

# steps (歩)

**A Short Film with Original Music**

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## **Abstract**

*Steps*, stylized steps (步), is a short film that serves as Samuel Zhang's culminating experience project in the Master's of Music Production, Technology, and Innovation program at Berklee College of Music, Valencia Campus. Aside from fulfilling academic requirements, the film is also the student's debut production in both music and film. Released specifically for internet distribution sites such as Youtube and Vimeo, the project is intended to establish an online presence for the student as an artist and promote his future projects.

The film is an experimental piece with a fictionalized version of the artist as the protagonist. The soundtrack of the film is written entirely by the artist and draws inspiration from ambient music, hip-hop, and cinema.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Short Films as Music Videos**

To understand the motivation for the project, a review of past short films that served as music videos should be made. To start, music videos in general fall under the umbrella category of film as an art medium. And, it is in general agreement that video is a popular tool employed by many musicians. Whether it be for monetization or brand promotion, music videos have become commonplace for many major artists and musicians today.

Similarly, the thesis project serves as a music video to promote the artist's aesthetic. It is a long form music video, which is a type of medium that is either a recorded concert performances, feature-length films or music documentaries<sup>1</sup>. This particular type of music video, also known as music film, usually runs longer than the typical three to five minute song. In order to encompass several pieces of music in the work, the short film was chosen as the most appropriate format for the thesis.

### **1.2 Music Distribution on Youtube & Vimeo**

The advent of the internet and social media has exponentially increased the rate at which creative video content can be distributed and accessed. Most notably, Youtube,

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<sup>1</sup> "The Recording Academy® Elects New National Officers and Approves Continuing Evolution of GRAMMY Awards® Categories at Spring Trustees Meeting," The GRAMMYs, accessed February 15, 2017, <https://www.grammy.org/recording-academy/press-release/the-recording-academy-elects-new-national-officers-and-approves>.

an online video platform, is the second most-accessed website and the first for video search engines<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, nine out of the top ten most-viewed videos on Youtube are music videos, with each logging over one billion views<sup>3</sup>. Vimeo is a similar website that is popular with musicians who want to upload high definition music video<sup>4</sup>. In the context of the millions of views these websites receive each day, it is easy to see why many musicians set up online profiles for video content. The artist in this project aims to distribute his short film using the exact same tactic. The final cut will be released online on the artist's profiles on Youtube and Vimeo.

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2 "The Top 500 Sites on the Web," Alexa, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>.

3 *Most Viewed Videos of All Time*, Youtube, accessed February 15, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLirAqAtl\\_h2r5g8xGajEwdXd3x1sZh8hC](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLirAqAtl_h2r5g8xGajEwdXd3x1sZh8hC).

4 Music Videos on Vimeo, Vimeo, accessed July 8, 2017.

## II. REVIEW OF THE STATE OF THE ART

A wide number of popular musicians have produced short films to help distribute their music or brand. One notable example is Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, a thirteen minute long short film that balances a lengthy introduction and storyline with a dance performance during the song portion<sup>5</sup>. In fact, the elements of storytelling and balance with the music in *Thriller* are no doubt this particular production's strengths, and are probably what contributes to *Thriller* becoming one of the most commonly recognized music videos. Furthermore, *Thriller* is unique in that it was distributed as if it were a movie, finding screen time in local theaters and previewed before films such as Disney's *Fantasia*<sup>6</sup>. In terms of prior art, Michael Jackson's *Thriller* serves as an appropriate example of a short film created with the intent of artistic expression and promotion but with a cinematic approach.



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<sup>5</sup> "Michael Jackson: Thriller (Video 1983)," IMDb, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088263/>.

<sup>6</sup> "25 *Thriller* Facts," LA Times, accessed July 8, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-web-thrillertrivia12feb12-story.html>

**Figure 1. Choreography from Michael Jackson's *Thriller* Music Video**

Kanye West's *Runaway*, released in 2010, is a recent example of a short film that promotes a music album's content using Youtube as a primary distributor. Indeed, the film was screened traditionally in a film festival in London,<sup>7</sup> but the lasting influence is in the expansive reach the film enjoyed on Youtube, with over twenty million views as of 2017<sup>8</sup>. This particular film is a great example of a cinematic work that was developed with consideration for internet release.



**Figure 2. Still from Kanye West's *Runaway***

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- 7 "Kanye West Premieres 35-minute-long 'Runaway' Video in London," IFC, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/the-juice/954875/kanye-west-premieres-35-minute-long-runaway-video-in-london>.
- 8 "Kanye West – Runaway (Full-Length Film)," Youtube, accessed July 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jg5wkZ-dJXA>



### **3. STEPS, A SHORT FILM WITH ORIGINAL MUSIC**

#### **3.1 Premise**

*Steps*, stylized steps (步), is a short film with original music intended for online distribution and release. The film is the debut musical and cinematic production of the student.

The overall premise of the film is rather abstracted; rather, the film is an experimental thought piece that aims to balance traditional music video themes with independent cinema. The main storyline in the film talks about a lone protagonist who observes other people in relationships and reflects about his own journey as a musician and human. Eventually, he abandons his roots in hip hop and youth culture in favor for a more ambient style of music. The character looks back on the journey at the end of the story and realizes the great number of steps that culminated in this transformation, a similar journey that many other peers and musicians also experience.

#### **3.2 Visual Aesthetic**

The project is primarily inspired by visual and minimalist storytelling in Buster Keaton's silent films. The deadpan delivery and physical humour used in the project are directly inspired by Buster Keaton.



**Figure 3. Virtually Silent Comedic Scene**

Furthermore, Wong Kar-Wai's film *In the Mood for Love* serves as the aesthetic inspiration for the thesis project because of its mature framing and color palette.



**Figure 4. A colorful and well-composed shot in Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love***

The film can be considered to be a mimicry of silent film. The only audio in the entire project comes from the music and selected ambient sound effects. Aside from that, there are virtually no dialogue or other noises. Because of this stylistic choice, the short film had to rely heavily on visual storytelling.



**Figure 5. A narrow cut from *Steps* focusing on the eyes.**

The movie still shown above is a good example of an editorial technique to dramatically enhance the action on screen without audio. A simple widescreen effect draws the focus to the eyes, and enhances the action. Similarly, the project as a whole aimed to employ strong editing and framing techniques in order to maximize the storytelling while minimizing the necessity for recorded dialogue.



**Figure 6. Still during a silent sequence that emphasizes color and composition.**

## **3.2 Track Listing**

### **3.2.2 *IDKIWSF***

*IDKIWSF*, an abbreviation for “I don’t know if we should fuck,” is a parody rap song produced and performed by the artist. It is the only song in the soundtrack that has choreography and implies the short film is a music video. Also, it is the only part of the film with lyrics or dialogue. The song was produced using electronic synthesis and production in Ableton Live, with a major sample taken from the anime *Cowboy Bebop*’s third soundtrack.

Heavily influenced by viral internet videos of emerging hip hop artists, *IDKIWSF* is part of the trap and electronic hip hop genre. It aims to poke fun at the themes of love and ego normally discussed in similar rap songs, but all the while maintains the lyrics as relevant and serious to the character. The protagonist is seen to initially have fun performing this music, but he eventually voices his disillusionment with that particular music culture and identity.

### **3.2.1 *Abroad (Main Theme)***

*Abroad Main Theme* is the second recording on the film’s soundtrack. It is a combination of ambient piano music and minimalism. This particular song serves as a soundscape for the film, with the shifted tone of the film’s story reflected in the shifted tone of the music.

The song is written as a variation on a theme played over a Dbmaj7 chord, with the dampening pedal depressed throughout the entire piece. The right hand plays the main theme, a vaguely pentatonic and asiatic theme that is echoed throughout the piece, while the left hand arpeggiates the Dbmaj7 chord continuously. The final result is a very spacy, very emotional ambient piece that appropriately fits with the montage seen on screen.

### ***3.2.3 17 (十七)***

*17 (十七)* is the third recording on the film's soundtrack. It is an ambient piece recorded using electronic synthesis in Ableton Live. The song serves to reinforce the themes in the ending of the film; it is a piece meant for reflecting back on the journey the past year. The song achieves this by creating an ambient pad using reversed guitar sounds that are stretched over a long reverberation time in Ableton. It is literally a reversed song juxtaposed with footage taken from the past. This particular song is very personal and emotional to the artist, and it successfully conveys emotion and nostalgia with the audience.

### **3.3.4 Untitled Musical Cues**

Interspersed throughout the film are short musical cues, all recorded on piano, that are processed to fit in with the overarching ambient theme. They were all recorded in

one single session, and were not written beforehand. Rather, all the musical cues used in the film were originally sound tests or random improvisations to pass time while recording the *Steps (Main Theme)* piece. The purpose of implementing these short pieces of music with the final product was to provide segues, transitions, and backing music as needed.

### **3.4 Innovative Aspects**

The innovative aspects of the short film in terms of its creativity and production is tough to judge, especially when judged by the artist himself. Artistic innovation can and should be left to the artist's contemporaries and future review.

However, the short film greatly boasts the artist's self-innovation. Self-innovation is defined by the artist's progression and development, something that is clearly apparent on screen. Before the spring semester term, the artist never worked with cameras more complicated than smart phone cameras, and never worked on a production longer than several minutes. This creativity and storytelling in the film has developed to a point where it is relatively unique to the artist and brand image. A very strong style of editing and artist imagery is established in the film.

Furthermore, the music is, in a sense, a literary metaphor for the artist's self-innovation in music as well. The artist originally intended to strictly produce tracks

for hip hop, but soon realized that the inclusion of ambient music is more appropriate for the film and artist's brand as well.

### **3.5 New Skills Acquired**

In the audio field, writing and producing songs were exercised extensively during the film's production. More specifically, producing using electronic synthesis techniques in digital audio workstations such as Ableton Live and Pro Tools was primarily used. In addition to electronic production, real world recording and performance was practiced as well. Most of the ambient music was made using real world recordings of the artist playing piano that was then ported to Ableton Live for electronic production.

The second main umbrella of skills acquired during the film's production was exactly that: film production. Indeed, the acting and writing improved slightly due to the fact that the artist was the actor and writer. But, most notably, camerawork, composition, and framing were the main topics in cinematography that were developed. The artist rapidly learned what makes a shot more successful than another when employing mature cinematic techniques simply by using trial and error. Most of the production phase was characterized by shooting and reshooting the same scenes, thus directly teaching the artist why some reshoots were strictly better than others.

Another video-related skill that was developed on was editing and storytelling. In the artist's works, editing is an integral part of the storytelling, so much so that specific sequences are planned with the final edited cut in mind. The artist has always worked on video and had experience editing, but never really had to employ editing as a storytelling tool. The thesis project greatly expanded on this topic, forcing the artist to rely on mature editing to bring the project together. Furthermore, most of the man-hours of the project were spent in post-production and editing.

The final major skill acquired was time management and project management. This project, while mostly accomplished by the artist, had a lot of outside help and coordination. This project alone has revealed to the artist what it means to go through a large-scale production and phase of planning. In the future, this acquired skill will be very apparent as future projects will no doubt have a much smoother production phase than what *Steps* had.

### **3.6 Challenges**

The greatest challenge presented to the artist was simply finishing the project on time with satisfactory cuts of footage. The music, for the most part, was handled well and on time. However, reshooting footage was a huge constraint on blocks of time. And, reshooting sometimes required other actors and characters. This meant



coordinating schedules and sometimes settling on old footage that was not satisfactory when compared to other shots.

Another challenge was editing a final cut that the artist was satisfied with. The project was iterated on and reedited numerous times, with a different version presented at each defense and prototype. The project even went so far as to reshoot the final sequence on the day before the premiere screening. In the end, artist dissatisfaction was a huge problem, and it greatly influenced the work flow and final product. In the future, a more thorough pre-production phase might minimize the need for last minute change and desperate reshoots.

### **3.7 Future Plans**

The artist is quite satisfied with the final cut of the film. In fact, the film is a good representation of the aesthetic and message the artist carries. The artist plans on developing similarly styled projects of short films and videos with a strong musical presence in the near future. This is the artist's desired path in terms of creativity and brand establishment.

Otherwise, the artist plans on supplementing his creative output with working and interning within the audio and video industry.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

*Steps* is a successful debut project for the student, combining both of his interests in music and film into a single project that will begin his artistic career. Furthermore, the project successfully incorporates many of the skills acquired throughout the school year, ranging from professional recording, to sound design and scoring, to video production. The challenge of producing the highest quality content under the constraints of time and budget certainly were evident in the project, but the triumph of the project is in its ability to embrace this aesthetic of an independent, low-fi film. It is in the student's highest degree of confidence that the film has successfully shown personal development and an artistic voice.

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