

Alone In The Ethereal Haze

by

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ABSTRACT

The start of the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to the motivation to do anything. With the cancellation of all future in-person concerts and recitals, including master's composition recitals, I decided to release an album instead. This allowed me to utilize all of the recording and mixing skills I had learned in my undergraduate and master's programs and experiment with electronic music techniques that piqued my interest, such as MIDI notation and cassette tape loops. In addition to releasing my album digitally, I choose to release the album physically via cassette. I learned each step of the cassette production process, including recording cassettes, designing J-cards, painting the cassettes, and wrapping the cassettes for sale. I also produced all marketing materials, including the cover and promotional photography, album trailer, and promotional photography. My thesis covers each step of self-producing and self-releasing a digital and physical album.

CHAPTER I

DETAILED STATEMENT

I made this album using a combination of both recording and MIDI techniques. The recording process for the electric guitar required a direct input box and a microphone on the guitar amplifier. The direct input box is essential for sending the guitar signal straight into an audio interface because the unbalanced, high-impedance guitar signal is converted to a balanced, low-impedance signal that works with recording equipment. The recording process for the acoustic guitar was similar to the process for recording electric guitar, except that the microphone recorded the guitar directly instead of recording an amplifier. For the cassette sounds on the first and last tracks, I recorded the music onto the cassette tape by using the auxiliary input on my cassette player. Then audio from the cassette player was recorded using a microphone. I recorded the field recordings (the rain from “rain in b” and the practice room noises from “light through the corner window”) using a Zoom H4N Pro during the fall of 2019. I used the BOSS VO-1 guitar pedal to record the vocoded vocals on the track “beyond time.” The piano that appears throughout the album is a recreation of a Yamaha grand piano from Arturia’s Piano V2 VST plugin. All other synthesizers that were used are from Arturia’s Analog Lab.

The production process was fairly standard as far as mixing, EQ, and compression are concerned. The pulsing sound that makes up the bulk of the music was created by placing the reverb and delay on the same auxiliary track. Usually, the reverb would be applied to the auxiliary track and the delay would be applied directly to the audio track so that the two effects would operate “in series” where one effect is applied, then the other effect is applied. By placing the reverb and delay on the same track, they operate “in parallel,” which means that the effects are processed at the same time and create a unique effect that would typically not be desirable. The reverb and delay mix used on the track “the beautiful moment” was created by sending the audio straight from the cassette player's headphone jack into my delays and reverb

pedals that I use for my guitar. Some of the synthesizer instruments had some additional effects programmed into them, such as distortion on the bass line of the track “I.” Still, other than that, the only effects utilized were heavy reverb and delay.

The mastering process involved several different aspects, all of which are essential for a high-quality professional-sounding product. The true peak levels cannot exceed -1.0dB. Otherwise, the audio will peak. This is different from the normal peak level monitored during the production process, which is 0db. The LUFS, which stands for Loudness Unit Full Scale, displays the overall loudness and energy level of a track. There are different standards for what the LUFS should be depending on how the audio is being used. For music streaming services and YouTube, the standard is -14.0dB. Slight adjustments to the EQ of the overall track are also made to bring out parts of a song that might be too quiet or bring down parts of a track that are too loud.

Liner Notes to *Alone in the Ethereal Haze*

In 2020, when COVID-19 sent everyone into quarantine, I found myself feeling more alone and isolated than I had probably ever felt before. For a while, it was hard for me to find the motivation to do anything, including the things I enjoyed the most and mostly work and school. It took me a long time to learn how to process that kind of isolation, but when I started working on this album, I began to reflect on my time in quarantine and some of the positive times in my life that I had been alone. This album represents my relationship with loneliness, from the dark times I had in isolation to euphoric moments of deep reflection and inner peace and calm within my soul.

When I actively listen to music, that is to say, when I put on headphones, lay down, and do nothing but absorb every bit of sound, I feel an immense joy like no other as time just melts away. These songs are meant to emulate that feeling so that you, the listener, might experience that same feeling that I feel. Many of the tracks start with an analog sound, whether it’s a cassette player, a piano, or a recording of a real place, and slowly grow into a dense texture of harmonious noise to the point that the original sounds are almost unrecognizable. In a way, one is literally “lost in the

music.” I hope that you’re able to lose yourself in this music so that you might find the peace and joy that I have found. The titles of each track are hyperlinked to my Bandcamp page for listening.

O

This is the symbol for OFF, which symbolizes “feeling off.” When quarantine started, it was very unnerving not to leave my house for long periods. I think the noisy cassette player does an excellent job of recreating that unsettling feeling.

dreams and ambitions crumble

I tested positive for COVID in June of 2020, and I could not leave my room for two weeks. This was the peak of the hard times of quarantine for me. I felt so empty and drained, and I had no desire to do anything other than sleep all day and night. The title says it all. Ironically, this track, in particular, signifies a positive moment in my life because when I showed this track to my professor, she told me this was “the best piece I had ever made.”

eremophobia

The fear of isolation. While true eremophobia is debilitating, no one wants to be alone. Humans thrive on interaction and connection with others, and without it, we are lost. I got into ambient new age guitar in my undergrad (shout out to Hayden Pedigo), which inspired me to try my hand at it.

rain in b

The idea of attaching a specific song or genre of music to a place or event has always fascinated me, in the sense that it’s very subjective depending on who you ask. For me, sitting in my room while it rains outside will always be connected to calming ambient music.

the beautiful moment

After learning about composers in the 1940s and 50s who would manipulate reel to reel tapes in a computer music class, I started messing with cassette tapes by taping the ends together to create a short loop of sound. By running the loop through my guitar pedalboard, a few seconds of sound turn into a magnificent ambient soundscape.

light through the corner window

The community college I attended had a few cramped practice rooms with some old pianos. I would always go to the one in the very back of the hallway to mess around on the piano. The only source of light was a little window in the top corner of the room. I would get so lost in the stuff I was playing that hours felt like minutes, and the other people practicing would just fade away. These moments were very formative in my musical growth and eventually led me to pursue composition.

beyond time

In the last half of 2020, I went a little overboard with guitar pedals and spent way too much money. When I was coming up with ideas for this track, I had just purchased a vocoder pedal and figured I would test it out on this song. It turned out well enough to me that I decided to stick with it.

I

The symbol for ON, but not necessarily symbolizing “feeling on.” To me, it’s a sign that this is not the end. Any song, album, or other pieces of music has to stop, but the way they make us think and feel does not. They become experiences we get to keep and potentially share with others.

CHAPTER II

PLANS FOR RELEASING THE COMPLETED WORK

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are currently no plans to perform this work. Therefore, in this section, I will detail the distribution methods and process, and potential plans if a live performance is scheduled in the future.

The album was released on March 26, 2021, on my Bandcamp page, nnooaahh.bandcamp.com, and can be purchased as a digital download or a limited-edition cassette tape. The album became available for preorder on March 12 and gave anyone who preordered early access to the track “light through the corner window.” The album can be downloaded in many different file formats, including Wav, FLAC, MP3, and more.

Recording the music to cassette tapes was done using Texas Tech’s Nakamichi MR-1 professional tape deck. My computer can connect to the tape deck through the 1/4” TRS jacks on my Scarlet 2i2 Gen 3 audio interface. Even though the tape deck has options to record onto higher quality tapes like Type II Chromium Dioxide (CrO₂) tapes and Type IV Metal tapes, the only cassette tapes still produced today are Type I Ferric (Fe₂O₃) tapes, which are the highest quality tapes available. It is a time-consuming process, as each side of the tape must be recorded individually at normal speed, which means that it takes a little over an hour to record one tape.

I wiped down the cases so that no fingerprints appear on the case and then wrapped them in iridescent wrapping paper. If the order is from Lubbock, I take the time to hand-deliver each tape to express my appreciation in person. If the order is not from Lubbock, I wrap them in bubble wrap and place them in a small envelope for shipment via USPS.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

My biggest takeaway from this album by far is that I can do this all on my own as long as I am willing to put in the effort. Before this project, I always wanted to release an album, but I was convinced that I needed a big studio, expensive equipment, and several other expensive things. Now I know that I have the knowledge and means to make an album and even do a professional physical release on my own.

I hope to release another project sometime this year, possibly album-length but most likely shorter. Now that I know I can make a high-quality project on my own at a low cost, I want to start releasing as much music as possible, build up my portfolio and make money as a musician. I have several ideas for new music, and I feel good knowing that I can make them a reality and share them with the people who believe in my music.

When the pandemic is over, there could be a live performance in the future. My desire for a live performance would be an acoustic realization of the album with a small chamber ensemble, perhaps using a very reverberant venue to emulate the album's heavy reverb and delay. I have always been intrigued by the translation of electronic music to an acoustic setting and vice versa, so I think this would be a challenging and fun experience.

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