Berklee College of Music

Hammock, An EP and Visuals about Ego and Success

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of

Master of Music in Music Production, Technology, and Innovation

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Abstract

This project seeks to produce a musical universe in the form of an Extended Play (EP) with seven songs and accompanying visuals. The EP is a concept album that is centered on themes of ego and success. This album blends rock, electronic, hip-hop, and storytelling. This project was recorded and mixed in the Berklee Valencia studios. First, a template was made for each part of the story and visual themes, and then the songs were recorded instrument by instrument. All the sounds, visuals, samples and music are original creations by the author of the project Michael Dodson. The author learned how to design sounds and visuals to represent thematic elements in the music. In the future, he will create a live show based around the EP. The show will feature live composing and live visuals.

keywords: creative project, recording, composition

1. Introduction

The author has been playing guitar since he was 8 years old and has loved the art of creating music ever since. After listening to bands like Pink Floyd, Phish, and Tame Impala, the author became obsessed with incorporating concepts into the music he creates. At the age of 15, he began learning music theory under guitar master Frank Axtell, which helped the author realize the emotional potential of harmony, melody, and rhythm. Later, his friend and producer Jack.Lion would introduce him to electronic music which greatly influenced the author to study Electronic Production and Sound Design at Berklee College of Music in Boston. At Berklee, he met Sam Ruff, a precise drummer and producer of many styles. Sam helped the author understand the role of the producer and also inspired the author to pursue a Master's in Music Production at Berklee Valencia. Sam also offered his drum knowledge and ability and played drums on every one of the author's tracks for the Hammock project. The idea for the Hammock project was initially conceived when the author imagined a future where he was given everything he ever wanted. Thus, the Hammock story features a main character, a narrator and includes songs which represent different chapters of the imagined future world. The Hammock project also features accompanying visuals to further create a sense of an imagined world.

All the mixing, mastering, and engineering was done by the author at the Berklee studios and his apartment in Valencia. All the music was created and mixed in Ableton with some parts being recorded and edited in Pro Tools. The samples used in the album were created by the author with help from Sam Ruff. The visuals were done using Resolume and Adobe After Effects.

2. State of the Art

Hammock is a seven song continuous musical suite inspired by many different albums that combine concept and music. One clear example is Dark Side of the Moon[1] where the songs similarly connect. Hammock separates itself by telling a story throughout the music. All the songs are built around a continuing storyline which progresses as the songs change from feeling to feeling. One inspiration was Trey Anastasio's *The Man Who Stepped into Yesterday*[2] which tells a story and has separate passages for narration. Like *The Man Who Stepped into Yesterday*, Hammock is creating several characters and resembles a Hero's Journey. However, *Hammock* will not contain any separate narration and the story is told through the music. *Hammock* also shares some similarities with Childish Gambino's *Because the Internet*[3] which has a 72 page screenplay and a short film that went along with the album. In a similar vein, *Hammock* has a 5 page short story along with audiovisual content. In terms of sound, Phish, Mndsgn, Tame Impala, and Madeon are the primary influences. Mndsgn's *Body Wash* and Tame Impala's *Lonerism* inspired the sonic landscape. The aim of the production and sound is to take the improvisatory nature of Phish and combine it with the precision of newer Tame Impala and Madeon records.[4]

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[1] Harris, John. 2005. The dark side of the moon: the making of the Pink Floyd masterpiece. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

[2] Phish Lyrics, The Man Who Stepped Into Yesterday. https://web.archive.org/web/20060210062117/http://www.musicgods.com/phish/lyrics/Ygamehendge.htm.

[3] "because the internet : script". *becausetheinter.net* Archived from the original

[4] Madeon. Good Faith. Columbia, 2019, Spotify.

3. Description

This project seeks to establish a musical universe in the form of a concept EP and a matching Resolume set (fig. 2). The project contains of seven songs which tell the story of a struggling artist named Mick Lane who gets a letter in the mail telling him he can trade his art to fulfill his desires. The musical universe and project is titled *Hammock* because the hammock is the place where Mick gets transported into another dimension where he is famous. In order to better express this musical universe, the author created a short story, and visuals. This is where Resolume best comes into play. Essentially, the author needed to create content that has the ability to be improvised. Resolume is the best for this as one can create a set that can evolve and be different each time it is performed. Some of the drawbacks are Resolume's inability to be precise with visual automation. Resolume is great for visuals that can be performed in the moment but not the best at creating complex animation. This is also why After Effects was used for some of the visuals. Since After Effects handles animation and video automation well, it is the ideal tool for precise animation. However, After Effects does not specialize in performing in real time, so using both progams for visuals is a good compromise. Resolume can be used for any live set, green screen, and projection mapping, and After Effects can be used to create media content. Another pivotal choice in this project was to track in Pro Tools but to use Ableton (fig. 1) for all sound design, mixing, and live performance. Ableton is one of the top industry tools for musical performance and is great with automation. The author used Ableton for all creative musical elements involved in the project. This was key in creating a modern sound, since a large chunk of this project involves merging live instrumentation, and improvisation with electronic production. The disadvantage to using Ableton is arguably Ableton's less traditional mixing and routing setup. However, Ableton was vital for resampling, doing granular processing, quick automation and will always be available to use to perform the hammock project live.

4. Innovative aspects

Hammock is innovative because it creates a musical universe. It's a piece of music that is conceptual, and an album while simultaneously establishing a world where all the songs take place in. This project is unique by combining music with storytelling; the work has visuals, characters, and feature's a hero's journey. *Hammock* blends styles of electronic music, rock, blues, and psychedelia, jam band and singer-songwriter. Also the project combines modern techniques like resampling/granular synthesis (fig. 1) with acoustic recordings. Most other projects that are music related are simply just EP's or albums. The goal of *Hammock* extends beyond the songs and visuals themselves. The project is more about immersing the listener into a world where anything is possible.

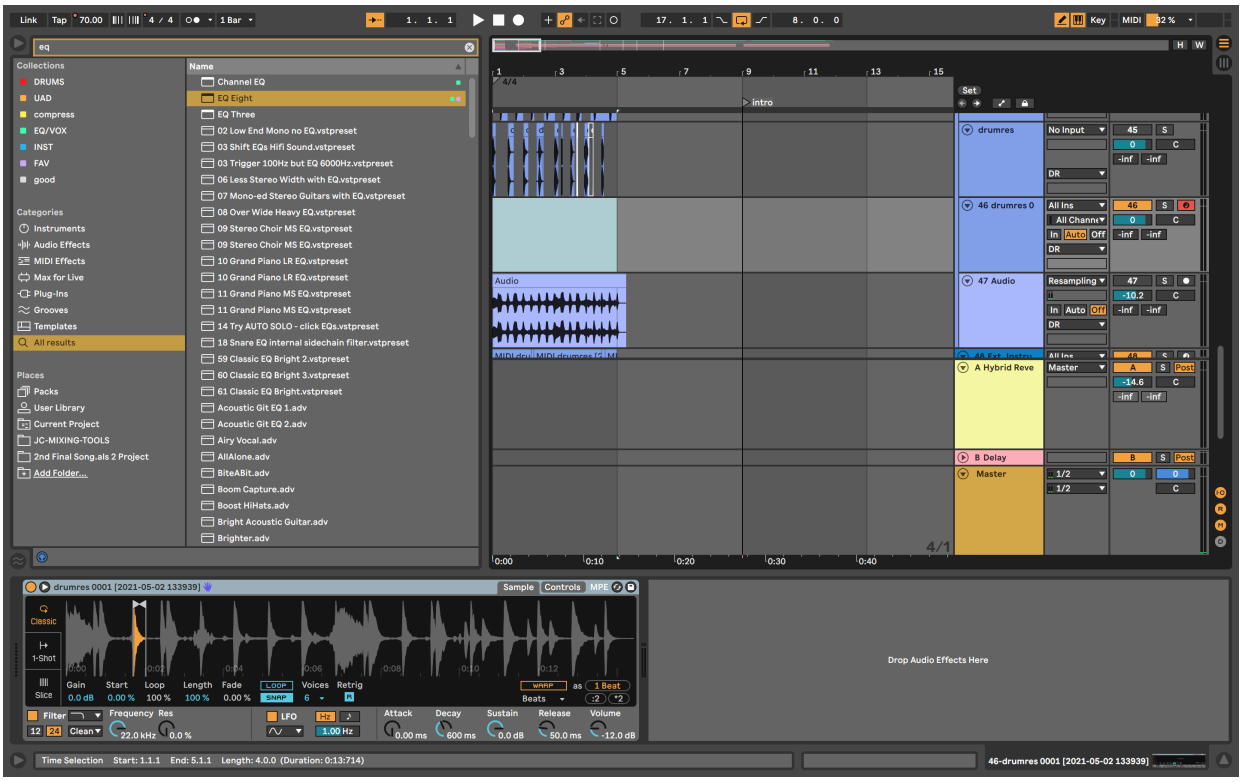


Figure 1. Resampling live drums using Ableton's simpler.

5. New Skills Acquired

The author is now able to create his own visuals with Resolume, and After Effects. This can open the door to many opportunities, such as creating a live visual concert experience. The author has the ability to VJ for other artists and create media for his musical work. A huge part of the this project was growing as a producer and engineer. Through mixing his songs, The author has greatly developed his ear, his patience, and developed strategies to better assess the problems and solutions involved with delivering a musical production. Engineering and producing studio sessions are some other skills The author has acquired. Through working with other students, The author is now comfortable running his own studio sessions. This includes creating the floor plan, input list, and selecting and placing microphones, and tracking. Also The author learned how to get the most of musicians and resources available. These skills are important as they allow the author to be a utility for nearly any role that is needed in a studio.

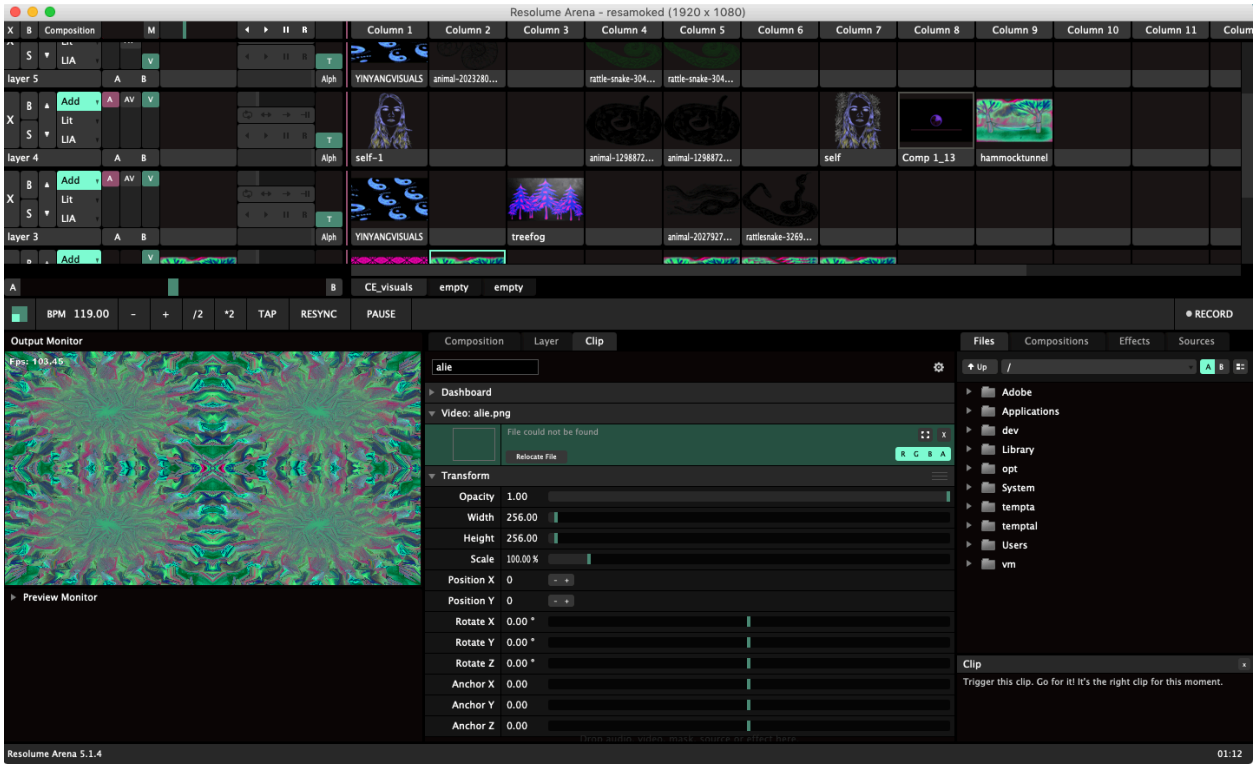


Figure 2. Resolume live set

6. Challenges both expected & unanticipated

Figuring out what the music to should sound like and then turning the concept into something tangible was an expected challenge. However, the author found that listening to new music is a solution, and referencing is very helpful in determining what the final product should be. Another expected challenge was recording multiple musicians, and vocals during pandemic times. The author had to do a lot of remote sessions to record vocals without a mask, and then make use of software in order to fix the problems that come from recording in untreated rooms with average microphones. An unanticipated challenge was creating visuals that connect with the music. Similarly the solution was to take inspiration from images that the author liked to get a better idea of figuring out what fits. Connecting songs with different sounds and styles was another unexpected challenge. This is partly due inconsistencies with the setup and recordings. One thing that helped the author was determining what was important in each song. The author had to figure out what the key elements were that brought out his voice and the vision of the songs.

7. Future Ramifications

The author will be releasing music and videos on Spotify, Youtube and other platforms. There is also room to livestream a green screen performance of the songs and Resolume set on Twitch. Most importantly, the author will be replicating the experience onto a live stage where the songs/visuals have more room to be improvised. One of the initial inspirations for the project was to create an experience that combines the spontaneity of Phish, a band that improvises every show and setlist, with the calculated experience of a Tame Impala or Porter Robinson show. So the goal for this project is to develop the musical universe further and use it as a tool to bring listeners invested into the experience/show. This project has the potential to add something new to live performances. One of the problems with live concerts is that they tend to be nearly identical shows each night. And the problem with improvised shows is that they tend to be inconsistent. This project seeks to find a compromise by being grounded in a universe and a set of songs while allowing them to be vehicles for improvisation.

8. Conclusion

Hammock explores the idea of creating a musical universe. The goal of this universe, set of songs, visuals, and story is to provide a unique listening experience through telling a story, providing visuals, and establishing continuity between songs. The project represents a merging of two worlds: improvisation and composition. The author learned throughout this process how to combine preparedness with spontaneity in order to run studio sessions, record friends, and mix various musical projects. This culminated into an experience that has the flexibility and reliability to be unique each time it is performed. The Resolume set and Ableton projects are ready to be used at any moment. Even if both were to fail the show would still go on; the songs can still be played. Through performance, improvisation, and live narration, the musical universe will always have the potential to be produced, and the audience will be provided a unique experience each time.

9. Appendix: Budget and Timeline

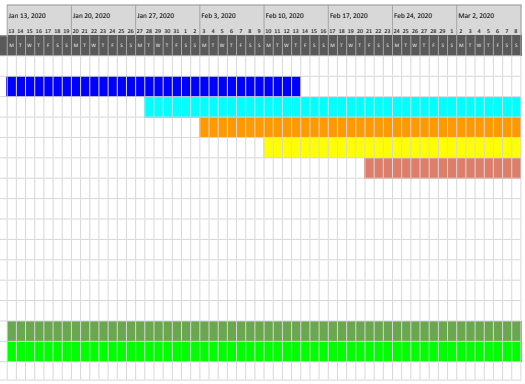
Hammock

Michael Dodson

Project Start: Mon, 1/13/2020

Display Week: 1

TASK	ASSIGNED TO	PROGRESS	START	END
Recording				
Record Drums	Mike Dots and Sam Ruff	100%	1/13/20	2/13/20
Record Guitars	Mike Dots	100%	1/27/20	3/13/20
Record Bass	Mike Dots	100%	2/3/20	3/13/20
Record Vocals	Mike Dots	100%	2/10/20	3/13/20
Add production elements	Mike Dots	100%	2/27/20	4/2/20
Mixing				
Mix Cascabel	Mike Dots	100%	4/6/20	4/26/20
Mix Come for a Ride	Mike Dots	100%	4/13/20	5/4/20
Mix Peak	Mike Dots	100%	4/20/20	5/11/20
Mix Hammock pt 1 and 2	Mike Dots	100%	4/27/20	5/18/20
Mix Lost and Gone	Mike Dots	100%	5/4/20	5/25/20
Video				
Create video one	Mike Dots	100%	1/13/20	5/12/20
Create video two	Mike Dots	100%	1/13/20	5/12/20
Composite final render	Mike Dots	100%	1/13/20	5/12/20



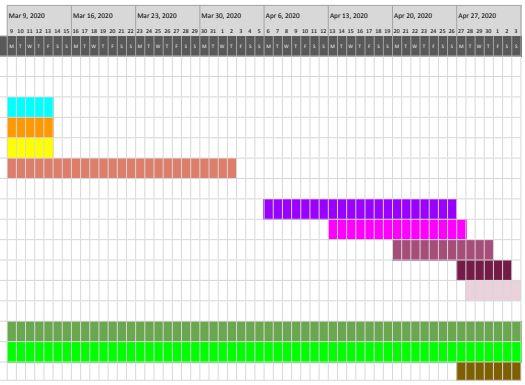
Hammock

Michael Dodson

Project Start: Mon, 1/13/2020

Display Week: 9

TASK	ASSIGNED TO	PROGRESS	START	END
Recording				
Record Drums	Mike Dots and Sam Ruff	100%	1/13/20	2/13/20
Record Guitars	Mike Dots	100%	1/27/20	3/13/20
Record Bass	Mike Dots	100%	2/3/20	3/13/20
Record Vocals	Mike Dots	100%	2/10/20	3/13/20
Add production elements	Mike Dots	100%	2/27/20	4/2/20
Mixing				
Mix Cascabel	Mike Dots	100%	4/6/20	4/26/20
Mix Come for a Ride	Mike Dots	100%	4/13/20	4/27/20
Mix Peak	Mike Dots	100%	4/20/20	4/30/20
Mix Hammock pt 1 and 2	Mike Dots	100%	4/27/20	5/2/20
Mix Lost and Gone	Mike Dots	100%	4/28/20	5/4/20
Video				
Create video one	Mike Dots	100%	1/13/20	5/5/20
Create video two	Mike Dots	100%	1/13/20	5/5/20
Composite final render	Mike Dots	100%	1/13/20	5/12/20



Hammock Album budget

ITEM	PROPOSED	REAL
MATERIALS		
Hard Drives	$300	$0
USB drive	$50	$0
Memory cards	$75	$25
EQUIPMENT		
HARDWARE		
INTERFACE (purchase) 120 days	$210	$0
COMPUTER (purchase) 120 days	$400	$0
MONITORS (purchase) 120 days	$70	$0
SOFTWARE		
PRO TOOLS 120 days	$50	$0
ABLETON 120 days	$40	$0
PLUGINS 120 days	$100	$0
PERSONNEL		
DRUMMER (7 tracks)	$1,400	$0
MASTERING ENGINEER (7 tracks)	$2,000	$0
STUDIO		
BERKLEE daily x 120 days	$XX	$0
HOME daily x 120 days	$450	$0
CATERING		
MEALS cost/120 days	$1,200	$1,000
OVERHEAD		
RENT	$4,000	$2,800
POWER	$50	$0
WATER	$25	$0
GAS	$25	$0
INTERNET	$30	$0
PHONE	$50	$30
FEES		
YOUR FEE	$1,000	$0
TOTALS	$11,525	$3,855

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