

Northbound

My Final Project focuses on songwriting and how to best convey my ideas to a wider audience. In order to do so, I wrote a series of three songs and one letter that correspond with a visual print. Each print and written portion I created is based on an experience or emotion that occurred during my time at Oxbow. I chose these four experiences specifically because they stand out the most in terms of the intensity of emotion. The experiences (from top to bottom) include themes of: “loss,” “closure,” “apology,” and “anxiety.” In terms of “loss,” the letter is written to my grandfather who passed away during my time at Oxbow. The song about “closure” is a way for me to let go of a bad relationship. The “apology” is to another past relationship of mine that ended while at Oxbow. The song about “anxiety” gives insight into my inner struggles with mental health.

My process originally followed more traditional printmaking techniques. However, after making a mistake on my first plate that led to the wipe marks appearing, I decided to recreate that look on other plates. While I wasn't able to completely do so, letting my process dictate my project was a beneficial way for me to not only have more fun with my project, but to discover new techniques as well.

This work encompasses my time here. I chose the name “Northbound,” not only as an ode to the time when I took the wrong bus (Northbound instead of Southbound) and got lost in St. Helena, but as a reminder that this experience has projected me upwards in my life. Oxbow has been a largely positive experience and one I will remember fondly.

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Writing the Human Condition

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This paper addresses the art of songwriting, as well as my personal connection to it. The driving question is, "How can I present my emotions and perspectives through music to a greater audience?" My goal through this project is to become more authentic in my writing, as well as a better lyricist overall. I want to find my own voice and style.

I. Intro - Logic

A look into my different musical phases:

The first musical artist that I was “obsessed” with was One Direction when I was in elementary and middle school. While many consider them to be superficial and just another boyband, I idolized them during those years.. My first concert was One Direction, and I remember being so excited for it. Singing along to their songs with thousands of other people gave me a sense of unity - unity that I hadn’t felt before. Looking back now I can see how overzealous I was, but I remember that band being one of the few things that I could rely on to bring me happiness during the confusing time that was middle school.

After moving on from One Direction, I was drawn to “emo” music. This grabbed my attention around eighth grade, when life seemed full of angst and the only way to control it was by listening to music that was rebellious. While I still listen to some songs from this era of my life, it’s more about reminiscing than “nobody understands me, so I have to turn to screaming music.” While I loved to dance to One Direction, My Chemical Romance’s lyrics spoke more of my truth. Sure, it wasn’t quite as fun to listen to with a group of friends, but it was great when I felt like looking out the window and pretending I was in a music video.

My most current musical interest is Korean pop music, also known as k-pop. I wrote an entire ten page long paper about k-pop and its impacts on society sophomore year for history class. I got an A. While other kids in my class researched different wars or political scandals, I chose k-pop. I tend to obsess over the things I love, and k-pop was no exception. I enjoy this genre even though I rarely understand the lyrics to k-pop songs without looking up translations. But when I do read those translations, often I am blown away with the stories they tell.¹

Music has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. My biggest wish when I was a kid was for an iPod, so that I could listen to my music whenever I wanted to. I began singing in preschool and have continued doing so as I’ve grown up. That love for music has also persisted and grown with me, to the point where I want to make my own. I have been writing lyrics since elementary school, but full songs never came to fruition until high school. Through music I have discovered what I wanted to do with my life- which is to create music that impacts others the way so many songs have strongly impacted me. My goal is to empathize with others and to convey the positives and negatives of the human condition. I believe that while all people live very different lives, we have similar experiences. We all go through love and loss, highs and lows, beginnings and ends. Music connects us through those experiences.

As a musician, the biggest questions for me to answer are how I can present my emotions and perspectives through music to a greater audience, what emotions/perspectives I am trying to convey, what I want to say, and how will I create a cohesive EP/mini album.

My writing process begins with lyrics most of the time. I usually start with an idea or a metaphorical concept that I want to pursue and go from there. Often the very beginning isn’t even a song or a poem-- just some random thoughts that I had and want to expand on. Afterwards, once I have written all the lyrics, I start with the melody. This step, however, sometimes occurs during the writing of the lyrics. The chords come at the end. I use either my ukulele or my computer on the program Logic X to find what chords I want to use.

¹ Examples of this: *Spring Day* (by BTS), *The Truth Untold* (by BTS and Steve Aoki), *Shoot Me* (by Day 6), *I’m Fine* (by BTS), *So Far Away* (by Agust D ft. Suran), *Jenga* (by HEIZE ft. Gaeko), etc. Basically, listen to BTS and look up translations to their songs.

I think the aspects of songwriting that I'm better at include finding melodies that work with the lyrics, lyric writing (when I'm inspired), and the use of metaphors. Some aspects that I want to work on to get better at include rhyme schemes, finding inspiration, and using different chord progressions.

Trade Mistakes - Panic! At The Disco

Mistakes I make in my songs²:

In all of the songwriting lessons I have taken, despite only taking few, I have been taught to write my truth. I was told that it is best to write from experience, from current knowledge, from my own feelings. And, in some ways, that advice is helpful. But real life isn't always easy to understand, especially when trying to compress a whole memory into, on average, three to four minutes. And while songs based on real life experience are great for catharsis, they don't always make complete sense. Often, they can be full of contradictions (as life has many of those), which can be confusing for the listener. If I can write from my truths while still remaining objective about whether or not my song makes sense, I can create something that not only others will want to listen to, but that will offer me some sense of relief.

Often, when I'm in a desolate mood and I just want to release some of my inner stereotypical teen, I tend to write from a negative perspective. While these songs may be great for me to sing, I can't write like this for others. Other people don't really want to sing about how awful they are. While some songs with a more self-deprecating tone are successful³, they don't over do it. In order to write more effectively to a greater audience, I need to be less cynical in my writing. I am a better person than I think I am. Putting more positivity in my music will hopefully put more positivity in the world.

Another mistake I noticed on my own is that I write about the same things, over and over again. I don't need a book to tell me this, because I already know so. I wrote practically an entire album about one boy. I need to get out more and experience more of life in order to expand my horizons. Some of the subjects that I write about often include my mental health and my own experience in relationships. I choose these subjects because they are the ones that give me the most powerful emotions. Part of having mental illnesses is that sometimes my emotions are more subdued, at least in my experience. When I do get bursts of strong emotion, however, is when I find I do my best work.

A description of my anxiety: it's a black hole. I feel myself getting sucked into it and I don't try to fight it. I find it harder and harder to get out of bed but I know it's just because I forget to take my meds. I know the solution to fixing my brain but I still forget so it doesn't work. I'm setting reminders now. I want to feel better. I want to find a ladder and climb my way out of this dark hole.

In terms of my relationships to others, I seldom write about positive experiences. Negative emotions tend to give me more creative outbursts. Whenever I write about my positive memories, I feel like it sounds cheesy. I also use the same chords for everything. I need to change things up from time to time in order to prevent being a broken record- this means

² Pat, Luboff. *88 Songwriting Wrongs and How to Right Them: Concrete Ways to Improve Your Songwriting and Make Your Songs More Marketable*. F+W Media, 2011.

³ i.e. *I'm a Mess* (by Bebe Rexha), *Goner* (by twenty one pilots), *Monster Among Men* (by 5 Seconds of Summer), *1-800-273-8255* (by Logic ft. Alessia Cara & Khalid), etc.

learning more chords on both ukulele and piano. To provoke more feeling from my songs, I should use minor chords for more somber tones and major for brighter sounds.

The Good in Me - Jon Bellion

Some advice for myself in order to better my writing⁴:

I am unique, and no person has the same exact experiences as me. That being said, I can create songs that no one else could. My opinions and perspectives are my own, but I must remember that within myself are other people. I am an amalgamation of all the people I've looked up to. I can look to them for their experiences and opinions if I need help or get stuck.

While I want to reach a large audience with my songs, I also need to remember that being too vague makes the lyrics lose their gravity. In order to keep the lyrics broad enough to reach a lot of people, yet specific enough that they still tell a story, imagery works well. Transforming the listener to the memory provides more of an emotional connection.

Paperback Writer - The Beatles

A negative experience that I have written a lot about involves a singular person: John. Let's talk about John. He royally screwed me up. What happened between us never should have and I know that now, but I wish I had known then. I was naive and thought that as long as I wanted it enough it would work out. Now, I am so thankful that it didn't. I was still a kid when he met me and for him to feel the way he did was so wrong on so many levels. I basically wrote an album about him. He didn't deserve any of it. Here are some lyrics from songs I wrote about him when I was hopelessly infatuated with him:

*when you don't see me
my world splits in two
but I'd love to have my heart
broken by you*

*when you look past me
you make me feel so blue
but I'd love to have my heart
broken by you"*

*"now I'm alone and insecure
but it's not anything I can't endure
my ghost will wander around endlessly
but that's okay, cause you'll live happily*

*so tell me how to save the life of a ghost
cause out of everyone, I miss you the most
and I know what we had has long since died
but that doesn't mean I'm not going to try*

⁴ Pattison, Pat. *Writing Better Lyrics*. 2nd ed., Cincinnati, Writer's Digest, 2010.

to save the life of this ghost”

He's manipulative and I hate him for ruining my perceptions of love and relationships for so long. And I know we agreed to be friends and that my mom would say to be friendly, or at least act civil, but I want him to stay the hell away from me. I'm glad that Dylan sent that text telling him to screw off. I don't want to talk to him ever again. Here's an excerpt from a song I wrote once I realized how messed up the situation was:

*and boy, this was a first
but out of the damage, you were the worst
so for my sake, what I'm going to do
is walk away from you*

*because you tore my world apart
and I couldn't see it
you came and ripped up my heart
and now I believe that
this is not for me, and I'm through
I'm done crying
yes i'm done crying*

*you stomped my heart in the ground
and I didn't see it
and you made me run around
and I'm here to say that
I hate your games and I'm through
I'm done crying over you*

I Want to Write You a Song - One Direction

One person that I want to write about is my late grandfather, who I call *Yeh-Yeh*. He was born as Benjamin K. Cheng (鄭國賓) in Shanghai on January 1st, 1925. He was an engineer and was one of the pioneers to try to transform Chinese characters into digital form. one of six children, Yeh-Yeh enjoyed calligraphy and was religious. He attended National Jiao Tong University in Shanghai July, 1942 but had to relocate to Chong Qing with the university because of the civil war. After graduating in 1946, he worked at the Chinese Government Radio Administration, then the Shanghai Telephone Company, and the Royal Hong Kong Observatory as a meteorologist. He arrived in the US on September 15, 1951 to pursue a postgraduate degree at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn.

He was loyal to his family. In 1970-71, he petitioned the Immigration Office in Newark, New Jersey to grant his two younger sisters, Shirley and Gertrude, preferential status as relatives of a US citizen to gain permanent residence (back in 1971, they each had to take a blood test to show that they were, in fact, siblings – one in New Jersey and one in Hong Kong). In 1971, he applied for his older sister, Loretta, to become a US citizen, too.

I have quite a few fond memories of him. I don't remember this actually taking place, since I was a baby, but on a long flight Yeh-Yeh carried me up and down the plane aisle the entire time, singing to me. As I was always sick as a baby with ear infections, this was a major

relief for my parents to not have to worry about me crying. Another memory I have with him is when I was in elementary school. We were in the basement of my old house, which is where I did all my arts and crafts. We were drawing together, and he drew the sun that was on the cover of my Cray-Pas Junior Artist oil pastels. I remember thinking that he was amazing at drawing, and that I hoped to be as good as he was. The last story occurred at my cousin's bar mitzvah. Yeh-Yeh slid me a red envelope under the table, as if it was some secret and put a finger to his lips. A bit later, he was on the dance floor moving to his heart's content. He looked so happy.

He was so caring and he loved his family. He did his best to stay active and got his 5,000 steps in every day. He enjoyed learning about everything that interested him and he was also creative. I miss him a lot and I wish I had spent more time with him, but I suppose that's a hard lesson we all have to learn at some point in our lives.

Blue Side (Outro) - j-hope

With all this advice, I think that practice will make me a better writer and will help me find my voice. If I don't practice I'll never get any better at what I want to do. In order to create songs that truly touch others, I need to write to my own experience without getting caught up in my memories. I need to work hard to perfect my techniques, and I need to experience life as full as I can so that I have more to write about. Lives are told through music. By creating music and listening to it, we are able to share our personalities, experiences, and perspectives with each other. Without that form of communication, there's room for a lot of people to feel lost. We can find ourselves through music.

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