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Experimental Music and Collaboration: Developing Artistry Through Performance Practice

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EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC AND COLLABORATION: DEVELOPING ARTISTRY THROUGH PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

John Harold Lambert III

B.A., Louisiana State University, 2013

M.A., Louisiana State University, 2016

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iv
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2. Snowy	17
Chapter 3. Wish	31
Chapter 4. Creature	49
Chapter 5. Wittgenstein	66
Chapter 6. Mitchell	81
Chapter 7. Sunburned	97
Chapter 8. Conclusion	122
Bibliography	134
Vita	140

Abstract

This project locates collaboration and collaborative performance as a potential site for artistic growth. This study analyzes six collaborative projects: composed pieces for electric guitar accompanying a staged performance of collaged texts, an audio-visual installation, the preparation of several short pieces to accompany choreographed dances, a 90-minute soundtrack to a performance mixed live, an ongoing improvisational duo, and a live visuals performance to accompany Sunburned Hand of the Man at Duke University. It traces the growth of my artistry while also providing a method for both doing and writing about collaboration. In addition, it offers a model for understanding collaborative compensation and evaluating collaborative structures.

The study begins in 2015 at the beginning of my master's degree coursework and ends in 2022 with the completion of this dissertation. Each chapter analyzes a unique performance I contributed to and provides a brief overview of the project, discusses my background with my collaborator, reviews any planning work, maps the influences that informed my creative choices, offers a description of my methods, recalls my memories of the performance event, and ends with a reflection on the collaborative process. The conclusion of this study explores collaboration across power dynamics and offers several models for collaborative structures and possibilities for payment and compensation both in academic and in popular and professional contexts.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Coming to Performance

My parents listened to music, but neither them nor anyone in my immediate family played any instruments as I grew up. My mom played in the marching band as a high school student, and I remember her trying to learn guitar twice but neither attempt lasted very long. My parents divorced when I was a toddler which ensured that what I listened to (and what I was allowed to listen to) depended on which one was parenting me. When I was a child, my mother enjoyed the type of country pop popularized by artists like Garth Brooks, Alan Jackson, LeeAnn Rimes, and Faith Hill. We also listened to the modern rock radio station and at the time, many of the bands featured on the station's playlists owed a great deal to the grunge band Nirvana. My father enjoyed popular music from the 1950s and 1960s, smooth jazz, and easy listening. A trip to Shreveport, Louisiana found us listening to the "Golden Oldies" radio station, with songs by artists like Simon & Garfunkle, The Animals, The Turtles, and Manfred Mann. Another trip to Walt Disney World found us exclusively listening to a compilation CD of the jazz singer Louis Prima. Growing up in Lafayette, Louisiana also meant exposure to Cajun, Zydeco, and other Francophone musical genres. Lafayette hosts two major cultural festivals per year: *Festival Acadiens et Créoles* in the fall, and *Festival International de Louisiane* in the spring. The former highlights the regional culture of South Louisiana and the latter features French-speaking artists from across the globe, both offer live musical performances and neither charge admission. Early CDs in my collection were the soundtracks to films like *Space Jam*, *Men in Black*, or *The Lion King* and I would play my favorite songs on repeat as soon as I learned that was an option on my CD player. As a child I enjoyed most of the music I heard on the radio or saw on MTV and as I grew into adolescence in the late 1990s this meant exposure to popular boy bands like The

Backstreet Boys, the amorphous rage of rap-rock artists like Kid Rock and Limp Bizkit, and the countless Nirvana rip-offs hoping to ride the waves of grunge's success across the United States.

The introduction of portable MP3 players towards the beginning of the new millennium also changed my listening habits. I no longer needed to carry my small case of CDs, nor did I need to worry about damaged discs skipping in my player. It also brought out an urge for collection and completion. As I got older and gained greater agency over my musical consumption, I began to borrow my friends' CD collections and import their contents to my MP3 player. Later, access to digital audio files through peer-to-peer sharing networks allowed me to obtain complete discographies of artists with relative ease. This urge continued as I grew into adulthood and my collection of vinyl records, CDs, and cassette tapes currently threatens to take over a room in my house. As I approached my teenage years, I became interested in punk rock (due to seeing pop-punk bands like Blink-182 and Good Charlotte on MTV). This led to me asking my mom to buy me a copy of Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's oral history of punk rock *Please Kill Me* after seeing it on the shelves at a Barnes & Noble bookstore in Lafayette.

The book covered McNeil and McCain's understanding of punk's early trajectory, a 15-year period from 1965 to 1980. While McNeil and McCain discussed the Ramones (who I knew), I had no familiarity with the other bands mentioned, such as The MC5, The New York Dolls, or The Stooges. The book's prologue discusses the Velvet Underground and by the end of the first page Lou Reed, the band's guitar player, is describing the electroshock conversion therapy his parents forced him to receive as a young man (3). This was unnerving to me at the time and had little to do with the spiky-haired skateboarding jokers I saw on TV in the early 2000s. While McNeil and McCain devote most of the book to coverage of the band's hedonistic lifestyles and turbulent love lives, they also offer considerable discussion of the music and

performances. While it took me another decade to appreciate the book, it did help expose me to a broader definition of punk music and introduce me to many artists who would influence me in the future. For example, La Monte Young (a major influence on my performance *Wish* discussed in Chapter 3) is introduced as “the best drug connection in New York” before another artist discusses Young’s lengthy drone installations, underscoring the co-mingling of influences between the early punk scene and the avant-garde.

In addition to becoming more engrossed in practices of listening and engaging with music outside of my parents’ influence, I also became interested in the performing arts as a pre-teen. I performed in theatrical productions produced both by my school and as part of summer programs in Lafayette. An audition for the musical *Oliver!* ended poorly when my drama teacher informed me that I would need voice training and singing lessons to succeed in musical theater. My voice coach worked with me for several weeks before she suggested that I learn an instrument to help with my pitch training. I took less than a month of guitar lessons before I gave up on the instrument and my musical theater career entirely, continuing to only work in non-musical productions throughout high school. While I did not latch onto the guitar immediately, I circled back to it almost a decade later. In between attempts at the guitar, I tried learning the piano twice. I made the first attempt in high school with an electric keyboard and the next as an undergraduate with a digital synthesizer. I abandoned the former attempt because I had lost interest in the person I was trying to impress with my piano aptitude and the latter due to disinterest in learning synthesis and synthesizer programming. As a high school student, I also became interested in attending performances by local bands in Lafayette venues like Artmosphere, Toy’s, and The Blue Moon Saloon. This was my first exposure to spaces that accommodated local and touring independent music as opposed to major label acts that

frequented the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Cajundome. Seeing people in my age group (often friends and classmates) perform on stage, playing both original songs and occasional covers by bands we all loved, was an impactful experience, due in part to the significance of seeing my friends and acquaintances working in a creative mode that I felt unable to access. I remember one afternoon, after spending the night at a friend's house, I watched him, and a few other boys, play music in the area where we had slept the night before. Without realizing it in the moment, I heard them improvise together in a group collaboration.

After graduating high school in 2008, I moved an hour east from Lafayette to Baton Rouge to attend Louisiana State University (LSU). Following several semesters of poor grades and a mid-semester withdrawal in the spring of 2011, I returned in the fall of 2011 to earn my bachelor's degree from the Department of Communication Studies. I enrolled in four electives and one communication studies course, Introduction to Performing Literature. I had attended a month of classes the previous spring before I withdrew, but Introduction to Performing Literature was the one I looked forward to the most in the fall. It was my first class in LSU's HopKins Black Box (HBB), a performance studies laboratory for classes, rehearsals, and productions. Over the course of the term, we read and interpreted poetry and prose, and then performed those interpretations for our classmates and instructor. Our first major assignment was a short performance of poetry, and we concluded the semester with a compiled group performance. Though I will go into greater detail about my early work in the HBB in Chapter Two, my introduction to the HBB was a foundational moment in my artistic practice.

My return to LSU also coincided with a developing fascination about the discography of the experimental rock band Sonic Youth: their studio albums, their live recordings, and the music made by the individual members independent of the band. While I had enjoyed the band's music

since high school, it was only after returning to LSU that I began to focus intensely on their work. This interest resulted from listening to both an audience recording of their performance in New York City on August 12, 2011 (recorded by Jonas Blank and available to stream on NYCTaper.com) and then a subsequent listen to their 1985 album *Bad Moon Rising*. I was struck by the pastoral opening of “Intro” and “Brave Men Run.” Between the latter track and the third track “Society Is A Hole,” the listener can hear a sample of “I’m Insane” by The Stooges bridging the two Sonic Youth tracks. In fact, every song flows seamlessly into the next, except for the quick pause between the final two tracks. They recreated this effect during their live performances as well, using guitar feedback, improvised jamming, and music sampled on cassette tapes and played through an amplified boombox to connect different songs. Their use of found material extended to literature and visual art as well. For example, the lyrics to “I’m Insane” from *Bad Moon Rising* recall the taglines on the covers of pulp fiction novels and the cover to their 1987 album *Sister* featured a collage of photographs including an unauthorized photo by Richard Avedon. I read about how they sometimes played guitars with drumsticks and screwdrivers jammed under the strings, watched performances of them in concert and on late night television, joined the semi-official Sonic Youth message board, collected biographies of the band and writings from band members on music, film, poetry, performance art and life on the road (“Making The Nature Scene”; “The Burning Spear”). I started tracking down live recordings of the band to get a feel for what I had missed as Sonic Youth announced their hiatus from writing, recording, and performing before the end of 2011. I found their aesthetic and creative process to be a bricolage of everything I found exciting, and I appreciated how they were open about their influences in terms of music, film, literature, and poetry. More than anything, I enjoyed their music’s promise of total release through volume. Songs like

“Expressway to Yr. Skull” or “The Diamond Sea” reach immense peaks before they crumble into ambient textures. This ecstatic release became something I later strove for in my own playing.

I began playing guitar again in May 2012 after I received a black Epiphone electric guitar as a birthday present. I quickly retuned the strings so I could play Sonic Youth covers which typically required pairs of strings arranged in octaves. I also began purchasing effects pedals to augment my playing. The Boss RC-2 Loop Station allowed me to record a short phrase with my guitar and then play it back in a repeating loop. I could then solo on top of the loop or begin recording overdubs to the loop. Using a loop pedal became essential to my practice, and I frequently use musical loops when performing or composing sound for a performance. I also began to experiment with delay, distortion, and reverb pedals to emulate the sense of presence created through immense volume. My first public solo guitar performance took place in the HBB in December 2013. I performed a cover of Sonic Youth’s 1987 song “Schizophrenia” as part of my final project in a class titled “Performing the Archive.” While I go into detail about this performance in the following chapter, I close this narrative with a mention of my performance to underscore the importance of the HBB to the development of my practice which includes playing, recording, performing, and improvising. Many of the artistic collaborations I describe in this dissertation (and most of my artistic work from 2014 to 2020) took place or was featured in the HBB.

This dissertation will study my past collaborative works holistically in the hopes of identifying a method for future collaborations while developing a model for categorizing different types of artistic collaboration. It has been written for three overlapping audiences: performance studies researchers and practitioners, those interested in studying collaborative

processes, and experimental artists working with sound and video. I understand collaboration as the process of working “jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor” (“Collaborate”). As I did not work on these projects envisioning them as data for a future dissertation, I did not keep a journal or detailed record of how these projects unfolded. Therefore, I refer to memories, emails, photos, videos, scripts, and audio files throughout.

The remainder of this chapter will consist of a brief overview of the HBB including its history, its role in the Department of Communication Studies at LSU, its advisory board, and the do-it-yourself (DIY) work ethic valued in the space. I will then conclude this introduction with a preview of the remaining chapters.

The HopKins Black Box

Established by Mary Frances HopKins in 1992, the HBB is a classroom and laboratory dedicated to performance practice and pedagogy (“Mary Frances HopKins”). Students attend lectures, and compose, rehearse, and stage performances, installations, and workshops for practice-based performance studies classes. It is also a theater with an active season of approximately 10 shows a year. The performance studies area at LSU funds the operation and maintenance of the HBB through the donations of audience and community members. In the past, the HBB also received a portion of performing arts fees collected by the university.

HopKins received her doctoral degree from the Department of Speech at LSU in 1968 and joined the faculty at LSU in the fall of the same year. HopKins acquired two classrooms on the first floor of LSU’s Coates Hall and converted them into a theater in 1992. The space became formally known as the HopKins Black Box in 2002 and celebrated its 30th anniversary at the beginning of the 2022 academic year (“Mary Frances HopKins”). The Department of Communication Studies website states that the HBB is an experimental space that “is dedicated

to providing students and faculty with a place to ask questions, unimpeded and with passion, through the practice of live performance” (“About the Hopkins Black Box Theater”). Both graduate students and faculty members have opportunities to teach in the space and Introduction to Performing Literature is a required course for communication studies majors, meaning that almost every student in our major will spend time working in the HBB. Since attending a production in the HBB is often a requirement for the introductory class, students encounter work by more experienced performers as well and have opportunities in their courses to describe, interpret, analyze, and theorize about the performance they witnessed as well as learn that performance is a site for research. Other courses in the HBB include Performance Composition, Performing Protest, Performing the Archive, Performing Technology, Performance and The Environment, or Performing Adaptations.

Prospective directors submit proposals in the latter half of the spring semester to the HBB Advisory Board. The board consists of a performance studies faculty member or HBB producing director, the HBB manager, the HBB technical director and four volunteers: an undergraduate student, a M.A. student, a Ph.D. student, and an ABD instructor. The HBB staff are constant board members, while the rest of the positions are served by volunteers on an annual term. The advisory board meets early in the summer, reviews the proposals, issues feedback and guidance, and votes to approve a schedule for the upcoming academic year. Student directors receive a faculty advisor, and the current season’s directors meet with the HBB staff at the beginning of the fall semester to review the HBB Director’s Handbook, a comprehensive document detailing the HBB’s functions, procedures, and equipment with tutorials on how to use the light and sound technology.

Most years, the season consists of ten productions. The first show of the season is typically a graduate student and faculty performance showcase, and the last show of each semester often showcases undergraduate work. There is also at least one visiting guest artist who may deliver a lecture on their work or processes, conduct a performance workshop, or both. Performance studies faculty members typically craft a production every two to three years. The remaining four productions in the HBB season are created by graduate students, though undergraduates who have been active in the space have sometimes been approved by the HBB Advisory Board. After most performances (excluding some faculty performances and student showcases), the HBB hosts a talkback where audience members can respond to the show and direct questions about the performance process to the director and cast.

As a part of the season contract, directors are expected to assist each other with a major component of their respective productions. For example, I may design sound for a director in exchange for that director's assistance in designing my performance's lighting plot. It is not uncommon to see faculty members working in the space alongside graduate and undergraduate students during the twice-yearly workdays where we clean the space, tidy the green room, and organize the prop closet, or at one of the many load-ins and strikes throughout the year. There are also practicum classes for students to earn credit by working underneath a faculty director or the HBB manager. These students help operate the box office, aid in load-ins and strikes, and attend work calls. Ideally, practicum students learn about what it takes to mount a public performance and become more involved citizens in the department, specifically in the performance studies area.

I arrived to the HBB shortly before the theater's 20th anniversary, and as an undergraduate student enrolled in introductory level performance studies classes I attended a

surreal performance art piece, a collaborative project between LSU, Xavier University, and Baton Rouge Community College, and a satirical ritual celebrating consumer waste. Since 2014, I have designed sound for 12 graduate student and faculty productions in the HBB. My responsibilities have included preparing audio for playback over the HBB's multi-channel sound system, composing music to accompany choreographed dances, live guitar performance, and mixing a performance's score in real-time. I have collaborated with visiting artists, faculty members, and graduate students, and several of the performances I have contributed to have toured to regional festivals, national conferences, and international exhibits. Through these collaborations, I have had the opportunity to spend the last eight years developing my practice. I have utilized improvisation, experimental techniques, sampling, used analog and digital methods of composition, and developed workflows in the digital audio workstation (DAW) Live and Max, a computer programming language used for digital signal processing (DSP).

As I reviewed the HBB archives trying to jog my memory of which performance occurred in a certain season, I am reminded of the labor involved in crafting performances. Both in terms of writing, rehearsal, and staging but in the technology involved in the production, When I began working in the space, we placed wooden ladders onto risers several feet above the ground and climbed to the top rung to change gels in stage lights. We had to run dozens of feet of speaker cables across the theatre floor to amplify audio for the audience. Now, we have digital lights with a stable ladder to adjust focus and re-hang. We have a multi-channel sound system with a user-friendly routing system for spatialized audio. Instead of temporary projection surfaces we have a retractable built-in surface spanning an entire wall and a professional projector permanently mounted. As these technologies become more embedded in the space, what becomes possible in the HBB expands. Several of the performances I describe in this study

were shaped by these technological possibilities and the labor of those who applied for the grants or did the work to afford us these new ways of realizing performance.

Preview of Chapters

The chapters that follow share several similar structural elements. I begin each chapter with a description of the collaboration including temporal and geographic details, and a summary of the performance and its methods. Following the description, I offer a background of my relationship with my collaborator and any past collaborative experience. Next, I discuss the planning stage leading up to the performance. This can include details of conversations with my collaborators regarding their goals for the performance, how the material produced by our collaboration would work in the broader context or plot of the performance, and a description of sampled recordings I may have incorporated into my compositions. Before I discuss my methods, I introduce the literature, performances, and sound recordings that have influenced my work. This is not a traditional literature review as different influences have inspired the different works in each chapter. The summaries of the individual chapters below will preview the literature review for each project, and I will discuss the theories, methods, and artists that have informed my work. The discussion of my inspirations will lead into a description of the methods I used to create the piece or pieces for the performance, this may include overviews of musical equipment, digital audio technology, musical theory, and other technical topics. I will summarize the run of the production, and then close the chapter with a reflection of the performance and the collaborative process.

Broadly, Chapters Two and Three include discussions of live guitar performance in the HBB. Chapters Four and Five describe my work using DAWs, DSP, sampling, mash-up and creating sound design to accompany dance and the performance of literature in the HBB.

Chapters Six and Seven focus on my work outside of the HBB including an on-going improvised experimental duo with percussionist Mitchell Mobley and my experience providing live visuals for the psychedelic rock band Sunburned Hand of the Man at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Chapter Six omits a description of a singular collaborative project in favor of a discussion of our duo's course over several years. I also combine the chapter's section discussing our methods and performance into one section due to our emphasis on improvisational performance. Chapter Seven also omits a discussion of my influences which I elaborate in Chapter Two.

Specifically, Chapter Two discusses the production of *On a Snowy Evening*, directed by John LeBret in the HBB. The performance ran for two non-consecutive five-day runs in December of 2014 before travelling to the Patti Pace Performance Festival in New Orleans, Louisiana the following year. In this performance, John combined performances of literature and poetry, puppetry, music, and DIY special effects to commemorate the winter season, its traditions and its place in folk and mass-mediated cultures, and the emotional juxtapositions created from the winter season's mirth and melancholy. This was my first experience as a sound designer for a theatrical production, my first collaborative project in the HBB and my first experience on stage since 2007. I describe my work with John as an undergraduate student and my final project in one of his courses: my first electric guitar performance in the HBB. Moving forward, I describe "Far From Home" a recording by Elisa Ambrogio that inspired my work for one of the pieces I composed for the performance. I composed an original piece for electric guitar and effects pedals using a simple chord progression, and developed an arrangement of "Snow," originally recorded by Harry Nilsson, with another cast member. I discuss the performance in the HBB and the experience traveling to New Orleans without John, who was

sick and could not attend. I end with a discussion of the collaboration's lasting influences on my work. While John gave me the freedom to make my own creative choices, I worked closely with him and submitted my ideas for approval throughout the production of the show.

Chapter Three discusses the production of *Wish*, a performance that I co-created with Jackie Rawls (then a graduate student in digital art at Tulane University in New Orleans) which we produced as a three-day workshop in the HBB in September of 2015. *Wish* combined improvised experimental guitar performance with live visuals generated and performed by Jackie using an analog video synthesizer and VJ software on her laptop. The chapter places special focus on our influences and discusses the intersection of sounds and visuals across several sites including cinema, club visuals, 18th century experiments with synthesizing an audio-visual correspondence with newly developed instruments, performance art, psychedelic light shows, and art installations. I go into detail regarding the creation of our promotional materials, how we staged the HBB, and the materials we installed in the theater including mattresses that doubled as spaces for audience members to recline and as projection surfaces. I also explain the musical and visual equipment Jackie and I used during *Wish* before I describe my memories of the performance and reflect on the show's documentation, the production process, and what I learned from Jackie as a collaborator.

Chapter Four discusses *Creature From The Primordial World*, a live staging of the 1954 horror film *Creature From The Black Lagoon* directed by Tracy Stephenson Shaffer. The performance had a five-day run in the HBB in the fall of 2017. Shaffer combined Everyday Life Performance methods with her research on the primordial world genre of horror films to create a production that aimed to have the cast recreate the exact movements as the film projected behind them. Occasionally, the recreation would be interrupted by three performers (including myself)

operating Primordia, our version of the original film's monster. These interruptions served as lessons on generic features of primordial world cinema as developed by Shaffer. In this chapter, I discuss my prior work designing a mash-up for Shaffer to use in an earlier production and my prior experience using a DAW and DSP to create music and how Shaffer asked me to sample Gary Wright's "Dream Weaver" as the basis for *Creature*'s musical score. Next, I discuss my influences in terms of sound's role in horror cinema, theories of ambient music, and theories of process-based music before I explain my process coding a virtual instrument to create the musical pieces that scored the performance's dance sequences. I then discuss the preparation of the pieces for playback in the HBB, the performance, and a reflection on the process. After having worked in the HBB for several years at this point, I felt more comfortable in my collaboration with Shaffer and worked independently after our initial production meeting.

Chapter Five discusses David Terry's adaptation of the novel *Wittgenstein's Mistress* in the HBB. The performance ran for five days in the spring of 2018 before travelling to the 2018 National Communication Association (NCA) Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. Terry fractured the novel's protagonist's stream of consciousness monologue into sections and assigned each section to eight different performers. I discuss how I built on skills developed from previous collaborations including my work with Shaffer and a previous collaboration with Terry. In contrast to *Creature* which featured isolated musical moments, Terry wanted music throughout the entirety of the performance. I discuss the influence of other laptop musicians on my work and discuss the creation of a virtual instrument that allowed me to sample popular music, classical music and my own original compositions, process them, and mix them in real time. I then describe and reflect on my experience as a co-performer with the performers playing

the show's protagonist, the difference between performing *Wittgenstein* in the HBB as opposed to a conference hall at NCA and the recordings I made of my work each night.

Chapter Six shifts focus away from my sound design work in the HBB to my work in the Baton Rouge DIY community and my ongoing collaborative work with Mitchell Mobley. I frame our work with theories of experimental music and improvisation and Bruce Russell's idea of mis-competence to describe how my guitar practice progressed after *Wish*. I describe the development of our relationship and our first experience playing together. I then discuss our experiences performing at an event sponsored by a poetry group in Baton Rouge, a performance accompanying a dance piece in New Orleans, and then a show at a DIY space in Baton Rouge opening for two rock bands. Next, I describe my process editing and collaging our recordings and the influence of the cut-up process popularized by William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, as well as Brian Eno's ideas on the role of the recording studio in composition. I conclude the chapter with how our collaborative work has influenced our personal relationship, how the scope of the project has changed over time, and future possibilities for growth.

Chapter Seven leaves Louisiana and discusses my work performing live visuals for Sunburned Hand of the Man at the von der Hayden Studio Theater at Duke University. The performance was produced by Duke Performances in partnership with Three Lobed Recordings as part of a three-day festival celebrating the North Carolina-based record label's 21st anniversary. I describe the festival, and give a brief history of Three Lobed as well as context for Sunburned's work in a post-Nirvana musical landscape using David Keenan's "New Weird America" descriptor. I discuss the development of my relationship with the band's drummer John Moloney, my work with Moloney on visuals for the rock group Dinosaur Jr., and the development of my live visual practice in terms of software and methods for creation. I move to

the different approaches I developed for the performance, how I created material in advance, and the difficulty of collaborating remotely for a performance in a third location. I then describe the performance, the choices I made, the experience I had participating in an event that held great personal significance to me, and how framing this performance as a learning experience helped me to reconcile with mistakes I may have made.

Chapter Eight concludes this study. In it, I describe the model for collaboration I exemplified in the six previous chapters and provide guidance in its application for future scholars. Before closing, I provide a model for evaluating future collaborations based on different forms of compensation and the potential for the development of interpersonal relationships. Finally, I apply that evaluative model to the projects described in this study.

Chapter 2. Snowy

Description

In the fall of 2014, I worked with John LeBret on his performance, *On a Snowy Evening*. The performance ran in LSU's HBB from December 3 to December 7, returned for another run from December 16 to December 20, and then performed one last time in the spring of 2015 during the Patti Pace Performance Festival. Inspired by Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," *Snowy* combined poetry, prose, music, puppetry, projections, humor, and melancholy to explore what John identified as the contrasts of the winter holidays ("Archives 2014-15"). John writes

Winter is a time of contrasts, when frosty chills are met with warm wishes and ten thousand tiny lights adorn the darkness of the longest night. *On a Snowy Evening* celebrates some of the season's most enduring stories, sights, and sounds with a cornucopia of music, puppetry, and performance that promises something for everyone.

John underlined the show's goal to promise "something for everyone" in an interview he conducted with *The Reveille*, LSU's student newspaper (Jackson). He noted that the goal of this show wasn't produced for just the familiar departmental audience, or for the handful of students required to attend performances for class credit. John says that "Because of how I feel about the Black Box, I wanted a show that could attract all audiences and here we are" (para. 9).

On a Snowy Evening unfolded over a series of 24 short performances of holiday related texts. The cast used dining utensils to act out the story of "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," turned pool noodles into puppets to sing the "Hallelujah Chorus," used another set of puppets to sing "Nuttin' for Christmas," turned the HBB into a snow globe and simulated a blizzard using a wind machine and disco ball, performed Dr. Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, depicted monsters from Alpine folklore, danced with white umbrellas to masquerade as snowflakes, assembled a miniature city, recounted the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone's trip to the

underworld, told jokes and stories, developed several ways to interact with wooden ladders, and served cookies to the audience at the end of each night. A spare storyline ran throughout the pieces involving Sparky, the invisible dog, wreaking havoc and Krampus, the child-torturing Christmas figure, kidnapping naughty puppets who are later rescued by the heroic invisible dog.

Background

I began working on my master's degree at LSU in the fall of 2014, after completing my bachelor's degree the previous winter. During that last semester of my undergraduate program, I registered in two courses with John: Performance Composition and Performing the Archive. For my final performance in the latter class, I explored my relationship with the Utkonos archive, a now-defunct web archive that at one point hosted a wealth of live recordings of the art-rock band Sonic Youth. I performed a solo electric guitar cover of their 1987 song "Schizophrenia" but practiced alongside a recording of the band performing the song in the fall of 1991 at a club in Bremen, Germany. I chose this song because I was fascinated by its structure and the way the song it builds and collapses over time. It was also a special song to the band and its fans, as Christopher Lawrence notes in his analysis of the song, that "It was usually reserved for a special slot in the set, either opener or closer, encore, etc. Its significance was clearly regarded" ("5/20/95"). Lawrence also notes that "Schizophrenia" was also the most frequently performed song by the band. Not only was this a special song, but I chose a special performance. The performance is the first song featured in David Markey's documentary *1991: The Year Punk Broke* which documented Sonic Youth and the grunge band Nirvana's tour of Europe in 1991. The tour found both bands playing in small clubs as well as on large festival stages and captures a moment just prior to Nirvana becoming a world-famous act. The recording sounds clean and

clear, and in addition to “Schizophrenia” they perform memorable versions of several of my favorite songs.

At the end of my cover of “Schizophrenia,” I performed a brief improvisatory coda inspired by my own time spent listening to the band’s live improvisatory moments. I edited together footage from the band’s music videos and film collaborations to the rhythms of the 1991 recording and projected this video onto the wall behind me as I performed.

I found John to be incredibly supportive and I noted how he enjoyed seeing his students experiment in the space. We bonded over our mutual admiration of William S. Burroughs, and he fascinated me with stories of his 2009 adaptation of Burrough’s novel *The Ticket That Exploded* in the HBB. He even encouraged my final performance after I went to him concerned after my classmates seemed shocked that I was “just playing a song” and not performing a narrative or using other voice-based performance methods.

In the fall of 2014, during one of our departmental pre-semester orientation meetings, I spoke with John after not seeing him since the previous December. John had encouraged me to apply to graduate school and provided me with a letter of recommendation and it felt good to see him again. He spoke with me briefly about his ideas for *Snowy* and asked if I wanted to join the production as a cast member and co-sound designer. I agreed, excited to be part of a performance and honored to have such responsibility as an incoming master’s student. John asked me initially to provide one guitar piece for the performance to accompany the blizzard scene. As rehearsals began, he also asked me to perform a cover of “Snow” recorded by Harry Nilsson with another cast member who would sing and play acoustic guitar.

Planning

Through conversations with John about *Snowy*, I understood that the blizzard would be the climax of the show in terms of its homemade magic. I envisioned this as a space for spectacular displays of theatrical special effects, contemplation, and as a reset for the latter half of the performance.

John explained that at one point, after the crew of poorly-behaved puppets sang Stan Freberg's novelty song "Nuttin for Christmas" where they described all of their mischief over the previous year (spilling on mom's rug, making another child eat a bug, playing pranks on a teacher), I would make my way onto the stage in a Santa Claus costume holding a sack ostensibly filled with toys bellowing several joyous "Ho Ho Hos" before I revealed my true identity as the monstrous Krampus. I would shove the naughty puppets into my sack and exit the stage. I would then quickly return to the stage in my black shirt and jeans and walk to my mark with my musical equipment. The lighting tech would dim the lights, start the disco ball's rotation, and a performer would hand crank a wind machine set up in the corner of the stage. I would perform a two-to-three-minute guitar piece while other cast members set up for the next scene, a performance of *How The Grinch Stole Christmas* with one cast member as The Grinch, another operating a sock puppet of The Grinch's dog Max, and several cast members creating shadow puppets underneath a wooden ladder draped in cloth.

John also asked if I could accompany Will Topham, an undergraduate student of John's, for a cover of Harry Nilsson's recording of "Snow." Towards the end of *Snowy*, the cast would assemble in a semicircle holding small candles. Each cast member would individually and vocally make a wish before blowing out their candle. Topham and I would make our way to the

musicians' station, perform "Snow," afterwards another cast member would perform the last verse from Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening":

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep (225).

In the darkest hour, Sparky (the invisible dog) would rescue the poorly behaved puppets from their captors (also invisible), the noodle puppets would sing the "Hallelujah Chorus," and then the cast would pretend to go on a sleigh ride (using the three large wooden ladders that the cast used as props throughout the show), followed by our curtain call. "Snow" would be a tender moment and the music needed to reflect the atmosphere accordingly.

I had seen snow maybe twice in my life, and had never experienced a blizzard, so I used my imagination to approximate the sensation. I needed something that sounded massive, something that would blanket the audience, and something that would resemble the sensation of a countless number of snowflakes passing before your eyes. I had also never been asked to compose something before and this was my first time collaborating with another artist in this way. I found myself relying on John's approval for my ideas and inspirations in an inordinate amount as we worked together. John and I met several times in his office leading up to the performance and as a first semester master's student, I felt overwhelmed and underqualified in my coursework. I would talk to John about my progress in my classes, my concerns and anxieties, and I would play him songs that inspired my creative process, hoping that these inspirations would lead to actual ideas. I wanted to not only impress my peers and the faculty in the department, but also show John that he made the right decision to trust me with such an important part of the performance.

John and I had agreed that this would be a live guitar performance. He was familiar with my playing style from the classes I took with him and he enjoyed drawing the audience's attention to the creation of the stage magic: musicians should perform live on stage, a puppeteer's body should be visible, the audience should watch a liquid light projection on a theater wall and watch the projectionists rotating the plates and applying the dye. He even planned to have me assemble my effects pedal chain and set up my guitar and amplifier as I delivered the opening monologue: a retelling of one of Aesop's Fables, "The Ant and The Grasshopper," where the musician grasshopper is welcomed in by the ant, and the grasshopper entertains the colony over the winter (*On a Snowy Evening* 2). I found echoes of this fable throughout the production and performance of *Snowy* as well as in John's attitude towards art: the creation of art is labor that should be valued by society.

Inspirations

On October 21, 2014 (six weeks before *Snowy*'s opening night) the singer-songwriter / free-noise instigator Elisa Ambrogio released her first and only solo LP. The record, called *The Immoralist* and released by Drag City, contains a selection of soft songs and ballads with only a sample of the heavier material that Ambrogio was more well known for. I had been a fan of Ambrogio's work for several years, and I enjoyed her recordings leading the free rock group Magik Markers and I was excited to hear her new material. My favorite track, "Far From Home," started the second side of the record.

The song begins with the sound of an object sliding over a guitar's strings bathed in reverb. You can faintly hear the ground noise of a plugged-in electric guitar. Ambrogio's multi-tracked vocals begin abruptly as she sings about loneliness and unfamiliar people and places. The sliding sound lingers in the background while strummed chords and soft drums accompany

her voice. At approximately two and a half minutes into the song the sound of another guitar slowly enters the mix. What at first sounds like processed guitar feedback turns into a devastating guitar solo that eventually overpowers Ambrogio's voice and the other instruments. Her vocals and strums fade away and all that remains with the listener are the thudding drums and the solo that builds in volume and intensity. The combination of Ambrogio's nostalgia-evoking 1960s girl group-adjacent vocals and the noise that slowly overtakes the recording made me return to this track repeatedly as I worked on *Snowy*.

I played this song for John and told him that this is the feeling I wanted to evoke with the blizzard. Unfortunately, I could not break down how Ambrogio achieved that effect. I took for granted that Ambrogio is a technically talented player in addition to being an inventive noise guitarist. In fact, in the fall of 2015 I attended one of her performances at The Saturn Bar in New Orleans, Louisiana. After her set, I talked to her about "Far From Home" and how she accomplished the solo in that recording. Kindly, she laughed and told me that she "just did it." While the finished project in *Snowy* sounds nothing like "Far From Home," listening to *The Immoralist* repeatedly during the brainstorming and rehearsal process guided my ideas moving forward.

Methods

One evening, during rehearsals, Topham and I went to an empty classroom to discuss how we would play Nilsson's "Snow" together. We may have seemed like an odd pair at first, Topham was attending LSU from California, had a typical surfer dude aesthetic, and played a dark blue acoustic guitar, the type that someone might produce at a campfire or beach. I had little technical skill and was usually content to just lay the body of my guitar against an amplifier and listen to the waves of shifting sound. Topham had transposed Nilsson's "Snow" into a more

comfortable key for his singing range and played the song with three simple open major chords: E, A, and D.

A quick Google search returns articles explaining these chords usefulness for novice guitar players like us. Andy Guitar, a popular online resource for those wishing to teach themselves guitar, has several lessons with instructions on how to play simplified versions of several popular rock and pop songs (ABBA, Lou Reed, Neal Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" for example) using just these three chords (Crowley). A friend and more confident music theorist explained to me that these three chords correspond to the first (E), fourth (A), and seventh (D sharp or D#) notes in the E major scale which explains why they seem to sound "right" when played together. However, by flattening the D# (the seventh note of the scale) a half step down to a D chord, Topham created a more mellow and introspective chord progression.

Topham strummed each chord before he sang the accompanying line and I created a quiet melody by placing my index finger on different spots along the neck of the guitar, fretting a string and quickly bending the string up and down to create a slight vibrato. Our arrangement of "Snow" sounded much different than Nilsson's yearning piano-driven original, but it fit the home-spun nature of the performance with its simplicity.

The sound for the blizzard proved to be much more difficult to realize. I experimented with a variety of different guitar tones, mostly trying different combinations and types of effects, mainly reverb and delay to create the sense of space needed to represent a blizzard. But I had trouble deciding what to actually play. As mentioned previously, at the start of my practice I was a beginner guitar player who knew a few basic chords, had poor rhythm, and typically relied on feedback, distortion, and abusing my guitar strings with screwdrivers and drumsticks.

I did not experiment with creating the blizzard at home, rather, I had brought my guitar, amplifier, and effects pedals into the theater and played for John and several cast members. In instances like these where I'm playing an instrument as part of the performance rather than delivering audio files for playback, I prefer to play for the director so we can sketch out ideas together. I find that I am easily distracted working at home and I will begin to explore ideas inappropriate (too long, too noisy, too rock and roll) for a scene like the blizzard in *Snowy*.

Prior to the start of rehearsals, I purchased a Sitori Sonics Tapeworm, an effects pedal that replicated the effect of a tape delay unit using analog circuitry. Most importantly, it seemed to emulate the noise of the motor that transports the magnetic tape found in vintage delay units. This 'whirring' sound proved essential in representing the blizzard's strong winds.

I found the tone for the blizzard scene by introducing some distortion into the signal with two pedals at the beginning of my signal chain. These would increase the guitar's sustain and introduce harmonics into the signal. I used a medium length delay (~300 milliseconds) with enough feedback to allow the Tapeworm to begin to self-oscillate (where the pedal creates a self-sustaining feedback loop that increases in volume, pitch, and saturation). Finally, I mixed in a short reverb to create a sense of space.

Instead of writing an original piece, I simply used the chords from "Snow" for the blizzard. It was not as ambitious as I initially wanted, but it sounded good, it worked for my technical skill, and the similar chord progression provided an aural thorough line for the performance.

To create a sense of structure for the blizzard piece, I tried strumming the first chord and slowly increasing the guitar's volume creating a swell before fading out entirely. The effects chain captured bits of the swell and created a bed of delayed and repeating guitar signal as I

slowly faded each chord in and out, each time slowly raising the volume at the peak of each swell. By the time I began to play each chord at maximum volume, my amplifier roared as snippets of each chord fed back and replicated themselves. To end the piece, I flipped the power switch on my amplifier and the signal would fade out over the course of several seconds. This impromptu performance for John and my castmates ended up as the template for the blizzard scene each night.

Performance

At the beginning of each performance, once the doors closed and the house lights went down, I would enter from downstage left to meet Topham on stage right. John had developed a gag that ran throughout the performance where Topham would squeeze a box of cornstarch to provide a live Foley sound that simulated the crunch of boots walking in snow. I would pretend to slowly maneuver through the snow as Topham squeezed the cornstarch box alongside the rhythm of my footsteps. Once I reached Topham's location I would begin the show's opening monologue telling the fable of "The Ant and The Grasshopper." During my monologue, John wanted me to slightly exaggerate the setting up my guitar effects chain in anticipation of the blizzard later in the performance, reiterating John's dedication to showing the work and preparation.

After my monologue, I would exit the stage from where I originally entered while slowly becoming aware of Topham's Foley effects. This quickly turned into a combative back-and-forth routine where Topham and I took turns controlling the rhythm of the steps or the cornstarch squeeze.

When I returned later, after momentarily appearing as Krampus to abduct the delinquent puppets, Topham would attempt to resume the play between us which I would cut short by

snatching the cornstarch box from his hands. Taking my seat in our shared musician area on stage right, I turned on my amp and my effects and silenced my guitar. The lights dimmed and the disco ball refracted a single beam of light into a flurry of snow circling around the audience. A performer went to the wind machine placed upstage right and began to rotate its handle creating a low rustle as the wooden boards of the wind machine rubbed against the rough fabric that encased them. The overdriven hum of electricity, processed by the Tapeworm delay, resembled the sound of wind blowing outside a cabin (or so I thought). As I strummed the chords and created ever-increasing swells of volume, the winds grew louder and louder as the puppeteers for the next scene assembled their station. I would try to take my time, not rushing myself based on how quickly or slowly the puppeteers worked each night. This whole process, from my re-entry to the beginning of the next scene, took approximately three minutes.

Before Topham and I performed “Snow,” the cast assembled in a semicircle in the center of the stage. We passed candles down the line and lit them one at a time. Once each performer lit their candle, we took turns making a wish before blowing out them again. After everyone had made their wish and extinguished their candle, we put away our candles and Topham and I returned to our station stage right. In contrast to the more distorted sound of the blizzard, I used a light boost to increase my guitar’s gain without introducing distortion or harmonics. Topham sang “Snow,” painting a winter landscape tinged with snow as a metaphor for the sadness that comes with change and the grief caused by an absent loved one. As he sang, I gently complemented his acoustic strumming with soft string bends. After Topham finished, the puppeteers began the next scene where Sparky rescues the naughty children from Krampus’s lair.

From what I remember, each performance in the HBB went the same. After four evening shows and a matinee, we returned nine days later for five more shows with more families and

young children in the audience than before. In the spring of 2015, *Snowy* traveled to the Patti Pace Performance Festival hosted by Xavier University at the Marigny Opera House in New Orleans, Louisiana. I remember feeling excited because of the beautiful space and for a chance to perform for visiting performance studies undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty members. This excitement was bittersweet because I knew John would not be joining us due to a sudden health emergency.

Stephanie K. Heath, a graduate student in our department who worked closely behind the scenes of *Snowy* with John, took over as director. Given that not every undergraduate had a continued interest in performance studies after they graduated, and the fact that many only attended as a favor to John, there was a tense and confused atmosphere amongst the cast. Some of them were drawn to the city's famous bars, restaurants, and shopping areas, while some attended the performances and workshops over the weekend. In the end, our performance went smoothly, though some of the show's magic was lost upon its removal from the HBB and while the blizzard sequence sounded impressive inside the historic building, I missed the dark theater and the disco ball rotating overhead.

Reflection

John passed away three months after *Snowy*'s opening night on March 11, 2015. Reflecting on this process had me contacting old cast members trying to find scripts and uncover memories from almost eight years ago. Like Nilsson's song suggests, time keeps moving. The seasons change, people come and go, grief hits hard and fades away. Locations remind us of the loved ones that have died, and time buries our memories. Writing and reflecting about this process has been a strange experience because his death looms over the entire project and my memories of our friendship.

John's absence weighed on the department as well. As the manager of the HBB, John kept track of everything: cleaning, scheduling, maintenance, lights, and sound. Faculty members quickly filled his role to ensure that the rest of the semester's shows went as planned. In the years since his death, the department realized that John held together many unseen threads that kept the HBB together and devoted resources to fill those roles that John expertly played.

While I certainly appreciated John asking me to be a part of *Snowy* back in the fall of 2014, I didn't realize the significance of the opportunity besides a chance to work in the HBB. By working as a collaborator with John, I got to work alongside a talented artist with a playful creative vision on a tight budget, using his imagination to create magic. Though John was faculty, and I was a master's student in my first semester, he never treated me as anything other than a trusted peer. In later collaborations, I became more aware of the power imbalances present in my collaborations with other faculty members.

Working with John gave me confidence in my own abilities. My limited technical abilities turned into generative constraints as I developed the blizzard and my accompaniment on "Snow." Even if I could not pull off the solo from "Far From Home," I could make something pleasing with three easy chords for guitar novices and the creative use of effects. Understanding financial and technical limitations and embracing them as an aesthetic choice, in my experience, seemed to be an identifying trait in John's work. I have attempted to continue this aesthetic in my own performance practice, and I embrace my limitations as aesthetic when I play guitar solo or with others, or when I design sound for theatrical performances. I am no longer the novice guitar player working on his first show. My practice has grown and expanded to performances outside of academia in ways that I would never have dreamed of in 2014. I have incorporated other media into my work as I incorporate video art into my sound performances. But I am still

learning, and each project gives me a chance to develop or refine a skill. Even if the seams show slightly.

Chapter 3. Wish

Description

In the fall of 2015, I collaborated on *Wish* with Jackie Rawls, a graduate student in Digital Art at Tulane University. *Wish* was a multimodal installation produced in LSU's HBB. The piece ran from September 11 to September 13 and used improvisatory sound and live visuals to explore intimacy and relationships between performers and audience members. Inspired by Michel Chion's writings on sound and vision, the performance Happenings of the 1950s and the 1960s, La Monte Young's Dream House installation, and Andy Warhol's proto-punk light shows with the Velvet Underground, *Wish* attempted to fuse our artistic practices into a coherent whole, with Jackie generating and mixing video in a live setting while I created the installation's sound. Jackie writes,

Wish is an experiment in navigating through the peculiarities of communication between audio and visual channels within a performance space. The goals are to negotiate and then attain a sense of congruence between expressive elements that further engage the architecture (living and non) of the space to extract more meaning, while also promoting an awareness of the unique condition of the space. (1)

Background

Before I focus on *Wish*, some background provides context for this unique collaboration. Jackie and I met in the summer of 2011 when she started bartending at a restaurant where I bussed tables. I planned to return to LSU in the fall to complete my bachelor's degree in Communication Studies, while she was completing a degree in LSU's School of Art. We began dating shortly after and continued to date while we started our two masters' programs, hers at Tulane University in New Orleans, and mine at LSU in Baton Rouge.

Before *Wish*, Jackie and I had already experimented with collaboration. I created a video for a class on social movements featuring Jackie as the leader of a feminist separatist army

inspired by Patty Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army. We also worked together as cast members in Patricia Suchy's performance *Tracking Shots*. And, most substantially, I designed sound for one of Jackie's early video art installations, *Wishing Well*. Comprised of an elevated oil drum, a small CRT television placed screen-up at the bottom of the drum, and a series of steps, *Wishing Well* invited audience members to climb the steps to peer into the oil drum where the television's screen fluctuated between blue waves generated by a video synthesizer, a static blue screen, and scenes from movies featuring wishing wells. I used an electric guitar and a series of effects pedals to create a piece playing from the TV inspired by the reverberation and echo of sound in an actual wishing well.

In the spring of 2015, Jackie and I pitched *Wish* for the upcoming season in the HBB. Directing a performance for the space was not required, but encouraged for graduate students, and at the time, I did not anticipate pursuing a doctoral degree upon the completion of the master's; so, I felt I needed to seize the opportunity before I left LSU. Prior to finalizing the proposal, I was listening to the song "Dirty Boots" by Sonic Youth. While the song seems to discuss life on the road as a touring band, I was struck by a lyric in the middle of the song: "a satellite wish will make it just enough." After discussing with Jackie, we decided to simply title the performance *Wish*. We felt the title evoked a sense of open potential that mirrored the improvisatory nature of the piece.

Throughout the application and planning process, I remember feeling that our piece did not belong, and that the performance we envisioned was incorrect or unsuitable for the HBB. The other performances that season explored themes of maturation and leaving childhood behind, death and dying, race and sexuality in popular film and media, Blackness, and an exploration of the culture orbiting cancer in the United States. Our idea, exploring our creative

relationship and creating a temporary community amongst the audience, felt vague and half-baked compared to the rest.

Tracy Stephenson Shaffer explains that performance practitioners “develop the ability to employ a variety of performance methods - writing and adapting methods, rehearsal methods, and staging methods - that help them to understand and communicate their subjects in profound and distinct ways” (102). We knew we wanted to combine our individual interests, video art and improvised music, and we worked with David Terry, our faculty advisor, to ease our insecurities as well as to translate our ideas into a final project. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe *Wish*’s influences, the creation of its promotional materials, the experimental ethos of the HBB, and our performance methods.

Influences

Film theorist Michel Chion coined the term *synchresis* to describe “the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears” (5). For example, imagine a movie where a character lands a punch on another. The instant we see the punch land, we also hear its impact. The principle of synchresis explains why we associate the resulting sound with the sight of the punch landing. Chion writes that “experimental videos and films demonstrate that synchresis can even work out of thin air -- that is, with images and sounds that strictly speaking have nothing to do with each other, forming monstrous yet inevitable and irresistible agglomerations in our perception” (63).

Synchresis in experimental films and the light shows accompanying psychedelic rock bands of the 1960s (specifically the liquid light shows of groups like the Joshua Light Show and Andy Warhol’s *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (EPI)) became guiding points as we brainstormed the development of *Wish*. Chris Salter explains that liquid light artists used “a combination of 16

mm film, slides, DC motor-controlled color wheels and liquid dyes and oils floating on top of 3M overhead projectors” (169). The overhead projectors would cast the visuals onto a surface as psychedelic rock groups like the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and The Mothers of Invention played in front of them, enveloped in the imagery from the crew of the light show. Jackie and I had previously seen an example of these light shows in the HBB from John LeBret’s 2013 performance *Close Cover Before Striking*, where he enlisted undergraduates to manipulate water and food coloring to create shapeshifting colored patterns on the wall behind his performance.

Andy Warhol’s *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* featured Warhol’s films, live music performances by the Velvet Underground and Nico, dancers, and strobing lights and occurred in clubs as well as a dinner for the New York Society of Clinical Psychology. Steve Gibson notes “*The Exploding Plastic Inevitable* is noteworthy due to its improvised, non-repeating and ‘not pre-established’ form. The visuals were fluid and changed as desired in response to the music of the mood of the audience” (71). Gibson also describes how this attitude (shared by the liquid light artists) has precedents in early animations by artists like Len Lye who used “both precise and aesthetic mappings of image to sound,” expressed interest in “popular and experimental (rather than classical) music” (54).

While these light shows worked with repurposed analog technologies, Jackie utilized an analog video synthesizer alongside software like Modul8. These technologies allowed Jackie to sample and remix digital footage and composite that footage with the output of her video synthesizer. Salter discusses the club culture of the 1980s and 1990s where DJs and video artists worked together to create mixed-media spectacles:

What the club scene did provide, however, was an alternative social *gestus* that directly led to new aesthetic expression through audiovisual fusion, catalyzing innovative forms

of communication that operated at powerful, nonverbal levels of affect, and at the same time encouraged different collective models of production. (173)

In other words, the club scene of the late 20th century presented an updated and more technologically driven imagining of the counterculture scenes of the 1960s. In 2021, these scenes still exist regionally, but are also mediated via sites like YouTube and Vimeo, social media platforms like Instagram, and chat communities like Discord. Artists can share their work digitally with one another or collaborate remotely by sharing files online.

Like VJs working alongside DJs, we sought to collaborate and communicate with aural and visual language. Jackie notes,

In a system of visual language, syntax is concerned with the arrangement of point, line, plane, color, shape, form, motion, texture, pattern, direction, orientation, scale, angle, space and proportion. Representational imagery carries additional semiotic abilities. Audio language is composed of expressive elements that are comparable, and also incomparable ... to the above list. (1)

To elaborate on Jackie's analysis, I would include volume, rhythm, meter, timbre, pitch, and key as elements of aural language. *Wish* attempted to join in the rich history of experimentation with developing an audio-visual language and though I have detailed our shared frame of reference for understanding *Wish*, this manipulation of light and color alongside sound dates back further.

Since at least the time of the ancient Greek, mathematicians, physicists, engineers, and musicians have made efforts to synthesize visual and aural language into a single instrument (Conrad 393). While a complete history of the matter is outside the scope of this dissertation, a brief overview may prove useful to readers unfamiliar with those seeking to develop a direct correspondence between the aural and visual. Daniel Conrad notes Louis Bertrand Castel as the first recorded inventor of a color instrument. In 1735, Castel built a model instrument that "would illuminate 144 different colored papers as the keyboard was operated." Pressing a key on the instrument would remove a covering above a candle, allowing the exposed flame to

illuminate the colored papers (Peacock 400). *Prometheus*, a color symphony composed by Alexander Scriabin in 1911, followed Castel's synesthetic approach where "each note of the musical scale was associated with a color" (Conrad 393). Thomas Wilfred abandoned the musical side of the instrument entirely to create a new art form dubbed "Lumia" (Peacock 405). For his first public performance, he utilized a machine he called the Clavilux to control prisms and counterbalanced disks to create "dramatic sweeping colored shapes that evolved on a rear-projection screen" (Conrad 393).

Outside of popular music contexts, Jackie and I noted that 20th century performance artists also utilized the possibilities of live projection (in this case, film projection) and the manipulation of color in their experimental performance events. In most cases, these artists were not trying to develop exact analogies between visuals and music, but rather use the visuals as a separate aesthetic effect. RoseLee Goldberg writes how the painter Robert Rauschenberg "flashed 'abstract' slides (created by the coloured gelatine sandwiched between the glass)" and projected snippets of film showing seemingly unrelated subjects while manipulating the cast of the projector along a wall during an untitled performance directed by the composer John Cage in 1952 (126). Cage tasked Rauschenberg and his co-performers with devising their own actions which would constitute the performance and leading to the cast members performing actions simultaneously with no deliberate relation between them.

Fluxus artist Allan Kaprow, a student of John Cage, extended the role of the audience further by incorporating them as cast members in *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* performed at New York's Reuben Gallery in 1959. Kaprow used the term "happening" to describe "an assemblage of events performed or perceived in more than one time and place. Its material environments may be constructed, taken over directly from what is available, or altered slightly; just as its

activities may be invented or commonplace” (*Some Recent Happenings* 5). A 1966 lecture by Kaprow positions art and happenings as separate from one another. He claims, “You can steer clear of art by mixing up your happening by mixing it with life situations” (“How to Make a Happening” 1). Kaprow wanted to subvert the public’s expectations of art and broaden the scope of what could be considered art. In this lecture, Kaprow discusses how he creates happenings from elements from “the real world, from real places and people rather than from the head.” He notes that “If you stick to imagination too much you’ll end up with old art again, since art was always supposed to be made from imagination.” In the end, Kaprow’s model of an experiential mode of performance incorporating the audience as co-performers and utilizing familiar and everyday scenarios influenced *Wish* more than Kaprow’s definitions and distinctions of what makes happenings separate from art. Gibson notes that Fluxus happenings were not only early experiments with live visuals but “but also as forerunners to interactive art. Happenings became a fixture in 1960s America and opened up late modernist art to ideas of improvised performance, visual spontaneity, and absurdity” (69).

Arguably, *Wish*’s production in a theater space excludes it from being a true happening, which typically occurred in spaces not generally considered sites of performance. *Wish* mixed in the everyday situation of reclining in bed and daydreaming to subvert the audience’s expectations of performances that typically occur in the HBB. Later, I learned that when the minimalist composer Terry Riley performed in the 1960s, audience members would fall asleep in sleeping bags and hammocks that they brought to his all-night performances (Sword 203).

La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela’s *Dream House* installation acted as a model for *Wish*’s conception as well. Installed in the pair’s loft in New York City, *Dream House* was an audio-visual installation that combined Zazeela’s lighting design with Young’s microtonal

synthesized music creating a space where audience members could rest, relax, and meditate in the immersive environment. The fact that Young and Zazeela's artistic cohort in the early 1960s included future members of the Velvet Underground only reassured us that our work with droning music and psychedelic projections had some historical precedent.

Planning

Walter Benjamin, in his influential 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," explores the importance of individuality in the artistic and performance process. Benjamin writes that, "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (para. 5). Because we knew that our performance would be improvised and unique each night, we wanted *Wish*'s posters to be unique and individual as well. Jackie designed a poster with the performance's title, the performance's dates, times, and location, as well as the phrase "A Day Dream," and the words "Sound Image Installation." We had the designs printed on white posters, and the goal was to create a long stencil that could be placed over many posters at once and we would use a selection of spray paints to decorate the posters that could create one long design when placed end to end.

Many performance and art scholars have written about the politics of spray paint and graffiti art. Emily J. Truman writes:

Stencil graffiti is a simple do-it-yourself (DIY) technique in which a design is cut from a piece of cardboard, creating a template that can be used to transfer the image to another surface by applying paint to the holes of the template. Stencil style is characterized as inherently political because its transformative power is seen to be embodied in its aesthetic form. (2)

As a form of public address, graffiti combines the simplicity of its application with words and images in contested public space. While graffiti performs a similar function to advertisements

and billboards, the display of the latter is authorized while graffiti remains typically prohibited which adds to its subversive potential. Our desire and attempt to create stencil art for our posters illustrates our embrace of experimental aesthetics.

First, we attempted to use an electric knife to cut clean and smooth undulating lines on the stencil film with varying levels of success. Our early attempts were rough and jagged, the opposite of our goal. We realized that cutting a long design would be too time consuming, so we settled on having the same design with different colors on each poster. We abandoned the idea entirely after having difficulty neatly affixing the stencil to the poster without having the paint creep outside the boundaries of the stencil. We had assigned a deadline for the completion of the posters, so we could post them throughout campus and local businesses to attract audience members. The day of the deadline, we struggled to come up with a new idea to create unique posters with the materials we had on hand. I also had to leave for a few hours to try on roller skates for *Rollerland*, the following performance in the HBB. When I came back, Jackie and a few friends had created a set of posters on the concrete outside the back door of the HBB. We liked that the posters had a uniform aesthetic but differed individually with one- and two-color gradients on the upper third of each poster.

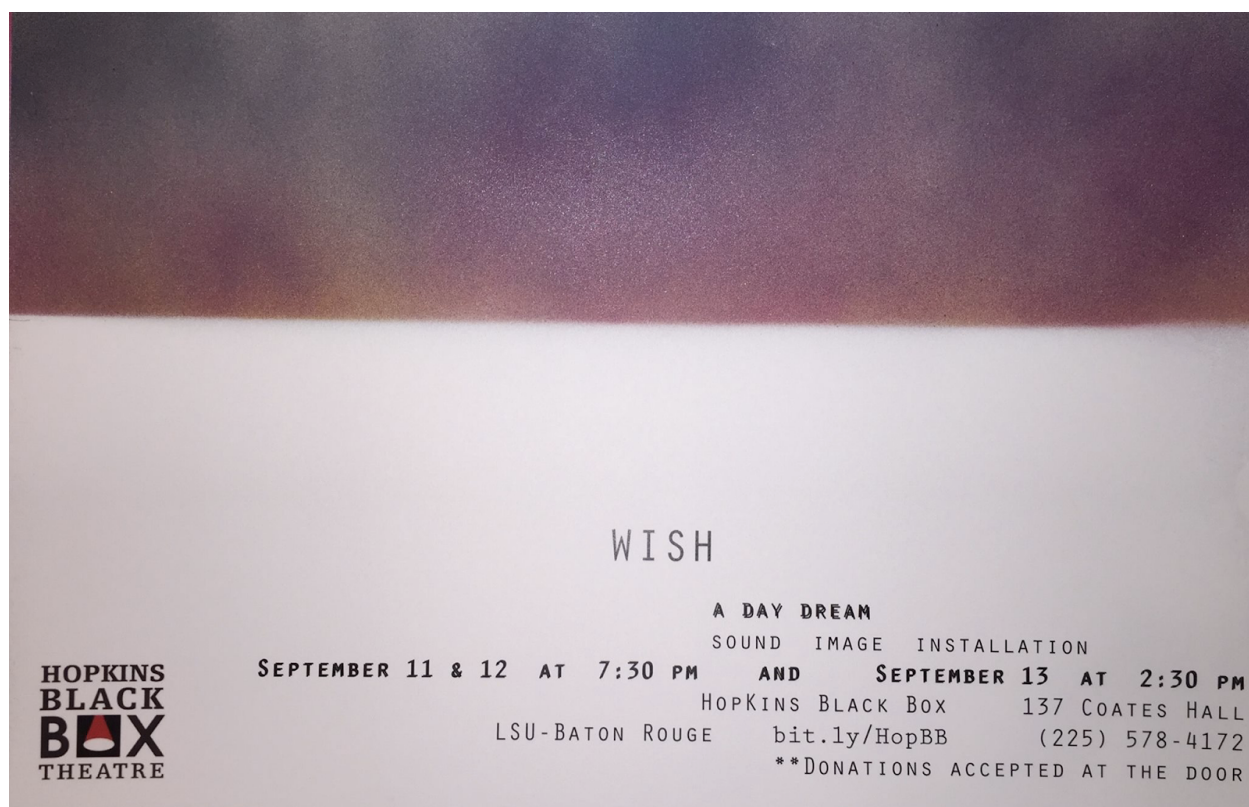


Figure 3.1. Example *Wish* promotional poster *Source: Personal photo*

Methods

As discussed in my introduction, the HBB doubles as a classroom, with risers that can be deconstructed based on the needs of the performance. Jackie and I wanted the space to be as empty as possible and did not need chairs or risers for *Wish*. We decided to set up our individual stations alongside one of the space's long walls with a projection surface atop of one of the medium-height risers in between us. We mounted a projector from the lighting grid to cast on this surface, as well as another projector above the first to cast onto the audience. While experimenting with projection, we liked the effect of setting up the surface at an angle so both the surface and the long wall would catch the projection. We hung a rectangular piece of mosquito netting from one of the long walls to the other to filter light from the second projector. In theory, audience members would be able to observe projections on the surface between Jackie

and me, on the mosquito netting, and on mattresses placed throughout the space. With our allotted budget, we purchased yards of white fabric and foam and, with assistance from other graduate students, we created five mattresses. While they were not as comfortable as we would have liked, the mattresses worked well as projection surfaces. The largest mattress measured roughly 150 square feet, and the smallest was 64 square feet. We placed the largest one against the long wall opposite from my station, the smallest one on the long wall across from Jackie's station, and then the other three in the middle of the space, with distance between all five for audience members to move throughout the HBB. I have included a rough diagram as Figure 3.2. While not exactly to scale, hopefully it illustrates how we set up the space for *Wish*.

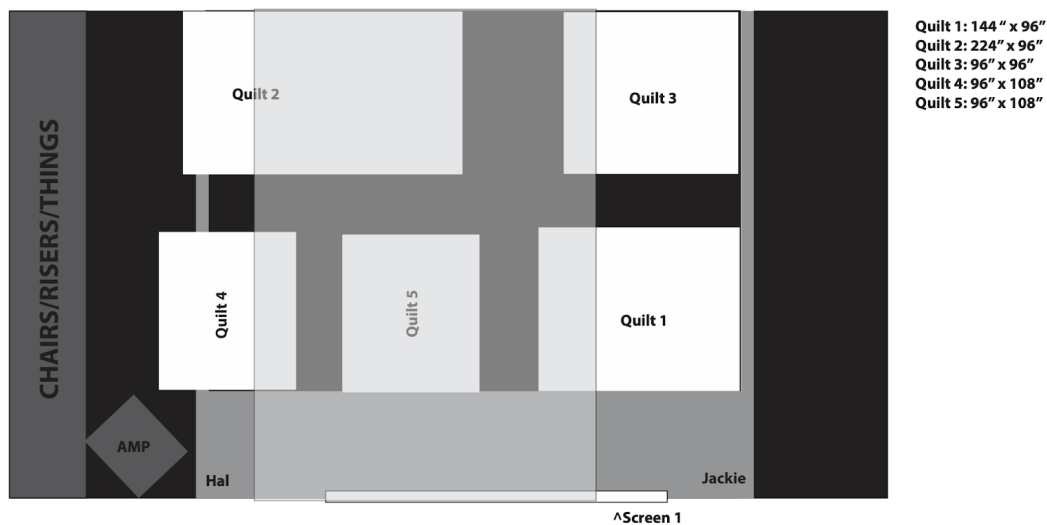


Figure 3.2. *Wish* floor map Source: E-mail communication with Jackie Rawls

At the time, the HBB used theater lights with colored gels to light performances. Jackie selected shades that would complement or contrast with colors she would generate with her video synthesizer for projections. In addition to the video synthesizer, Jackie set up her performance station with the HBB lighting board to control the theater lights during the performance, and a laptop for mixing found footage of home movies documenting birthdays,

vacations, and landscapes with the output of the video synthesizer. We found two rugs, one by a dumpster outside of Coates Hall and another in the department's prop closet, and Jackie sat and kept all her equipment on one of the rugs. We placed the other rug on the opposite side of the room for my station. We selected the rugs to create a domestic environment, which we hoped would complement the mattresses that the audience would use to rest. Jackie writes "The intention of this performance is to provide a space that is at first neutral, and then slowly builds into a living, breathing entity to encourage Art as Experience" (3).

Leading up to the performance, Jackie and I discussed the performance's ephemera and staging, but we never practiced together or rehearsed until the night before the performance's debut. I continued to play music to develop techniques that I would incorporate into the actual performance, and Jackie borrowed a 3trinsrgb+1c, a three-oscillator video synthesizer, from her department at Tulane and practiced with that on her own. Like a musical synthesizer, video synthesizers utilize oscillating waveforms to create colors and patterns that can be displayed on external monitors or routed to a projector and cast onto a surface. Jackie could modulate the frequency of each oscillator (slowly increasing or decreasing the number of repeating patterns), as well as change the type of waveform to create sharper edges, pulses, or visual noise. Jackie routed the output of her synthesizer into a program on her laptop called Modul8. Using this software, Jackie could mix the synthesizer's output with the found footage or apply effects. For example, Jackie could take a video of a cloudy sky and process it in a way that the sky would appear to be yellow and the clouds pink. She could also create copies of the video with a picture-in-picture effect. Since the first projector cast its image on the surface between us, as well as the wall behind it, she could give the sensation of multiple layers of video occurring simultaneously.

My station consisted of two wooden classroom chairs, one for me, and one for my amplifier. I used a Fender Blues Jr. tube amplifier because it was the loudest one that I owned. I like to have my amplifier elevated, so when I stand, I can easily create feedback between my guitar and my amplifier. Feedback comes from the interaction between the sound emanating from the amplifier and the vibrations being amplified by the electric guitar. Imagine the piercing squeal you hear when you hold a microphone up to a speaker. The difference here is that electric guitar performers can easily use feedback for aesthetic purposes and can manipulate the timbre with their proximity to the amplifier, the angle of their guitar to the amplifier, and with extended techniques like slowly bending the guitar's neck. For example, Lou Reed sings "And then my mind split open" on The Velvet Underground's "I Heard Her Call My Name," screeching feedback signals the beginning of his extended guitar solo which modulates between lead playing and shards of feedback ("I Heard Her Call My Name").

During *Wish* I owned two guitars, a Fender Telecaster, and a Fernandes Stratocaster copy. I used the Stratocaster copy because it was also very loud, and it had an arm for vibrato (slowly stretching the strings out of tune), which combined with effects could create an exaggerated vibrato within a wash of sound. I also used an assortment of distortion, reverb, delay, and looping effects as well as drumsticks and piano wire to activate the guitar's strings.

Performance

Jackie and I had our first and only rehearsal the night before we opened. We invited Jackie's siblings, the HBB manager, and a member of my graduate student cohort to attend. I remember feeling nervous because we had spent so much time designing posters, making mattresses, hanging projectors, mosquito netting and little time practicing together. We envisioned *Wish* as lasting as long as it needed to last. One performance may be an hour, the next might be three

hours, the last maybe only 30 minutes. We performed for no more than 45 minutes that night, and none of the performances ever lasted more than an hour. I learned that it was actually very difficult to improvise alongside Jackie. I was too involved in my own station and what I was doing to always pay attention to the screen between us. In addition, the distance between us created the sensation of an aural/visual binary that countered our own understanding of the two as influencing one another to create a holistic experience. A performance choice intended to give the two of us space to sprawl out and be comfortable resulted in a potential reading of *Wish* that we aimed to avoid.

We wanted audience members to be able to move throughout the space, and to come and go as they pleased. This was either not logistically possible or was misunderstood in communication or through the established cultural norms of the HBB. So, on opening night, the audience members stepped into the space after a speech from our theater manager, and the door was shut behind them without a clear message that folks could leave, come back, or invite friends to come after the starting time.

I had prepared a loop to serve as bed music as the audience entered. On the first night I think I used the sound of piano wire rubbing against guitar strings. There was a destroyed piano on the street where I lived at the time, and after recording myself playing the wire inside the piano, I took one as a souvenir. I curled one end of the wire and wrapped electrical tape around the curl to fashion a handle. I slid the wire underneath my guitar's strings, gripped the handle with one hand and the end with my other and I slowly bowed the guitar with my new device.

I do not remember much of the actual performance, but we have several videos and still photos from the first and last shows from an undergraduate videographer. These videos supplement my memories in interesting ways. First, I forgot how loud things were. We have two

videos of opening night: one from a handheld camera in the audience, and another from a camera set on a tripod in an elevated area above me and Jackie. The sound in each video is incredibly distorted. Some of this distortion can be attributed to the inadequate microphones built into the camera, but it seems as if my volume never dipped below “very loud” for the entire performance.

Audience members seem receptive. From the videographer’s perspective, we can see a row of audience members sitting down and watching Jackie’s projections. One observer lays down after fashioning a pillow out of their jacket. My father attended opening one night and told me he fell asleep, which also felt like an appropriate response to the performance. The video from the elevated camera shows groups of audience members moving through the space together. These were all responses Jackie and I hoped audience members would have during the performance.

Jackie’s projections look lush and vibrant from both angles. In one moment, from the handheld footage, the camera goes slightly out of focus. Jackie’s projections begin to blur, and the audience fades away leaving a gradient of soft pinks and oranges floating in space. Jackie’s explorations of color shine through in these videos, especially as she begins to process footage of landscapes: cloudy skies, rivers, and trees blown by the wind to name a few instances.

Unfortunately, we made the mistake of having the videographer set his camera up in a far corner opposite the projections for the final show. In this video, the projections are lost in the frame, you can see the hanging sheets very well as well as a row of empty chairs. To make things worse, we only have a series of still photos of that performance with no recorded audio.

Reviewing these photos and videos shows that *Wish* met our expectations. In addition to the outstanding quality of Jackie’s projections, they also look different on each surface.

Audience members responded well, nobody heckled us or disrupted the environment. My friends visiting from out of town expressed their enjoyment and one audience member told me about the performance's lingering out-of-body impact on them after they left the Sunday matinee.

Reflection

Since my memories of the performance come primarily from the documentation, I will reflect on the process of documenting first. The documentation captures Jackie's projections, but only from the audience's point of view, so we miss the projections on the bodies of audience members unless you look at the elevated footage which is distant. The camera's built-in microphone might work fine capturing dialogue from subjects nearby but worked less well for recording an amplifier from several feet away. A method for properly documenting an installation like *Wish* might resemble a montage of different moments from each performance. Maybe footage of Jackie's projections, my own performance, Jackie working in her area, the audience members, close-ups of textures and patterns in the space would accompany an adequately recorded soundtrack of my music. The videos and stills capture the moment of the performance from the audience's perspective, which is necessary. But a more comprehensive approach would have been to also capture Jackie's laptop's output before it went to the projector. This way, we could have edited a video that combines the audience's perspective and special moments from Jackie's projections into a new art project. Instead of capturing my sound with the camera, we could have used an instrument microphone to record my performance each night to an external source. This method will not be *Wish* as it was experienced in the HBB, but rather a remediation of the performance. Nevertheless, it would be useful to have when presenting on my work in the future.

Looking back on our performance, I am satisfied with *Wish* and the work we accomplished in staging, promoting, and realizing the performance. Jackie's work with video art during *Wish* inspired me to create my own video art for projections during future solo performances, and more recently, to create video art for other artists to use as music videos or to accompany other artists' performances. One thing that stands out the most about her practice is that *Wish* was Jackie's first video art performance. She acquired the gear from her department at Tulane and taught herself how to use it for *Wish*. I was already doing something similar with guitar, but video art seemed out of reach for some reason. To see Jackie pick it up so quickly, and then successfully perform as part of the HBB season inspired me. I have attempted to embody and incorporate this DIY attitude into my practice since *Wish*. I try to take classes where I can, watch tutorials on sites like YouTube, experiment with possibilities, copy and paste from other's projects and build on them in my own way. Jackie also quickly developed her own style, combining both analog and digital methods and could discuss the histories behind each tool.

Initially, the HBB board would only allow us two nights in the space for performance, but I asked for a three-day workshop. Jackie and I felt that more performance dates would allow our collaboration to unfold in different ways each time and that through repeated performances we could strengthen our hybrid art form. While I was thankful we had three performances, I wish we would have discussed our work from each night and worked together to decide which elements to attempt to replicate, devised different strategies, or changed in our position in the space. Instead, we trusted that we would instinctively develop things during *Wish*'s runtime, something that may have happened if we had spent more time rehearsing with one another in advance.

This was a production on a scale that I have not achieved again, and I doubt I could without the help of a collaborator. Jackie was dedicated to the project even when I could not be bothered, and it is also safe to say that she did much of the academic writing necessary to propose the project. Working with Jackie was simultaneously a way for us to bond and something that pulled us apart, equal parts stressful and joyful. Her drive to realize her vision that spanned from lighting, to projections, to promotion, to the physical layout of the space inspired me to push myself as an artist and diversify my practice outside of music.

Chapter 4. Creature

Description

In the fall of 2017, I worked with Tracy Stephenson Shaffer on her performance, *Creature From The Primordial World*. Shaffer envisioned the performance as a simultaneous screening and live reenactment of the 1954 Universal horror film *Creature From The Black Lagoon*. In addition to experimenting with Everyday Life Performance (ELP) methods, *Creature* taught the generic conventions of primordial world horror films to the audience through dialog between the performers. The movie tells the story of a group of researchers and their local guides who make their way down the Amazon River searching for evidence of an unknown amphibious creature in a mysterious area that locals call the Black Lagoon. The characters encounter the titular creature, whom they dub the Gill-man, who soon falls in love with Kay, a scientist on the expedition. The Gill-man kills various members of the team, and kidnaps Kay before the explorers rescue Kay and defeat the Gill-man who sinks to the depths of the Black Lagoon before returning in two sequels: *Revenge Of The Creature* (1955), and *The Creature Walks Among Us* (1956).

For *Creature*, the cast rehearsed using ELP methods, acting alongside the film to replicate the performances and vocal delivery of the original actors as accurately as possible. Developed by Robert Hopper and Nathan Stucky, Everyday Life Performance asks actors to listen to a recording of a conversation, replay the recording while reading with a transcript, get comfortable reading without the recording, attempt to replicate the recording without reading the transcript, and then finally, perform the recording (Hopper 182; Stucky). During rehearsals, Shaffer decided that the film should be projected onto a surface behind the live actors to create a visual echo for the audience during the show's run, underscoring the performance's method and

the discipline with which the actors rehearsed and performed. A different group of cast members would occasionally interrupt the re-performance of the film to elaborate on the generic conventions of primordial world horror films such as character archetypes or the different types of threat and their natural origins.

As opposed to the rubber suited male menace from the original film, *Creature From The Primordial World* imagined a beautiful, but still murderous, female sea creature. In addition to designing the sound cues for the performance, I operated the head of our version of the Gill-man, Primordia. The two-piece puppet required three performers to manipulate and bore a resemblance to the dragons seen during celebrations for the Chinese New Year.

Made by colleagues Ruth Laurion Bowman, Emily Graves and Bonny McDonald, Primordia's 12-foot body consisted of a rigid aluminum tube with three poles attached to operate the puppet. Sheets of bubble wrap coated the tube to provide bulk and layers of fabric in varying shades of cyan were cut into scales and adorned Primordia's body interspersed with bits of refractive gold. A fringe of fabric and thin tubing reminiscent of jellyfish appendages would hide the puppeteers' bodies. The puppeteer at the front of the body would hold the first pole with their right arm, rest the end of the tubing on their right shoulder, and operate the puppet's head with their left hand. Primordia's head, fabricated around a plastic gallon jug, had scales similar to the body. It was also topped with two curved horns, and had a sharp, pointed jaw that could be opened and closed by rotating the puppeteer's wrist. The puppet was heavy, and we needed to elevate it above our heads to create the movements that made it come alive. We also found that she had an incredibly expressive face, especially when registering emotions of shock and surprise and we entertained ourselves by mimicking her expressions.

While the Gill-man appears frightening in the film. Primordia seemed much more sympathetic, so when she met her demise, I imagine that the audience felt a twinge of sadness. The sense of beauty, grace, and mystery the puppet exuded also informed the creation of *Creature*'s sound cues.

Background

Shaffer asked me to produce several musical pieces for the performance: short bursts of sounds or “stings” to accompany the creature’s attacks, as well as longer pieces that would accompany aquatic explorations, the dramatic climax, and a dance sequence between the performer playing Kay and Primordia. Shaffer also asked if I could use instrumental moments from Gary Wright’s 1975 song “Dream Weaver” to create all of the pieces for the performance. Shaffer viewed the relationship between Primordia and Kay in a more loving and tender light than the relationship depicted in the original film and the sound cues needed to reflect this decision.

I worked with Shaffer on her performance *Rollerland* two years prior in the fall of 2015. Shaffer had a similar request then when she asked me to an opening number that should combined similar sonic elements from Chic’s “Good Times,” the Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight,” and Queen’s “Another One Bites the Dust” into a new composition. When working on *Rollerland*, I had no previous experience working with a DAW, so I learned the process of layering, editing, and mixing audio as well as the process of automating effects parameters as I created the piece. The final product emerged from the learning process as well as what some might call “dumb luck.” In between *Rollerland* and *Creature*, I enrolled in classes in the Experimental Music & Digital Media program in LSU’s College of Music. I learned the fundamentals of digital audio, received hands-on guidance navigating DAWs, practiced the

proper application of effects such as delay, reverb, and audio filters, and explored the possibilities for audio production and DSP with Max, a visual programming language created by Cycling '74. Given this, I felt more comfortable approaching this project and the director's request knowing that I would have more time to explore possibilities and dedicate a significant amount of time devising a working process.

Planning

Through discussions with Shaffer, I knew that each piece should evoke a specific mood: danger, wonder, dread, etc. Fortunately, Shaffer selected "Dream Weaver" due, in part, to the contrast present in the song itself. The song begins with a synthesizer emulating a string section. The drone of the synthesizer connotes an ominous mood, perfect accompaniment to a killer stalking their prey. You can also hear fleeting and mysterious keyboard melodies and burbling synth sounds that seem to mimic the breath of a living creature. After 30 seconds, the drone abruptly stops, and Wright begins to sing with a sparse keyboard accompaniment. After a brief verse, the band joins him for a triumphant chorus and the string sounds from the song's introduction return. In contrast to their presence in the intro, they create a descending melody that resolves into a blissful sense of optimism. The song alternates between the moody verse and the joyful chorus until it returns to the primordial soup from which it originally emerged.

I typically approach each project as a blank slate. The director tells me what they need in terms of content, the mood they wish to evoke, and the contextual framing of the piece. In this case, "Dream Weaver" was a key part of Shaffer's entire concept. The music I produced needed to be abstract enough to fit alongside the performers and not call attention to itself, but it also needed to retain some of its original spirit. I wanted to create an instrument with Max that I could use to cut "Dream Weaver" into slices for further processing and layering. Choosing to work

with Max as opposed to a DAW allowed for more flexibility in arranging the audio since I could code the instrument in Max precisely for my needs. Being familiar with Max already would allow me to take time to experiment, to discover unexpected combinations or styles of music, and to play with multiple options before it became time to submit a final product.

As opposed to other programming languages which use written lines of codes, Max works in a visual/pictorial domain where programmers create patches to perform a series of functions. Within the patch, the programmer connects a series of nodes or modules known as *objects* to accomplish certain tasks. Some objects work with data, but other objects work with audio signals and manipulate audio in real time using DSP. My professor in the Experimental Music & Digital Media program, Jesse Allison, introduced Max to my class by asking us “what do you want to make?” We decided to make a digital delay unit. Digital delay units work by recording a source audio signal into a buffer that delays the audio by the amount of time specified (previously determined by the length of a piece of tape in an analog unit). You can control the length of the delay as well as how much of the delayed signal feeds into the incoming source signal. In 15 minutes, he created a patch that delayed incoming audio from his laptop’s microphone and played the processed audio through his laptop’s speakers. He also explained how we could further customize the patch: how to apply filters to control the resonance of the delay and filter out the high or low frequencies, how to create multiple delay lines for processing individual channels in different ways, and the possibilities of using Max as a live performance tool.

Inspirations

In perhaps more ways than any other genre, sound and music enhance the atmosphere of horror films. In regard to the link between sound, music, and horror cinema, Philip Hayward

notes “music routinely accents and amplifies aspects of various film texts and genres...its capacity to create tension and shock supplementary to narrative and visual design is a key element in the horror genre” (2). Michel Chion uses the term *added value* to describe

the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression “naturally” comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself. (5)

He notes that added value works “reciprocally,” that a film’s audience perceives the film differently due to sound and they perceive the sound differently due to the images on the screen (21). In our case, the Gill-man’s snarls elevate the Gill-man into a “creature” as opposed to a man in a rubber suit. Diegetic sound allows the moviegoer to hear his snarl and nondiegetic sound (like tense and strident strings) create the psychological effects that make lovers hold each other tight in the cinema. Slasher icons of 1980s American horror films also arrived with sound cues that became iconic in their own right: John Carpenter’s synthesizer score for *Halloween*, the nursery rhyme warning of Freddy Krueger’s arrival in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and the ominous and breathy cue accompanying Jason Voorhees (or his mother) in the *Friday the 13th* series.

I looked towards the sonic qualities already present in Wright’s song as inspiration. I thought, “what can I make with what I already have?” I also knew not to detract from the performers on stage, so the pieces should be relatively static. In the liner notes to his album *Music For Airports*, Brian Eno discusses the difference between the background music developed by Muzak Inc. in the 1950s and his then-current projects experimenting with what he described as “ambient music.” Eno writes

Whereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies, Ambient Music is intended to enhance these ... Ambient Music must be able to accommodate

many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting. (*Ambient 1 (Music For Airports)*)

Eno's manifesto on ambient music guided my decisions as I created recordings for *Creature* and I wanted to create something that would not distract from the performers, but rather reward audience members who chose to focus intently on the sound during the choreographed dance numbers.

I also knew that I did not want to spend much time layering and editing sounds. Instead, I wanted to find a mood and immerse the audience within that mood. I would need to create a system that could play the audio independently from my control for several minutes at a time to see what works and what does not work. I became interested in this type of process-based music through the work of composers like Steve Reich. Discussing process-based music, Reich writes that "the distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note- (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously ... by running this material through this process I completely control all that results, but also that I accept all that results without changes" ("Music as a Gradual Process" 305).

One example of Reich's process pieces is "Pendulum Music." In this piece, several microphones are suspended above an equal number of speakers usually with some sort of rope or cable. Performers pull the microphones back and release them so that they swing in a pendulum motion over the speakers. When the microphones get close enough to the speakers, they create a feedback loop resulting in audio emerging from the speaker. The piece ends when the microphones stop swinging and create overlapping feedback drones (*Writings on Music: 1965-2000* 32). This inspiration also informed my decision to use Max, the patch I would create with Max would act as the process through which I would be able to generate all of the material for the performance.

Methods

In Max, objects typically have a combination of inlets and outlets. Inlets receive data or signal and outlets send out data or signal. A Max programmer connects the outlet of one object to the inlet of another by using patch cords.

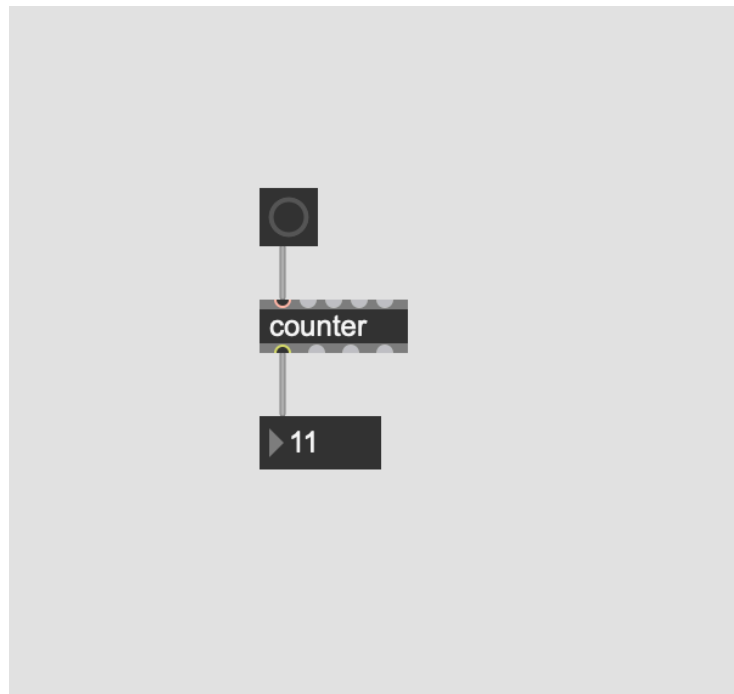


Figure 4.1. Sample Max patch *Source: Author*

Figure 4.1 contains a patch that can count the number of impulses or *bangs* it receives.

At the top is the *bang* object which can be triggered in various ways. The easiest way to trigger a bang is by clicking inside the circle with a mouse. The outlet of the *bang* is connected to the inlet of the *counter* object. Counter keeps track of how many bangs it receives and its leftmost outlet outputs the current count. The leftmost counter outlet connects to the *integer* object which displays the current count. At this moment, if I clicked on the bang again, the integer object would display 12. Programmers could use this incoming data to further drive processes within a Max patch. For example, you could create a patch that would incrementally increase the gain of a sample with each bang. I have presented only a brief and rudimentary explanation of Max, but

this explanation is necessary to understand how I applied my knowledge in collaboration with Shaffer.

When working on the music for *Creature*, I decided to isolate each stereo channel of “Dream Weaver” so that the audio a listener would hear in the left speaker (or channel) and the audio a listener would hear in the right could be processed independently from one another. I then built an instrument in Max that would allow me to select portions of audio from each channel for looping playback.

First, I created an audio buffer for both the left and right channels of “Dream Weaver.” These buffers stored the audio and allowed it to be accessed by other objects within Max. The playback of the audio comes from a series of *groove~* objects, each responsible for a channel of “Dream Weaver”. *Groove~* reads through a buffer at a specified rate and outputs the signal for further processing or for playback. *Groove~* can also reverse audio, change the playback speed, one-shot or loop a specified portion of the buffer, and utilize time-stretching pitch correction. For example, if I have a two-second drum sample loaded into a buffer and I used *groove~* to playback that sample at a rate of 1, then I would hear the unprocessed sample. A rate of -1 would play it at normal speed in reverse, a rate of 0.5 would be half speed, a rate of -2 would be double speed in reverse. A rate of 0.5 would also create a four-second-long sample (the absolute value of the rate multiplied by original sample length will equal the new sample length), but it would also create a sample that’s an octave lower than the original sound. A rate of 2 (the original played back at double speed) would create a one-second sample an octave higher than the original. Enabling time-stretching uses a DSP algorithm to stretch the length of the sample without changing the pitch. Using this feature, I could stretch the length of Wright singing “weaver” by any factor without making his voice go higher or lower. This algorithm can only

approximate an accurate representation of the sound and will introduce digital artifacts: bits of sound that might resemble noise or audio glitches. But it can also create ambient soundscapes from unlikely sources. I mostly decreased the speed of the loops in order to mimic the slow, lyrical movements choreographed for the performers on stage.

I wanted to create a system that would allow me to recreate the sensation of moving and hearing underwater. I routed the output of each *groove~* to a *biquad~* object which applies an audio filter to the signal based on a set of coefficients I could control.

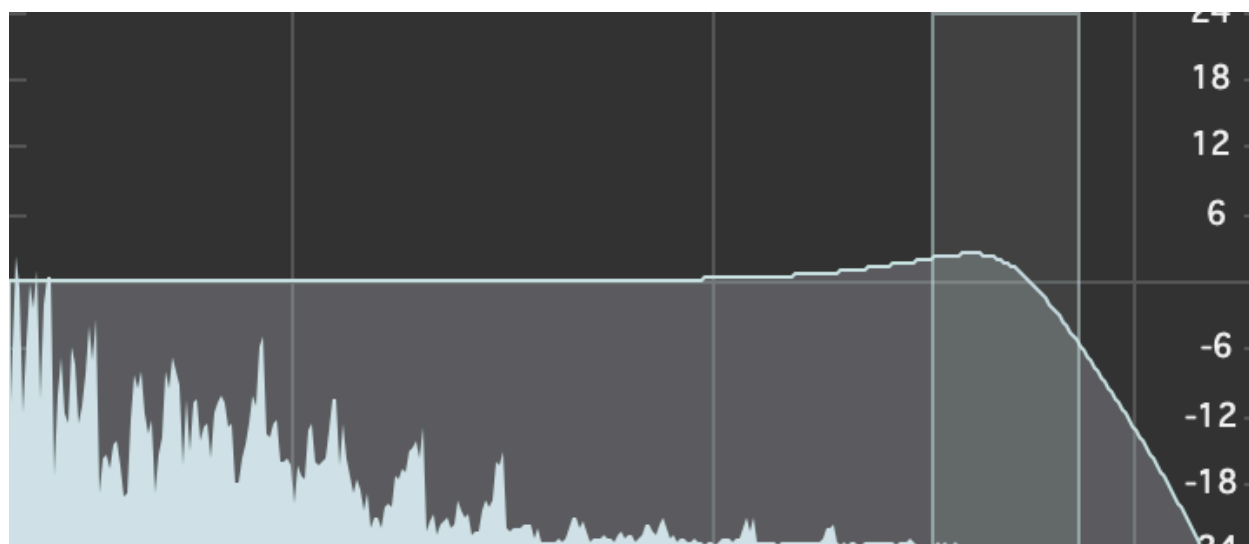


Figure 4.2. Low-pass filter in Max *Source: Author*

There are several different filter types, but I selected a low-pass filter to attenuate the higher frequency content from the audio signal. Figure 4.2 depicts a low-pass filter with a cutoff of 5000 hertz (Hz) (the blue-gray line parallel to the top and bottom edge of the picture). While the labels for the x-axis are invisible, the x-axis corresponds to the frequency domain (0 Hz - 22050 Hz) while the y-axis corresponds to the gain (-24 decibels to 24 dBs).

The coefficients help the filter determine the cutoff, slope, gain and resonance of the filter. For example, if I set the cutoff to 5000 KHz, then the filter would begin to remove

frequencies above that threshold. The unattenuated frequency content rests in the shaded area beneath the filter. The gain decides how much the filter affects the signal's overall amplitude or volume. The slope determines the resonance of the filter, the notch before the filter begins to curve down. This provides a slight boost to the frequencies near the cutoff of the filter. To create a sense of movement, I routed a low frequency oscillator (LFO) to control the cutoff of the filter. The LFO would slowly modulate the cutoff frequency within a specified range to create an effect called a filter sweep that slowly reveals or hides elements of the signal. This sounds like the music slowly becoming brighter or duller over time.

I later learned that I created my system in the opposite way of how sound waves travel underwater. A high-pass filter would have been most appropriate in terms of fidelity to real life. However, when I make these changes to the patch, I find that the lack of low-end frequencies takes away from the weight and feel of the sounds. Nevertheless, I felt slightly embarrassed that I had never even thought of researching how sound travels before I began working on the project.

Next, I spent time finding sections of the song from each channel to loop. I listened for how the pieces interacted with one another and how they slowly went out of sync or phase with each other. Paying attention to the phase of the two loops reveals new sonic events as the pieces slowly drift apart from one another and reveals the content created through the process or system I established. When I found a pair of loops that I liked, I would then adjust the speed or pitch to taste and then sit and listen for several minutes. If I could listen comfortably while browsing the Internet, reading on my phone, or wandering the house then I would save this setting as a preset for easy recall of the beginning and end of the audio loop, the playback speed, and filter settings.

Without access to Wright's stems (the individual recordings of each instrument and vocal before they are mixed into stereo) I had less control over the material for the performance's

sound cues and I had to pay close attention to musical elements that repeat throughout the song. Rather than trying to avoid these elements entirely or only have them featured in one cue, I experimented with ways that I could take these elements and make them slightly different each time they occur. I also needed to negotiate the lengths of my loops to avoid Wright's voice. Through playing with the musical loops, I realized that I did not want to use his voice because it called too much attention to itself and took me out of the moment when listening. In total, I created 47 presets and then began to take note as to which preset would work best for the sound cues I needed to create.

Most of the cues would only appear once in the performance, but Shaffer wanted to use one cue repeatedly to signal Primordia's presence, this cue became known as "The Creature Theme." Shaffer identified elements from the intro and coda of "Dream Weaver" that she wanted featured in this cue, so I avoided the bright and uplifting middle section of the song as I created this piece. The final product loops a low synth drone with a slow filter sweep, a small section of the synthesized strings, a keyboard melody played in reverse, and an off kilter arpeggiated chord. Occasionally, other elements would bubble to the surface but a superficial listen gives an impression of an eight second loop with little variation.

The next cue became known as "Exploration" and accompanied the team of researchers as they explored the Black Lagoon for the first time. The performers playing Mark and David, two of the main researchers, would perform a dance on the Black Box stage while their filmic counterparts navigated the Black Lagoon using scuba equipment. This cue utilized material from the verse and chorus sections of "Dream Weaver." My favorite of the cues, "Exploration" consists of a slow-motion two chord progression that fades in and out over the course of the

piece. Twinkling keys and a consistent pulse reminiscent of the thud of a kick drum accompany the dreamy melody.

The next cue played alongside Kay and Primordia's dance. After watching the men explore the Black Lagoon, Kay decides to dive into the water unaware that Primordia has stalked the crew to this point, enamored with Kay's beauty. This was another choreographed piece, and it also provided the audience with their first glimpse of the complete Primordia puppet. As described earlier, it took three performers to operate the 12-foot puppet using poles underneath the head, middle section, and end. Kay would explore the stage with Primordia lingering in the distance while occasionally coming close enough to quickly graze Kay. This cue used similar material to "The Creature Theme" but processed in such a way that each cue had its own individual character. In this instance, the strange synth sounds from the intro to "Dream Weaver" suggest the breath of the creature as it follows Kay instead of murderous intent and the keyboard melody ends abruptly before resuming seconds later, as if waiting for a response.

As the performance progresses, the research team and ship crew capture and subsequently lose Primordia who eventually kidnaps Kay and escapes to her lair with several dead bodies in her wake. The sound cue "Grotto" played as the researchers swam towards Primordia's secluded resting place. The whistling sound associated with the creature present in most cues appears again and a single note from "Dream Weaver"'s keyboard melody fades in and out. This cue stripped away many of the elements from the intro to "Dream Weaver" to create a sense of anticipation and mystery as the explorers approached the dramatic showdown.

The final cue accompanied Primordia's final battle with the researchers. By this point, Primordia had inflicted serious casualties to the team of researchers and their local guides while suffering wounds herself. "Attack" sounds slower and deeper than any of the other cues. I set

oscillators that modulate the low pass filter cutoff frequency to an even slower rate with a higher resonance than in previous cues. The low-end rumbles more than in previous cues, the creature breathes slower, and listeners can only faintly hear the keyboard melody in the background. Shaffer and I found that many of the pieces needed to be extended to fit the accompanying actions on stage. In these cases, I simply cross-faded the cue with itself by duplicating the sound file and having the end of one fade out while fading in the beginning of the second. This proved to be a quick and easy solution since the cues served as textural accompaniment as opposed to providing a sonic representation of the performers' individual movements.

Performance

The HBB has a designated laptop for our sound and projection operator. I imported each sound cue into QLab, the software we use on the designated laptop to manage audio-visual cues for our productions. Importing files and creating cues is a relatively quick process and the laptop would also be used to project the film *Creature From The Black Lagoon* meaning the video and sounds were controlled with one list of cues. During the appropriate moment in *Creature* rehearsals and performances, our operator would trigger playback for each cue, and then initiate an automated fade-out for the cue's volume after the corresponding actions on stage. Our operators ensured that each rehearsal and public performance went smoothly and without any unplanned audio-visual interruptions.

During the performance, I operated our puppet Primordia alongside two other performers, Evan Schares and Montana Smith. Schares, Smith, and I would occasionally call for the tech operators to pause the film, interrupting the show to engage in dialog with ourselves and the performers playing the film's actors. Through this dialog, Shaffer sought to define and elaborate the generic conventions of primordial world horror identified through her prior research. We also

provided the film's opening narration that hints at the Creature's evolutionary beginnings and its connection to the prehistoric past. I admired the diligence of the group of performers reenacting the film. The ELP methods seemed rigorous, and the performers spent hours attempting to recreate the actors' verbal and nonverbal performances. My fellow puppeteers and I enjoyed the chance to turn in exaggerated performances during our interruptions and we enjoyed time spent working together to create Primordia's physicality and personality.

Reflection

In my experience, some collaborations are more laissez-faire than others. From my history with Shaffer, I know that she will spend a considerable amount of time working with her performers and will not require much time with me as I work on sound design. While she is not an active music practitioner, she has an ear for music, can describe the qualities of sound she desires to hear, and had specific requests for the sonic characteristics of the cues and their pop-cultural contexts. This led to an easy-going collaboration, where she described what she wanted, and I provided the material by an agreed upon deadline. We had one initial meeting and at least one more where I showed her a few sketches before I installed the audio in the theater. Since she could explain what she wanted in a clear way, I could get to work sooner.

While I had designed sound for a performance before, I had never used Max to do so. Working on *Creature* allowed me to spend time becoming more proficient in Max, a skill I incorporated into later performances and projects. In some moments (and frequently in sound design collaborations), I viewed this experience as a chance to provide service to the department while learning a new method for my own artistic explorations.

As I mentioned previously, even though I had responsibilities as a performer, I had ample time to experiment and play with "Dream Weaver," find the instrumental moments to process,

and explore different combinations and possibilities of playback rates, LFO settings and time-stretching. In collaborations like this, I find it best to offer several sketches of potential cues. By following this practice and providing a diverse set of sketches, I can reduce the risk of having to start from scratch if the director dislikes the works-in-progress. In this case, everything went as planned and I could develop the sketches I presented to Shaffer into the final pieces for the performance.

Like *Rollerland*, the previous performance I worked on with Shaffer, *Creature From The Primordial World* needed sound cues that could be triggered by a sound operator offstage. To ensure the best possible playback. As described above, I imported the files into QLab myself so I could decide on durations of the fades, route the audio to the theater speakers, and adjust overall volume in advance of the performance. If, for some reason, I could not install the audio myself (in case of a remote collaboration or something similar), I would have provided detailed instructions for applying fades. Adjusting the volume would be more difficult remotely as I would not actually be in the room to hear the acoustics of the space. In this case, I would leave that decision to the director or tech operator.

In collaborations like this, I find that I do not necessarily learn new things as opposed to experimenting with what has worked in the past. Given that I had worked with Shaffer previously, I thought I knew how the process would work and I planned accordingly. The only misstep I remember was that some of the initial “final draft” cues were not long enough (described above). This was probably caused by the fact that I was operating the puppet during most of these cues and was busy in rehearsals trying to remember to hit my mark and lost track of the length of each section. I also never thought to time the cues in rehearsals. So, shortly

before *Creature* opened, I had to extend several cues. Luckily, this was easily fixed, but worth noting for future collaborations.

During *Creature*, Shaffer worked with another graduate student to choreograph the underwater dance pieces that my cues scored. Moving forward (and I should have learned this lesson before *Creature* but am only realizing it as I write this document), I would recommend engaging in open communication and perhaps a meeting or two between directors, choreographers, sound designers, and video editors. Sharing drafts, ideas, sketches can be useful so that all collaborators have a sense of what the other is doing as the performance takes shape.

Chapter 5. Wittgenstein

Description

In the spring of 2018, I worked with David Terry on his second adaptation of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and our second collaborative project. Adapted from David Markson's 1988 novel by the same name, the performance brought Markson's protagonist Kate to life with eight actresses. Terry transformed the novel's stream-of-consciousness first-person addresses into eight separate monologues and the performer's took turns depicting Kate's fractured mental state. The novel, a blur of references to art history, Grecian epics, Western literature, European geography, philosophy, and classical music combines with the story of the last woman on Earth. *Wittgenstein's Mistress* ran from March 14 to March 18 in LSU's HBB and traveled in an abridged format to the 2018 NCA Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Kate, the performance's protagonist, jumps from one subject to another, speaking as an expert on a great number of topics, but having difficulty remembering specific details about her past life. She also acknowledges her past struggles with her mental health early in the novel (6). When she can remember her past, her memories are fractured. For example, she struggles to remember her age or the names of her loved ones or how long she's been in isolation. Kate hints that she has been alone for at least a decade, or possibly more.

Kate often reflects on the passage of time especially in events separated by a decade. For example, when contemplating the epic poetry of Homer, Kate imagines what she would have done had she been Penelope waiting for Odysseus to return from the Trojan War. Kate foreshadows the reveal of her adultery and says, "Or Penelope, making love to one after another of all of those suitors, while Odysseus was away. Wouldn't she have? Surely, with so many of them hanging about? And if it was truly ten years for the war and still another ten before that

husband of hers materialized?” (22). Ideas, people, places, and objects swirl throughout the novel, often recurring with slightly different retellings.

Kate’s stories of her actions over the past decade include tales of living in museums and installing her own art, traveling the world, befriending cats, corresponding with philosophers, and reading. Eventually, she begins to acknowledge the inaccuracy with which she has told her story to the readers. She continues to prove herself an unreliable narrator as she reveals half-truths in the telling of certain stories, disclosing towards the end of the novel that she cheated on her husband before their child’s death and their subsequent separation.

In Terry’s adaptation, each performer would take turns portraying Kate before they exited and a new Kate replaced them on stage. While delivering their monologue, each performer would slowly cover the theater walls with jagged lines of blue painter’s tape as Kate told her story. Other props included an easel, another relic of Kate’s former life as an artist, a four-panel window frame, and several mannequins seated with the audience. The presence of the mannequins suggested that the living and breathing audience members were privy to a performance that Kate may regularly perform in whatever space she has occupied: the Louvre, the National Gallery, or maybe the Metropolitan Museum. Kate reveals this to be true during the performance’s final moments as she speaks on her desire to stage a performance.

Projected onto the wall behind the performers were images and videos illustrating Kate’s references. Terry would trigger these projections manually each night to keep them in synchronization with each performer’s pace layering portraits, maps, landscapes, and text in a manner that resembled Kate’s discursive tangents. I sat in the HBB’s tech booth opposite the performers and behind the audience members and mixed the performance’s soundscape during each performance. Kate’s rapid-fire strings of references and the performers’ frequent shifts in

mood became guides as I triggered samples of recordings mentioned by Kate, processed samples and original audio with effects, and faded sources into and out of the mix, using a MIDI controller and a Max patch.

Background

Terry's vision for *Wittgenstein* required me to build on skills and concepts from our first collaboration, *Shadow of the Valley*, in 2015. In fact, Terry wanted *Wittgenstein* to sound similar to *Shadow*: constant amplified sound, music that accentuates the mood of a scene, music that suggest a character's psychological state, and both recognizable and unrecognizable moments from recorded music history. For *Shadow*, a series of short performances exploring death and dying, Terry wanted amplified sound throughout the performance: original compositions, diegetic sound for atmosphere, and sampled recordings. Building on my skills from *Rollerland*, I composed several pieces in Live (the DAW I used to make *Rollerland*'s opening mash-up) and selected clips of songs with lyrics about death and dying for a game of on-stage musical chairs. For the latter project, I would trigger a clip and the performers would move in a circle around a group of chairs. The performers would need to listen carefully as I cycled between clips and then wait for the music to stop before they took their seat. I edited each song into an approximately 20 second clip capturing when the singer mentions death or dying and triggered the clips each night using Live's built in playback system.

During *Shadow*, I sat in the tech booth using QLab to trigger audio and projections. Due to me accidentally deleting several weeks' worth of work from my laptop, I did not meet the goal of having a musical piece for each scene. Because of this, I learned that once I completed a piece for the show, I needed to import the audio into QLab and build a cue for live playback and to always back up my work.

Planning

To help me get started on the project, Terry saved me the trouble of reading the entire novel and gave me a list of musicians referenced by Kate. Terry mentioned that Kate references Joan Baez several times throughout the novel: how she hears Baez's music, wondering what Baez might name a cat, and revealing she attempted to correspond with Baez. Terry also suggested that I also listen to compositions by Antonio Vivaldi, Hector Berlioz, and Dmitri Shostakovich among others. I downloaded a compilation CD of Baez's greatest hits, and I selected her cover of "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" for further editing. Though I was unfamiliar with European classical music, I also made sure to download several symphonies and operas by the composers listed above.

An early idea from Terry was to simulate a radio scanning for stations. Maybe, at some point in her journeys, Kate had acquired a radio and would scan across the frequency bands to play the classical composers she held so dear. I worked on this as a creative exercise for several days, I could never quite achieve the effect of scanning through static (possibly because I overlooked an easy solution: sampling white noise) but I did mangle many of the early recordings and several of these early experiments made their way into the final performance in some way or another.

I remember latching onto Terry's request for sampled audio because I thought it was tedious to sit in the tech booth and trigger clips in QLab and because I had just bought three small electronic instruments: a sampler, an analog synthesizer, and a digital frequency modulation synthesizer. I initially planned to use all of these to create the soundscape for *Wittgenstein*, but I quickly abandoned the idea when I realized samplers work best with short clips of audio, not whole songs, and I would need to teach myself three different instruments in

addition to composing sequences for the performance. As discussed in previous chapters, I enrolled in several classes in LSU's School of Music during my graduate coursework. I decided to use Max to build an instrument I could perform during each showing of *Wittgenstein*. This instrument would need to load a library of samples, process them in varying ways, mix different audio channels, and output audio to the HBB speakers.

Inspirations

When I used Max previously (in *Creature*, for example), I worked with pre-recorded audio in a setting where I could spend time fine-tuning details to my specifications. For *Wittgenstein*, I wanted to use Max's potential for DSP as well as its capabilities for live performance, something I was fascinated by in recordings by artists like Christian Fennesz and Jim O'Rourke.

O'Rourke's collaboration with Sonic Youth from 1999 to 2006 introduced the laptop to the band's guitars-bass-drums approach. In addition to playing guitar and bass, O'Rourke could also be seen performing with his laptop during the band's tour promoting their 2000 record *NYC Ghosts & Flowers*. Several recordings from this era have been made available on the band's official Bandcamp page and when listening to a recording of the band's performance at the Cat's Cradle in Carrboro, North Carolina on August 5, 2000, you can hear recordings of Gordon's voice glitch and stutter at the beginning of the track as a result of O'Rourke's performance. The Gordon performing on stage soon joins the disembodied chorus and as the song progresses the chorus fades out before O'Rourke processes Gordon's voice with digital delay and reverberation.

Christian Fennesz's *Plays*, a 7" single from 1998, consists of two covers: The Rolling Stones' "Paint It Black" and The Beach Boy's "Don't Talk (Put Your Head On My Shoulder)." Fennesz has made the single available to stream on his Bandcamp page. The latter track begins

with disjointed electronic sounds and features Fennesz's acoustic guitar playing. The notes seem to interact with the web of electronics stretching across the recording, and you can hear vibrations of the guitar's strings disintegrate and shift into alien sounds and cybernetic timbres. In fact, the initial experiments to produce material for *Wittgenstein* (described in my Methods section) resulted in a Max patch designed to process my guitar in a similar fashion.

These artists also used DSP in live performance to process sampled recordings, similar to how a DJ might chop and flip a sample on a vinyl record. In 1999, Fennesz, O'Rourke, and Peter Rehberg released *The Magic Sound of Fenn O'Berg*, a collection of live performances recorded by the trio in Japan, Germany, and France. While the liner notes do not specify the instruments used, it is safe to assume multiple laptops and guitars. "Fenn O'Berg Theme," the final track on the CD, has one of the performers sample John Barry's "007 And Counting" from the James Bond film *Diamonds Are Forever*. The performer loops the song's opening and Barry's composition provides a structure for the piece as the performers improvise. The performer sampling Barry's piece extends the track's opening moments by digital looping. The live performers add digital textures to Barry's orchestral arrangements without overpowering and when Barry's opening march gives way to woodwinds and a soaring crescendo, the live performers add screams and sweeps that mirror the intensity of "007 And Counting." As the climax subsides and the march resumes, the live performers return to their earlier efforts, creating a new piece whose beginning and end mirror each other. While the attitude and context of Barry's piece has differences to the compositions referenced by Kate, the combination of DSP, sampled music, and the digital processing of instruments typically associated with orchestral ensembles (woodwinds, brass instruments, strings) influenced me as I worked on *Wittgenstein*.

Methods

First, I needed to build a library of audio to load into the final Max patch. To create this library, I edited clips of songs, symphonies, and operas into smaller segments. Then, I processed them in a manner similar to my method in *Creature*. I recorded myself looping bits of the composition, changed the segment of the audio being looped, and added other effects like delay or distortion. I recorded myself creating more ambient soundscapes with the Korg Volca FM, a portable synthesizer that uses frequency modulation to generate complex tones. I would also process those synthesizer recordings in Max. Finally, I made several recordings using my electric guitar and DSP in Max. Using a clean and *dry* (unprocessed signal) directly into Max, I looped and pitch-shifted parts of my playing to create a rich and swirling guitar soundscape. In the end, I created 72 samples for the performance, the longest sample lasted almost thirty minutes and the shortest lasted only two seconds.

The layers of processing on the different recordings created new sonic characteristics while emphasizing qualities inherent to the original recording: the operas and symphonies turned spectral and otherworldly, Baez's voice skipped back and forth before being overtaken by a wash of sound, and bits of audio that only lasted fractions of a second stretched out with sporadic interruptions of momentary clicks and pulses.

During the rehearsal process, I created a note on my laptop's desktop grouping the recordings by mood, instrument, and texture: Droney Synth, Bright and Rhythmic, Peaceful Drone, Guitar, Noisy Synth, Noisy Drone, Electronic, Orchestral, Voice, and Good For Grain (meaning good for granular synthesis). I also included comments on some of the recordings like "this one is good," "marimba, use this, 0.6 speed sounds waltzy," or "lots of good noises throughout."

Now, I will discuss the Max patch I made. For a more thorough explanation of Max and its workflow see the chapter on *Creature From The Primordial World*. I decided on three channels of audio, one of which would utilize Spindrift, a granular synthesis plug-in for further processing. Barry Truax, an early practitioner and pioneer of granular synthesis, writes “Granular synthesis ... is based on the production of a high density of small acoustic events called ‘grains’ that are less than 50ms [milliseconds] in duration and typically in the range of 10-30ms.” This process creates hundreds or thousands of grains per second of audio which can then be further manipulated in terms of pitch, speed, and by implementing an attack-decay-sustain-release envelope (or ADSR envelope) to introduce dynamics in amplitude. For readers unfamiliar with ADSR envelopes, synthesizers and other electronic and digital instruments implement them to change qualities of sound over time whether volume or pitch or parameters of an effect. Attack, decay, and release are all measured in terms of time while sustain is measured in terms of amplitude. Imagine the sound of someone clapping their hands. There is a quick attack (you can hear the sounds as soon as their hands come together) and a quick release (they cannot hold their hands together to sustain the sound or extend its length). Now imagine a plucked sound, it has a quick attack and quick release. Finally, a sound that swells and fades over time as a long attack, decay, and release.

Truax notes “What is most remarkable about the technique is the relation between the triviality of the grain (heard alone it is the merest click or ‘point’ of sound) and the richness of the layered granular texture that results from their superimposition.” Indeed, the audio files processed by Spindrift became essential to the overall feel of the show and created a bed of sound on which to showcase the other channels.

I created three different buffers to store the audio I produced for the performance. Instead of using a regular `buffer~` object which only stores one audio file at a time, I needed to use a *polybuffer~* object to store and switch between all 72 files. I could now trigger the audio, select loops for playback, control the speed, and adjust the volume for the two channels that did not incorporate granular synthesis. The Spindrift channel worked in a similar manner but it also included a bank of presets to adjust the behavior of the audio grains. I used the faders on a MIDI controller to adjust the volume of each channel throughout the performance. By using a MIDI controller, I could adjust multiple channels simultaneously without having to use my laptop's touchpad.

I also needed a way that I could monitor my output with headphones, and audition new clips before triggering them in the performance. To create this system, I used two laptops: my own laptop and the HBB laptop. I loaded the patch and the library of audio onto both laptops, and I used objects built into Max to control my laptop's patch from the HBB laptop over a wireless network. I could make changes on my personal laptop without those changes transferring to the HBB laptop. Thus, I could run the show from the HBB laptop, make changes on my own laptop, listen to how the change would sound, and then implement the change on the HBB laptop which played through the theater speakers.

I did not attend every rehearsal, but I did spend time in the theater working on sound design as Terry worked with the performers. As I watched and listened to the actors, I would edit audio, patch in Max, and make notes for the performance. Terry worked with his performers in shifts, meaning that not every Kate was present during every rehearsal, so I only observed disjointed scenes from the performance until the tech rehearsal where we polished light and sound cues. During the tech rehearsal, I experimented with my sound design without stopping

and with no major issues. I continued to practice and experiment with different mixes during the following two complete run-throughs before opening night.

Performance

I recorded my audio during each performance of *Wittgenstein*, including the tech rehearsal and two open rehearsals, before opening night for a total of eight performances. Listening back to the recordings reminds me of the thrill of each night as well as several consistent elements during every performance. The recordings last close to two hours and begin with the show's house music: a four-minute mix of processed guitar over a bed of electronic whirring that plays as the audience enters the theater. The guitar builds in momentum and a simple melody fractures into multiple parts. The bed of sound, more than just a drone, creates its own juxtaposing but consistent rhythm as the guitar circles around the space. Eventually, the guitar dies down and the audience is left with only the noise of the electronics. At approximately three minutes from the start of the recording, a mournful processed classical piece enters the mix in a stark contrast to the more optimistic guitar piece.

One concern I had during the performance was to make sure that my audio would not overpower the performers on stage. To be safe, I kept the volume rather low during the performances, and even my own recordings of the show require considerable amplification in post-production to bring the audio up to a reasonable level. Terry made it clear that he wanted the audio to be just as present in the space as the performers, but who would want to be the sound designer that overshadowed and drowned out the actors on stage?

During the performance, I cycled through various moods and samples, and I relied heavily on my notes discussed earlier. Throughout *Wittgenstein*'s run, I would add more descriptive notes as to the character of the sound. But, I would never mark a script with sound

cues or state in my notes where each sample might fit in the show. Instead, I continued to experiment using the two-laptop setup to monitor potential changes before implementation. While stressful, mixing was fun. I enjoyed making decisions and I appreciated the freedom for improvisation during each performance. By rejecting the adherence to a score or notated document, I could continue engaging with the cast members in this improvisatory manner. I did rely on several pieces as constants for each individual Kate, and by knowing those, I could experiment with processing other samples each night.

As the run progressed, I became more comfortable performing the soundscape for each showing. Not to say that it was easy, but I felt that I could perform without any stress regarding the operation of the instrument. Though it was difficult to follow along with the performance each night because Terry's adaptation retained Markson's circular and tangential prose. Kate seems to repeat herself frequently with slight variation and only slips miniscule details (probably inaccurate or half-truths) about what happened before her isolation. Listening to the mood and identity each performer developed for their Kate guided my selection and mix during each performance.

My favorite moment occurred each night at the end of the performance during Bonny McDonald's monologue. While all the cast members excelled in their roles, McDonald's section (whether by being the last monologue, the culmination of an intense performance, or just my respect for McDonald after knowing her for several years) always stunned me by its impact. McDonald captured Kate's sorrow and anger despite Markson's circular prose jumping from one idea to another.

In my notes, the first audio file in the first section reads "Eleven (FOR ENDING) *this one is good*". The piece originated from one of my earliest experiments for *Wittgenstein*, dated

February 7, 2018, and I imagine that the parenthetical and italicized text were added over the course of the performance. Pitching the original experiment slightly down, the piece takes a 30-second recording and loops it for close to five minutes. The piece consists of two parts, a constant rumbling bed of sound that goes slowly glides back and forth between two consonant pitches and a single note melody that stretches (almost like reaching out for someone) before it becomes subsumed by the rest of the sound.

Listening back to my recordings from each night, I remember that this was the main piece of sound during McDonald's monologue. As McDonald began her monologue, I would use a series of small clicking and whirring sounds, like a faulty hard drive. There is a slight variation in the intensity and the pitch of the sounds which continue even as I begin to introduce a slightly slowed-down orchestral sound into the mix. Before long, Baez's voice echoes in the space followed by a percussive loop from one of the classical pieces, until "Eleven" closed the performance.

David Terry, part of the cast, and I presented an abridged performance of *Wittgenstein's Mistress* at the 2018 NCA Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah later that fall. Luckily, I still had my notes pinned to the desktop of my laptop. In the time that passed between the original run and NCA, Cycling '74 released a new version of Max incorporating *.mc* objects. This new collection of objects simplified the process of making multiple instances of a function in Max. It also allowed the user to introduce variations into those instances. For example, I could play back 12 instances of my piece that closed *Wittgenstein*, but each instance could be detuned by increments I specified. This could also be used for more advanced spatialization of sound for theaters with multi-channel sound systems, or for more complex audio synthesis. I used the new update to detune samples and took advantage of the new tools to mix dozens of audio channels

into a cohesive stereo mix. I continued developing my patch once while we rested in our hotel room, and I remember missing the comfort of my apartment in Baton Rouge as our neighbors next door argued loudly throughout the night.

This was my first experience at NCA, and it felt strange performing in a brightly-lit conference hall instead of the HBB, and it felt especially strange to be working at a table behind the performers alongside Terry operating the projections and in full view of the audience. When audience members came up to me after the performance, I realized they thought I was helping the director by monitoring projections or doing several things unrelated to the performance's sound.

I abandoned the two-laptop setup I used in the HBB, which may have created a less adventurous mix. But, I did try to explore new possibilities for performance in several ways. First, I would change a loop's beginning and ending points rapidly several times throughout the performance. After each change, the loop would begin and end according to its new positions creating a stuttering effect or an aural jump cut. I also used my laptop's touchpad to simulate the motor of a cassette player using a technique called *scrubbing*. By modulating the speed and direction of gestures, I could control the playback of the buffer. Both methods recalled the sound of digital technologies failing and helped to represent Kate's challenges remembering her past. As with any last-minute introductions and updates, I made coding errors in my patch as I rushed to implement new changes. This did not result any noticeable glitches or distortions that disrupted the performance, but the mixing was not as sophisticated as it would have been had I noticed beforehand. Overall, performing at NCA was a learning experience but worthwhile as it gave me the opportunity to continue working with Terry and to share my craft with scholars outside of LSU.

Reflection

Reflecting on this process causes me to think about the development of my computer music practice through collaboration and the similarities between my collaborations with Terry and Tracy Stephenson Shaffer on *Rollerland* and *Creature From The Primordial World*. Both collaborations asked me to work in an unfamiliar style or method (composing music, crafting mashups, creating with my laptop), and each of my collaborations with the directors built on work done for them. For instance, I made three songs to make one mash-up in *Rollerland* and then made one song into several in *Creature*. With Terry, I edited samples of songs and triggered them in addition to scoring several moments in *Shadow* and then created and performed a live score comprised of original music and samples for *Wittgenstein*. Prior to *Rollerland*, I had no interest in using computers to make music. I had an electric guitar and four-track cassette recorder, so I did not need to a computer or laptop to record myself. But, a series of five collaborations with three different directors led to me develop skills in two different workflows for computer music making everything from mash-ups of pop songs, samplers and other types of virtual instruments, sound cues and installation soundscapes.

At the onset of writing this chapter, I only planned to discuss my sound designer-director collaboration with David Terry. Writing about the performance and rehearsal process led me to reflect on my interactions with the eight women playing Kate and how we collaborated during each performance of *Wittgenstein*. Earlier, I focused on my experience watching and reacting to Bonny McDonald as the last Kate. Listening back to my recordings from our run in the HBB, I realize I did not use the sample I described earlier until Tuesday evening, the night before the show opened. I was still searching for the right piece until I found it in the rehearsal process. I understand now that there is a web of influences between Terry's directions to me and the

performers, the actor's performance styles, my interpretation of their performances, their interpretations of Kate and my selection and mix of the material.

Working with Terry again reinforced patterns from our previous collaboration, *Shadow of the Valley*. I had access to rehearsals and I would take advantage of that time to work and watch the development of the performance. In the HBB, I typically perform on stage in addition to designing sound for performance. This means attending rehearsals, learning lines and blocking, as well as working on sound cues outside of the rehearsal process (and managing my coursework, teaching, and personal life). Both collaborations with Terry have given me space to work in one artistic medium as opposed to working in multiple capacities.

Presenting *Wittgenstein* outside of its original context and 1600 miles away from Baton Rouge at NCA in Salt Lake City was another challenge. Fortunately, Terry handled the transportation of the speakers necessary to amplify the output of my laptop to our conference room. Being unprepared for the restaging of a production is a commonly recurring nightmare in my life and we would not be lucky enough to have weeks of rehearsals and days of run-throughs before our performance in Salt Lake City. I felt that passing time, removal from the initial process, and my physical location in relationship to the performers (their backs facing me) changed the nature of the collaboration. As much as I tried to recreate the sensation of the original run in the HBB, I did feel slightly out of sync. I felt our relationship shift because I no longer had the opportunity to watch their performance as an audience member.

Chapter 6. Mitchell

Background

In December 2018, I reached out on social media for anyone interested in playing experimental and free improvisational music. The search for a collaborator would hopefully result in a continuing practice that would be experimental and improvisatory in the sense of the way we utilized our respective instruments, the commitment to exploring our on-going sonic relationships, and the constant creation of new ideas in different contexts. It had been approximately three years since *Wish* premiered in the HBB and I wanted to collaborate with another artist on equal ground, without having to worry about faculty-student power relationships, and the deadlines necessary to stage a performance in a busy theater schedule. Most importantly, I wanted to work in a context where sound was the focus, not the background to dances, monologues, or videos.

Only one person, Mitchell Mobley, reached out to me. I knew Mitchell from my first course in the School of Music at LSU discussed previously in the chapter on *Creature From The Primordial World*. We also temporarily worked in a restaurant together but never talked much. Mitchell plays in a band called Wumbo with a mutual friend of ours. I owe Wumbo for fostering my solo performance practice after they allowed me to join them on a bill when they released their first EP in December 2017 (my second solo public performance, and my first since 2014). When I released a CD of guitar and laptop improvisations, I asked them to open up for my CD release show. My performance practice with Mitchell developed almost simultaneously with my partnership with Wumbo. They continued to invite me to play on bills, and eventually I started recording with them and joined the band officially in 2019.

However, in December 2018, Mitchell was still working to complete a bachelor's degree in percussion performance at LSU. I felt slightly intimidated. He played in a band that wrote real songs and not just explorations of textures. He was also a trained musician from a family of trained musicians. His understanding of experimental music came from an academic route, whereas mine came from an obsession with rock musicians who have incorporated avant-garde methods into their performances. Nevertheless, we quickly found a date to meet up. I loaded my guitar, amplifier, and a Trader Joe's bag full of effects pedals, metal files, drumsticks and screwdrivers into my car and drove to Mitchell's house. Mitchell had his drums set up in a room off to the side of his roommate's, so we lugged my equipment through the roommate's room and into the workspace. For our first meeting, we played non-stop for almost an hour, and I recorded everything onto a handheld Zoom field recorder. The meeting was the beginning of a fruitful collaboration. In this chapter, I will describe my influences for this project, provide a description of our first session, discuss a soundtrack we provided for a performance, and explore a recording that we produced following a performance at a local DIY arts space.

Influences

Definitions of experimental music vary from artist to artist and theorist to theorist.

Michael Nyman, a composer and music theorist writes:

Experimental composers are by and large not concerned with prescribing a defined time-object whose materials, structuring and relationships are calculated and arranged in advance, but are more excited by the prospect of outlining a situation in which sounds may occur, a process of generating action (sounding or otherwise), a field delineated by certain compositional "rules." (211)

Compositional rules may be the institution of a set of instructions or commands for performers to follow, or allowing performers to make choices regarding volume, duration, and/or timbre throughout the piece. Nyman continues, "Experimental music exploits an instrument not simply

as a means of making sounds in the accepted fashion, but as a total configuration—the difference between ‘playing the piano’ and the ‘piano as sound source’” (216). Nyman’s use of a piano in this example draws on John Cage’s use of what Cage dubbed the “prepared piano.” In Cage’s essay “How the Piano Came to Be Prepared,” he discusses his tutelage under Henry Cowell, who would sometimes play the piano’s strings with his hands while an assistant would depress the pedal to sustain the piano’s sounds. In another example, Cowell used a darning egg on the strings while playing the keys.

The idea of using the total configuration or prepared version of the instrument influenced me to pick up the electric guitar in the first place. As I describe in my introduction and chapters discussing *On a Snowy Evening* and *Wish*, my early practice involved utilizing amplifier feedback, bowing the guitar’s strings with different objects, using the guitar as a type of percussive instrument, amplifying external sound sources with the guitar’s pick-ups, and processing the guitar with analog and digital effects units. I also prefer to use alternate tunings for the guitar, favoring pairs of strings tuned in unison to the standard tuning. In most circumstances, I do what I can to avoid a standard approach to playing guitar.

If asked to summarize my practice, I typically describe it with some combination of the terms “experimental,” “free improvisation,” and “rock music.” Derek Bailey, a practitioner and theorist of free improvisation, refutes the tendency of music critics and promoters to lump experimental and improvised music into the same category. For Bailey, “the attitudes and precepts associated with the avant-garde have very little in common with those held by most improvisors...and as regards method, the improviser employs the oldest in music-making” (256). For Bailey, practices of improvisation precede notated and composed music, and therefore have no relation to experimentation. Bruno Nettl suggests musicians and music critics should:

abandon the idea of improvisation as a process separate from composition and adopt the view that all performers improvise to some extent. What the pianist playing Bach and Beethoven does with his models -- the scores and the accumulated tradition of performance practice -- is only in degree, not in nature, different from what the Indian playing an *alap* in *Rag Yaman* and the Persian singing the *Dastgah* of *Shur* do with theirs. (19)

I feel most comfortable borrowing Bruce Russell's description of his own work. A guitar player in the free-rock trio The Dead C and sonic improviser, Russell uses the term "mis-competent improvised sound work" to describe his own practice (3). Russell traces mis-competence as a method of improvisation in two ways: performance and documentation (85). In terms of documentation, this is a result of his background in the New Zealand punk and DIY scene of the 1980s, where artists self-recorded and existed outside of mass culture. In terms of performance, Russell discusses how he was able to overcome his technical inability and "develop[ed] an alternative competence through improvisation - a 'mis-competence'" (87). Situating his musical performance as a type of art, Russell continues that his "rejection of any hierarchy of skill *vis à vis* the audience is *always* the point of the performance. In effect it is a form of abjection, a refusal to inhabit the role which the commodity-spectacle has created, the role that killed Jimi Hendrix" (88). Though as of this writing I have been taking guitar lessons, learning music theory, and playing in standard tuning, at the beginning of my practice with Mitchell I was deliberately unskilled and had not received any training beyond a few weeks of lessons as an adolescent.

Methods

Before working with Mitchell, I had only played consistently with one other person before, and we had both played guitars. My partner would play cyclical melodic parts while I worked on a bed of sound on which his playing could rest, and I was excited for what I could make with a percussionist. While I had been playing guitar for years, my rhythmic playing had

never developed, which led to of an interest in creating layers and textures of sound. I hoped that with a percussionist, we could create something that had a sense of forward motion that could also provide me with a sense of timing. I had come to incorporate a device called an EBow into my practice. EBows are handheld and use a battery to power a magnet inside of the device. A guitar player places the EBow over a string with the strumming hand and it creates a tone with infinite sustain by vibrating the string until the player removes the EBow. I found that I could layer these with a loop pedal to create harmonic beds of sound or slowly bend the string to create a slow vibrato. I started our first meeting with an EBow while Mitchell used an actual bow on his cymbals.

We did this for six minutes before we switched approaches and Mitchell started ringing bells and started striking glass cups with a butter knife. I placed a drumstick perpendicularly across the strings of my guitar and rubbed it with another drumstick. After sixteen minutes, we went quiet and I slowly agitated my strings to create a soft stuttering noise and Mitchell continued to play his objects while alternating hits on his drum kit. One of my favorite moments came after 28 minutes, and I began to loop what sounds like the repeated plugging and unplugging of the guitar's input jack and the hum of an unplayed guitar. Mitchell complemented this with more cymbal bowing, a metallic screech but sometimes adding the rustle of cymbals depending on the angle of the bow and where Mitchell placed his hand on the cymbal. We continued this for two minutes before I pulled out my iPhone where I had recorded a voice memo of the end of Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" playing on my stereo. I loved the verse that begins with "Sail on silver girl" and had originally sampled it when I played the Wumbo EP release show the previous year. I placed my iPhone over my guitar's pick-ups

and let the song play through my effects chain creating a ghostly vocal track underneath the soft noise of my guitar and Mitchell's playing.

The end of the Simon & Garfunkel recording led into another slowly developing crescendo where I layered drumstick rubbing, EBow drones, and rapidly strumming my guitar with a plectrum into a loud roar while Mitchell accentuated the buildup with his percussive playing. This subsided into the soft chimes of Mitchell's bells and glass and cymbals and the looped sound of a screwdriver running quickly along the neck of my guitar. I tried my best at playing a repetitive, gentle melodic figure on my guitar which led into one more crescendo of guitar feedback and drum battering before we called an end to the session.

Compared to *Wish*, which had a specified performance date that Jackie and I worked independently towards, my sessions with Mitchell felt rewarding. Mitchell and I had a new and fresh relationship, compared to artistic collaboration with Jackie which was intertwined with three years of dating. Playing with Mitchell felt comfortable and natural, and we seemed to operate on similar wavelengths and this one session evolved into a regular practice every one or two weeks, and we would record onto the Zoom recorder, a Tascam four-track cassette tape recorder, and onto my iPhone.

Mitchell was interested in percussive objects besides a traditional drum kit. He placed wooden blocks on his drums, played glass cups and pieces of rusted metal. He also used a bow to create sustained tones from his cymbals. One of my favorite techniques was the way he applied pressure to a drum with his thumb and slowly circled around the drum skin to create a low, rumbling sound. Mitchell also used his drum set as a total configuration, to borrow Nyman's descriptor. Playing with Mitchell also led me to discovering new techniques and ways to play my guitar. The guitar I use frequently with Mitchell is a Fender Telecaster. Telecasters have two

pick-ups, one close to the bridge of the guitar at an angled position, and another closer to the neck that runs perpendicular to the strings. The bridge pickup has a small hole in the center and I learned that if I inserted a metal object (I usually used a file) it could create a stuttering effect. If I placed the guitar face-up in my lap and used my left hand to pluck the strings and my right hand to manipulate the file, the file would temporarily disrupt the amplification of the strings' vibrations, which would resume after I removed the file. Rapid manipulation of the file combined with distortion pedals and a tremolo created a rhythmic, percussive sound that complemented Mitchell's playing. Kaprow writes that "Play, of course, is at the heart of experimentation," and that "Playing has no stated purpose other than more playing" (179). Those early sessions allowed us to play and get used to each other, experiment with different combinations of sound, and solidify our play into a live performance.

Performance

A month after our first meeting, in January 2019, we had our first public performance at River Writers, a monthly poetry reading in downtown Baton Rouge. River Writers typically has two scheduled readers, a musical performance, and then an open mic portion. I reached out to the organizer at the time, explained our project to her, and she approved us. At the time, River Writers took place at Cane Land, a rum distillery with an indoor bar and an outdoor patio. Temperatures during the winter in Louisiana can fluctuate wildly, but this night was cold. I remember my fingers being numb as I performed and in videos from the audience you can see our breath hang in the air. I asked a friend to give us a signal after 15 minutes so we knew when to stop.

For 15 minutes, we rumbled, shimmered, and roared on the deck of Cane Land. I felt so grateful for the opportunity to play, but also because I felt that I had found someone with whom I

could collaborate. In March, I took my recording of the Cane Land set, and selections from our sessions at Mitchell's house (dubbed the Geranium House) and released a three track, 40-minute CD. For the cover, I created a collage from images I had left over from John LeBret's "Performing the Archive" class I took as an undergraduate. I have little skill in drawing or painting, but I consider myself to be an adequate collage artist and I enjoy rearranging and combining images together and I felt that the collaged cover corresponded to the collaged nature of the recordings. I scanned the collage to my laptop, printed out five copies, and pasted the artwork onto plain brown CD jackets. I gave these away to close friends and Mitchell and I became recording artists.

In March of that same year, Naomi Bennett, a member of my graduate cohort at LSU, asked me to provide the soundtrack to a reinterpretation of an installation she originally produced in the HBB. The reinterpretation would take place at the Art Klub, a venue near the Marigny and Bywater neighborhoods in New Orleans. I had originally created a piece of laptop music for the installation in the HBB, something that I could set-up, turn on, and have run by itself. It used short samples of music that I had recorded along with a selection of effects with random and constantly changing parameters and volume settings. The HBB has six speakers installed throughout the space, three on the rear wall, one above the front door, and one on each of the adjacent walls. I routed different recordings to different speakers in the space to create a listening experience dependent on one's position in the space.

Naomi wanted a new soundtrack for this piece, which was more dance than installation and reached out to me to see if I was interested. I wanted to include Mitchell, so we made the trip to New Orleans. Neither of us knew what Naomi had planned, so we played along to a few of their rehearsals before the audience entered the space. We were able to quickly sketch out a

framework of what we wanted to do that would allow us to include both structure and improvisatory elements as the soundtrack to dancers' movements. Unfortunately, neither of us thought to record ourselves, and technical problems limited Naomi's recording to video only.

I do remember the rush of the live performance. When Mitchell and I played at his house, we could abandon musical ideas if we hit a brick wall. Our first performance at Cane Land required us to be confident in the direction our playing took as we could not stop and chat amongst ourselves to decide what we should play. This was true of our performance in New Orleans as well, but we were also required to quickly decide a framework for our piece which accentuated, rather than overshadowed, the dancers on stage. Bailey writes of "the temptation, when nothing else seems to be offering itself, to resort to tried and proven procedures" (260). In this passage, Bailey specifically refers to the act of solo improvisation, but performing with Mitchell at Art Klub made me realize that our typical performance model (approximately 80% loud / 20% quiet) would not work in this setting. We had to adjust our playing styles to compensate for a group of co-performers who were the audience's focus.

Our collaborations continued in the summer of 2019. We were asked to perform at a concert with a local rock band, Loudness War, and a touring band from Pensacola called DEAdBUGGS. We were excited because this would be our first performance in a conventional rock music context. Our prior two performances took place at a poetry reading at a rum distillery, and in a performance arts space, but this performance would take place at Southside Arts Center, one of the few (if only) DIY spaces in Baton Rouge at the time. Given the local success of Loudness War, it was likely that this event would be well-attended and a great way to debut our practice to a broader audience.

I have always been unsure what purpose Southside Arts Center served before it was repurposed into a venue. It could have been an autoshop, given the dilapidated sign in front of the building reads “Southside Motors.” In the parking lot, a small boat rests on a trailer, and the backyard contains all sorts of metal junk and refuse. The office doubled as a bedroom for the gentleman who owned the building and his dog was known to wander through the audience and step onto the stage during performances. The space had a rotating crew of managers, who handled the booking and business end, and the owner typically stayed out of the way, content with listening to the music from his office bed. Mitchell and I arrived early out of a combination of excitement and as a gesture of goodwill. We did not want anyone to be waiting on us to sound check and setting up. While waiting for everyone else, we played with the venue dog and wandered the backyard, climbing on debris and looking for bits of metal for Mitchell to incorporate into his drum kit. I tend to get very anxious and nervous before a performance, and I usually try to alleviate that with beer and cigarettes from the gas station across the street from the venue. On this occasion I might have tried to alleviate my anxiety too much, which led to that night’s lengthy and raucous performance.

Given our relatively obscure presence in the Baton Rouge music scene, Mitchell and I performed first. During our soundcheck earlier, the sound technician placed a microphone on my guitar amplifier, to broadcast the sound over the venue’s PA system. This seemed overkill to me, because of the small size of the venue, the fact that I already play at a high volume, and given that I only had Mitchell’s drum kit with which to compete. During the performance, my proximity to the PA kept creating unwanted feedback from my guitar, and I remember having to lean over to try to swing the microphone away from my amplifier. We were experimental in the

sense of adapting to issues on the fly, incorporating faulty electronics into the performance, and accepting the general mishaps that accompany live performance.

We played for 45 minutes, about 15 minutes longer than we should have played and I recorded our performance with either my iPhone, or with a handheld Zoom recorder. The recording reveals moments of unwanted and unbearable screeching feedback, but also quiet, meditative, and serene moments. The next time we played at Southside we received a rare admonishment from both the venue's owner and manager for our volume and the shrillness of our performance.

Over the next few months, I kept coming back to the recording. I experimented with different ways to soften some of the shrill parts, while boosting some of the sounds that were buried beneath the surface. As a fan of live concert recordings, I am familiar with the ways that a recording can become its own sonic artifact based on recording equipment, recording medium, room acoustics, and the taper's place within the space. I accepted the flaws of the recording, and sought out ways to emulate the sound of cassette tape recording from the 1980s. On the other hand, instead of creating something faithful to the original performance, I thought of ways I could use the recording as source material for a new piece entirely.

Brian Eno discusses how the shift from recording musical performances from wax cylinders to magnetic tape "was very important, because as soon as something's on tape, it becomes malleable and mutable and cuttable and reversible in ways that discs aren't ... the effect of tape was that it really put music in a spatial dimension, making it possible to squeeze the music, or expand it" (128). In the epilogue of his novel, *The Ticket That Exploded*, William S. Burroughs's applies his literary cut-up method to tape recordings of human speech and notes how you can recite any text into the microphone of a portable tape recorder and "speed it up slow it

down run it backwards inch it and you will hear words that were not in the original recording new words made by the machine” (335). Digital recording expands on the promise of magnetic tape with digital signal being almost infinitely malleable. For example, I can loop a piece of recording with no loss of quality, and no need to break out a razor and bits of tape to physically make a tape loop. I had played with these principles in one of my early computer music classes discussed in the chapter on *Creature*. My instructor assigned us to create a piece of music using a DAW. The instructor told us to craft a piece that told some sort of narrative without using any words or virtual instruments. We were required to use pre-recorded audio samples, or samples that we generated on our own. We could collage the samples as we saw fit, but could only cut and splice the audio, adjust the volume, manipulate the speed and pitch of the samples, and reverse the sample. We could not use any software instruments, nor we could use any effects like delay or audio filters.

I kept these principles in mind as I processed the recording of our show at Southside. I created a patch in Max that would allow me to select chunks of the recording for looping playback and began to experiment with playing chunks back at different speeds. To emulate the sound of a recording made on an actual tape deck, I added a bitcrusher, which works to reduce the amount of information in a digital signal, creating a crunchy sound. I also introduced an overdrive object, to amplify the signal and introduce clipping, where a sample of digital signal crosses the threshold of what can accurately be reproduced. In his critical analysis of the Velvet Underground’s album *White Light / White Heat*, in particular the closing track “Sister Ray,” Jeff Schwartz notes how the recording’s noise (in the sense of undesired elements) and distortion become “the standard text of the album” (101). While the Velvets worked in the realm of

magnetic tape, and I worked with digital audio, the principle remains the same. Flaws, mistakes, and errors all become part of the thing itself in the act of recording and editing.

I used Live to collage the samples I created in Max with the original recording of the concert. In Live, I used filters to amplify or attenuate certain frequencies, to emulate the frequency response of an actual cassette tape, and to ensure that the collaged elements would sit nicely amongst each other. The result had bits of our performance interrupted by the whirr of a recording played back at high speeds, looped drum patterns and the voices of audience members. I split the recording into two pieces, a 13.5-minute track titled “Side A” and “Side B” which ran for nine and a half minutes. The goal was to produce cassette copies of the recording, but for now it only exists as digital download. We had hired our friend and film photographer Harbir Kapany to document the show that night, and we chose an image that he shot from Mitchell’s side of the stage as the potential cover (Figure 6.1).



Figure 6.1. Performance photograph from our performance at Southside Arts Center *Source: Personal communication with Harbir Kapany*

The photograph contains bits of dust and debris from the scan of the original negative, which could be considered a flaw in the process, similar to the flaws introduced by bitcrushing, distorting, and overdriving the audio to emulate the sound of a tape recorder. Eventually, these flaws become part of the composition. I felt that this release and Harbir's photograph complemented each other because they both had a preoccupation with the grain and innate aesthetics of the recording medium.

Reflections

At the time of this writing, Mitchell and I have continued to engage in collaborative practices consistently: jamming, recording, performing, streaming concerts, editing, and releasing music. First, I must note how fruitful and gratifying our collaboration has been over time. At times when living in Baton Rouge seemed isolated from the rest of the music world, working with Mitchell made me feel that we were bringing something new to the community while also developing new forms for expressing ourselves. Spending time together collaborating as peers and not in a teacher-student relationship led to a bond developing between us that I value and I think of Mitchell as a dear friend. I will explore the different nature of teacher-student and friendship collaborations in the conclusion of this dissertation.

When I chart the development of our collaboration, I can see how we have developed in terms of exploring different genres. Early recordings focus mainly on free improvisation and exploring different combinations and layers of textures. Neither of us take the lead and instead we aimlessly wander towards our destination. Our most recent recordings build and collapse over time, and borrow more from rock and punk than free improvisation. Mitchell's drums provide a sense of rhythm and propulsion while I might play riffs or explore feedback timbres. This

development doesn't just happen, it is the accumulation of hours of time spent together playing and talking.

Generally, I find that I take the lead in the collaboration in both performance and in other contexts: organizing rehearsals, calling Mitchell to tell him to check his text messages, booking shows, editing recordings, and creating artwork and promotional materials and I feel that this is due more to our personalities as opposed to any inequalities in the division of labor.

As mentioned above, Mitchell and I are peers. I found that collaborating with a peer as opposed to a romantic partner or someone higher in the institutional hierarchy to be a much more relaxed process. While individual egos may surface (mostly mine), the stakes are lower. The failure of our collaboration will not negatively affect a romantic relationship that existed independently of the collaboration. Since Mitchell and I are peers, neither of us have to fear damaged departmental or institutional relationships due to undesired or unsatisfactory work.

My collaborative work with Mitchell has helped both of us grow as artists and provided me with a model for future collaborations with other peers in the community. As opposed to the HBB, where projects have a clear lifecycle and collaborations seem to begin again with every new project, the years-long project with Mitchell has offered me a different insight into creative relationships, their developments, and their rewards. I've identified our continued growth, the development of our interpersonal relationship, and its relationship to a broader scene or community as spaces for further discussion.

Our project, which started on a whim in a small room in Baton Rouge, Louisiana has developed in terms of its style and its reach. We began in a totally free context, where we focused mainly on our instruments' timbre and possibilities for sound-making. Public performances became opportunities to explore new ideas, whether meditative like our show in

New Orleans, or maximalist, like the show that became *Dead Edits*. Two recording sessions in the summer of 2021 produced longform jams, moments of genuine rock rhythms, and deconstructions of pieces by Neil Young, Angelo Badalamenti, and Erik Satie. We've gone from playing poetry readings and self-releasing CDs, to international recognition with a 2022 release on Dadaist Tapes, a Belgian label, alongside several contemporary experimental players.

Mitchell moved away from Baton Rouge in the fall of 2019 to begin a master's program at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. The COVID-19 pandemic and a disillusionment with his program prompted Mitchell to move back to Louisiana in the spring of 2020, first to Monroe in north Louisiana, then to New Orleans. Mitchell's return allowed us to continue our collaboration, first as the summer recording project mentioned above, and a return to the stage in July 2022. If we aren't working on our duo, we're recording, rehearsing, and performing in Wumbo. We spend weekends together, with Mitchell sleeping on a couch in my living room, we get coffee, lunch, dinner and drinks together. During those days, we spend almost every waking moment together. I like to think all this time spent together develops our friendship as well as our artistic collaboration.

Compared to my work in the HBB, where we produce a show for the LSU and Baton Rouge community, my work with Mitchell has allowed me to develop correspondences with people who may have never seen us perform in other parts of Louisiana, the United States, and globally since we exist as both a performance and recording project. I have discussed the biggest example of this characteristic above (our Belgian tape), but I have mailed CDs to listeners in Los Angeles and western Massachusetts. We have also been featured on radio shows locally, nationally, and abroad. Future projects include the release of our first studio recordings, a recording made at KLSU-FM (LSU's student radio station), and a return to regular rehearsals.

Chapter 7. Sunburned

Description

In April 2022, I traveled to Duke University in Durham, North Carolina to provide live visuals for Sunburned Hand of the Man's performance at the Three Lobed Recordings 21st Anniversary Festival. Sunburned performed on the second night of the three-day festival in the von der Hayden Studio Theater inside the Rubenstein Arts Center on April 15, 2022 after sets by guitarist Steve Gunn and a rare duo performance between harpist Mary Lattimore and singer/guitarist Meg Baird. Please see my earlier chapter discussing *Wish* for more context surrounding historical practices of projected visuals and music, psychedelic light shows, and VJ culture which I often refer to as I discuss my work with Sunburned.

The festival, delayed a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, celebrated Three Lobed Recordings, a small record label based out of Jamestown, North Carolina and operated by Cory Rayborn, a Duke alumnus. Rayborn started the label in 2000 with a 10" record by the heavy psych rock group Bardo Pond from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Since then, Three Lobed has blossomed into an underground institution with over 140 releases. In my own experience as a young music listener, Three Lobed's discography works as a roadmap of American psychedelic music spanning ambient, folk, solo guitar, rock, noise, and more.

For the festival, Rayborn assembled a slew of Three Lobed affiliated artists playing in various configurations, with several musicians performing multiple times over the weekend. Three Lobed partnered with Duke Performances to host four shows: Friday evening at the Duke Coffeehouse (a BYOB late-night coffeehouse on Duke's campus), Saturday evening at the von der Hayden Studio Theater, an outdoor matinee Sunday at Duke's Karsh Alumni Center, and then a Sunday evening show back at the studio theater. Each performance was broadcast by

WXDU, Duke's student radio station, and recorded by Jonas Blank of the website NYCTaper. As of this writing, you can listen to several of the weekend's performances and other past Three Lobed events affiliated with Duke University on NYCTaper.com by searching for "Three Lobed."

Active since the late 1990s, Sunburned Hand of the Man is an ever-evolving musical collective originally based out of Boston, Massachusetts which emerged from the free-rock trio Shit Spangled Banner. It is difficult to estimate exactly how many different releases Sunburned has made since their beginnings, but a conservative estimate points to 200 releases and counting. Most of the band's output appears on Manhand, a label operated by the band since 1998, but the band has collaborated with countless small labels in the United States and Europe to release their impressive discography of CDs, tapes, DVDs, 7"s, and LPs. Currently, the core of Sunburned consists of John Moloney (the group's drummer / sometime MC / label operator / shipping chief and contact point for all excursions), bassist Robert Thomas, and guitar player Ron Schneiderman.

Sunburned originally rose to prominence in the early 2000s as part of a loose collective of American artists working on the fringes of folk, psych, rock, performance art, and jazz later identified by David Keenan of the music magazine *The Wire* as "New Weird America" after Keenan attended the Brattleboro Free Folk Festival in Brattleboro, Vermont. The festival, organized by musician Matt Valentine and Sunburned's Ron Schneiderman, featured a diverse range of musicians that became associated under the umbrella of New Weird America. I want to highlight a passage from Keenan's interview with Moloney after the Brattleboro Free Folk Festival because it not only articulates the group's ethos but also provides one framework for how I understand experimental or improvisational music:

For me, it has become very spiritual ... whether we are playing coke rock or clanging bells while someone groans like a dosed goat. I try to look everyone in the eye before we play in front of people. There's always a loose plan that goes right out the window the second we plug in. Always. Like in Brattleboro, the music just took control, the sounds, the power. I feel like we conjure up the sounds from the beyond or from right next door. I honestly feel like we are some sort of channeling device or medium. Not some New Age bullshit but some sort of conscious coincidence. It's a real uplifting experience and we are proud to be the ones to make everyone smile and come out of themselves a little ... The ultimate goal is, for me, to get folks moving, to get folks involved and ultimately let everybody know that *you can do it too*. Pretentious assholes, arm folders, negative hipcats, they're everywhere and we're out to get them. (39)

Indeed, learning about Sunburned's music and diving into their discography in 2012 was one of a string of moments in my life that helped guide me to where I am today: teaching myself guitar, recording and designing sound for performances, playing for audiences outside of the HBB at LSU, releasing my own music and designing my own artwork, and supplementing my work and the work of others with visuals.

A month before the festival, I wrote to Moloney (I describe when I met him later in this chapter) and mentioned that I would be traveling to Duke for the festival, and I was excited to see him and the rest of the band. Moloney replied asking if I would be interested in providing visuals for the band's performance Saturday evening. I jumped at the chance to work with one of my favorite bands at an intimate festival with an internationally acclaimed line-up celebrating one of the best record labels and I told Moloney I would love to work with him.

Background

Writing about this now, I can understand that this web of obscure musical connections and collaborations between fringe artists might be impenetrable to some readers. I like to think of Three Lobed, New Weird America, Sunburned, my work and the work of others as nodes in an ever-evolving American musical landscape: from early self-released folk and jazz records by musicians like John Fahey and Sun Ra in the late 1950s and 1960s, the early punk explosion in

places like Detroit, New York City, and Cleveland, the beginnings of psychedelic music in Austin, to Black Flag and SST Records developing a touring network through the United States in the early 1980s uniting countless local scenes, the corporate commodification of punk in the late 1980s and 1990s, and the explosion of vanity labels with the readily available consumer technologies of the 2000s where groups of freaks with spray painted CD jackets made from recycled materials, 3" CDs, and lathe-cut 7"s toured from scene to scene in a re-interpretation of the 1980s salad days of punk.

Byron Coley, a music writer with first-hand knowledge on decades of music history (including the 2000s experimental explosion), wrote about the concept of New Weird America a decade after Keenan's original piece. Coley discusses the unifying aesthetics of such a sonically broad genre and points back to John Fahey as a figurehead of the movement in terms of his "voracious appetite for styles ... blues, hillbilly, spirituals, pop, string bands, rock combos, musique concrete and who knows what else." Coley draws parallels between Fahey, Sun Ra, and composer Harry Partch with the artist-run labels of New Weird America as he references Sunburned's Manhand label as well as the countless other small-scale labels represented by artists at the Brattleboro Free Folk Festival. Coley closes by stating "Between the poles of jazz, noise, folk, psych, experimental, electronics and free rock there's a kind of common ground. Maybe it's imaginary and maybe it's not, but all these artists inhabit that space."

Brent S. Sirota, historian at North Carolina State University, writing in the liner notes to Sunburned's 2021 album *Pick A Day To Die*, describes Sunburned as maybe

the last of the great American free rock collectives. There was a time, not too long ago, when every region of this great republic could boast of its own visionary troupe of seekers and improvisers, thrumming at the frequency of the illuminated world ... David Kennan of *The Wire* memorably called it the New Weird America. It felt to me like the mystical democracy of Walt Whitman. It was never arch or jittery or wiry; it sprawled like the continent and massed like the seas.

Sirota also notes how the explosion of these scenes coincided with “A veritable head music awakening” as more people became aware different historical strains of outsider music in America and abroad.

Robert Thomas, in his liner notes to a reissue of the band’s debut *Mind of a Brother*, describes the groups early performances in the late 1990s in Boston and New York. There is also something to be said of Thomas’s description of the band’s ingestion of psychedelic drugs. Like the Grateful Dead 30 years prior, Sunburned found themselves in a space where constant recording, performance, improvisation, communal living, and the dissolution of egos caused by LSD bonded the players.

I first met John Moloney from Sunburned in November of 2013 in New Orleans, Louisiana. At the time, Moloney was on tour with Chelsea Light Moving, Thurston Moore’s new group after Sonic Youth went on hiatus in 2011 after 30 years of playing together. I was a fan of Chelsea Light Moving, but I especially enjoyed Moloney’s work in Caught on Tape (a free rock drum/guitar duo with Moore) and his output with Sunburned Hand of the Man. Previously, I had corresponded with John for a year over email after I began buying records and CDs from him on Discogs (an online music marketplace). Moloney was very kind to me, and seemed genuinely interested in meeting a fan of his work. Over the years, we continued to correspond over email and through social media, and I would see him perform with Sunburned when I visited my mother in Massachusetts in the summers. Moloney also works as the tour manager for the rock trio Dinosaur Jr., and I would catch up with him when he would come through Louisiana on tour for work. Prior to the collaboration at Duke, I had worked with Moloney on two other projects: a music video for “Black Lights” a song on Sunburned’s *Pick A Day To Die*, and visuals for two

songs during Dinosaur Jr.'s show at the Academy of Music in Northampton, Massachusetts on November 26, 2021.

Before I discuss those two projects, I want to give a brief introduction to the development of my video art practice. In 2017, I began working with Max to create visuals using a package of Max objects called Vsynth designed to imitate analog video synthesis (similar to Jackie's work during *Wish* only using digital methods). Early projects included a video synthesizer whose controls responded to several parameters on a virtual musical instrument and a video synthesizer that responded to the amplitude of a signal generated by an external physical instrument.

Eventually, I quit using Max for visuals and began to use VJ software like VDMX and Lumen for generating, compositing, modulating, and effecting layers of video. At the time, this typically looked like abstract patterns and splashes of color overlaid on footage from films. I loved to use Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* and John Coney's *Space Is The Place* as source material for further manipulations because of the compelling or surreal imagery present in those two films. For example, I enjoyed using Gene Hackman as Harry Caul destroying his apartment before he plays the saxophone alone at the end of *The Conversation*, or the colorful costumes and outer space elements of Sun Ra and his Arkestra in *Space Is The Place*.

VDMX also included several features for synchronizing video effects with audio data using DSP. For example, I could use VDMX to calculate a song's tempo and then automate the rotation of a shape to last one measure, or four measures, or 16 measures. Or, I could use the first beat of every measure to generate a ramp that would distort a shape and quickly restore it to its original form for the rest of the measure.

I began to incorporate these visuals into my live performances by automating several parameters in VDMX and assigning other parameters to respond to the audio from my

performance. In the fall of 2018, I contributed live visuals to WarFair III, a music festival in Baton Rouge featuring punk and psych bands from Louisiana and Arkansas using my laptop and an app on my phone to control parameters of the video effects. In the spring of 2020, any upcoming performance I had scheduled was canceled due to COVID and I tried to find ways to occupy my time at home. In addition to teaching myself to cook and watching television, I tried to broaden my video art practice in terms of the methods I used and the potential outcomes and I became interested in understanding and incorporating video feedback.

Audio feedback was already an essential part of my musical practice and video feedback seemed like another necessary tool in my toolbox. Like the oils and dyes of the liquid light artists, video feedback has an element of chance and inventive visualists can even replicate the shifting and interacting forms seen in the work of liquid light artists. There are two easy ways to create a video feedback loop. The first involves a video camera, a subject, and a display (a television or a projector surface) and you can see a similar use of this effect in the music video for Earth, Wind & Fire's "September" or in the music video for "Blame It On The Boogie" by The Jacksons, both available to stream on YouTube.

If you have a surface as large as a human body, you can have your subject stand in front of it. If you have a smaller surface like a television, then you might want to place your subject's hand or head in front of the display. Point a video camera at your subject and display, and then connect the camera to the display so that the display acts as a monitoring device for the camera. This will cause a series of repetitions to develop as a feedback loop develops between the camera and screen. By making slight adjustments to the camera's angle, focus, and zoom, you can begin to rotate and direct the repetitions and different combinations of cameras and screens will give different results.

Here is a practical example: a visiting professor gives a presentation to a group of academics. The visiting professor stands in front of a projection surface displaying a Zoom meeting with virtual attendees. The graduate student in charge of facilitating the Zoom meeting points their webcam at the visiting professor which causes an infinite tunnel of visiting professors to appear on the screen. Each time the visiting professor moves their arm, the repeated tunnels of visiting professors all move their arm but each successive repetition is slightly delayed. Another classic example of this process can be seen in the opening credits to early episodes of the British Broadcasting Corporation's *Doctor Who*. In these examples, the subject is abandoned entirely and the feedback is generated from some chaotic interaction between the camera and the screen.

The second way to generate video feedback involves a video mixer: a piece of hardware that can route video inputs and blend or wipe between different sources. Video mixers typically feature outputs for display and preview outputs for monitoring individual sources as well as including effects like strobe, color inversion, mosaic, and the ability to key between inputs based on a specific color (like keying out a green screen) or based on brightness (like keying out all of the dark parts of an image). First, connect the final output of the mixer to a TV. Next, connect a preview output into one of the inputs. A buffer in the mixer creates a feedback system that could be further processed by the mixer's effects and additional video hardware. You can now key out parts of one video and replace it with the mixer feedback. Or, you could use a picture-in-picture feature to have your video composited on top of the feedback. If you adjust the position of the original video, you can see the mixer feedback react as the picture-in-picture square moves throughout the screen. Each model of video mixer creates its own unique type of feedback. For example, the first video mixer I bought (a Panasonic WJ-AVE5) generates lush waves of red and

blue feedback while the second (a Roland Edirol V4) creates jittery feedback with a strong green hue with a more pixelated look than the older Panasonic mixer.

There are many additional tools to creating video art, and while not all involve video feedback or hardware, some video artists (myself included) prefer to further process their feedback loop by inserting additional components. Currently, I incorporate a modified (or “circuit-bent”) Archer Video Enhancer to adjust the saturation and brightness of the feedback loop as well as to generate glitched imagery by modifying the sync signal of the feedback loop. Circuit-bent gear is popular in the video art community and involves opening up a device and making new connections in its circuitry, as well as installing new controls to adjust the intensity of the effects created by these new connections and cheap consumer products like the Archer line of products sold by Radio Shack in the 1980s and 1990s have proved to be a goldmine for glitched gear enthusiasts.

Moving from creating video art using computer software to a hybrid method combining software and hardware introduced two new factors: the scarcity of the components and the expense of acquiring them. I found myself joining Facebook groups and Discord servers and reading about artists scouring yard sales, Craigslist, and church dumpsters looking for old mixers, camcorders and other video gear to incorporate into their rig. I also learned that I arrived late to the party, and that the demand for old video mixers, camcorders, and miscellaneous components had skyrocketed over the past decade. Devices that used to be cheap have had their prices driven up by scarcity as selling circuit-bent gear turned into a potentially lucrative hobby.

Some artists have recognized the high bar for entry into video art production and have contemplated ways to make video art more accessible. Brooklyn-based Andrei Jay has taken to coding a suite of their own video art devices and making them freely available. Jay’s software,

the Video Synthesis Ecosphere RPI (VSERPI), includes a video delay and feedback generator, and a video oscillator system (like Jackie's device in *Wish*) amongst others and their website includes detailed technical explanations of how concepts like video feedback work in addition to hosting instructions on building your own device. Periodically, Jay will also offer sales of the VSERPI devices which is how I acquired my device in the fall of 2020.

Now that the reader is more familiar with the tools I used for my work at Duke and other video art practices and concerns, I will return to my discussion of my earlier work with Sunburned's John Moloney. Prior to Three Lobed's release of Sunburned's most recent studio album *Pick A Day To Die* in the spring of 2021, I asked Moloney if they needed a video for any of the songs on the album. He sent me a digital copy of the album and let me choose from the album's seven songs. I chose "Black Lights," the last song on the record's first side, and created a video to accompany the song's mysterious groove. Working with Moloney was easy and he seemed open to any ideas I would bring to the table. The only suggestion I remember from him was that the band envisioned the song as having a "spy" feel. For "Black Lights" I used a digital camera to rescan a television displaying video from my VSERPI device, video mixer, and VDMX and edited it together to follow the atmosphere of the song. The end result is an abstract montage of pixelated lines (the pixelation resulting from the digital camera zooming into the television), a grid of spheres, brief explosions of color, and a sense of rhythm and movement that emulates the song's slow propulsion. Moloney told me that the band enjoyed the video, and after a few weeks the video was shared to the official Three Lobed Recordings YouTube channel. As of this writing it has received approximately 600 views. More than anything, it gave me a chance to contribute to Sunburned's body of work.

Later that year, Moloney contacted me as he was on tour with Dinosaur Jr. Moloney asked if I would be willing to provide visuals that he could project behind the band during the second to last show of their tour at the Academy of Music in Northampton, Massachusetts. He described this as a “hometown show” and told me that the band typically used still photos of their albums or archival music videos during performances but they had two songs that lacked visual accompaniment. I quickly went to work and sent John six five-minute videos for the band to choose from. The two selected for that evening’s show feature a looping source video with processed video feedback that blends with the source video and shifts and stretches over time. Below is a photo taken by John Moloney from the side of the stage during Dinosaur Jr.’s performance. The white lines in the video swirl, fractalize, and imitate the imagery seen in a kaleidoscope (Figure 7.1).



Figure 7.1. Dinosaur Jr. performance photograph with visuals by author *Source: Personal communication with John Moloney*

Planning

I had one month to work on the projections for the festival. The geographic distance between Moloney in Massachusetts, the venue in North Carolina, and myself in Louisiana caused initial headaches. Moloney would also be on tour in Europe with Sunburned at the end of March, complicating any sort of communication between myself and Moloney. I worked with Moloney to get all of the relevant details from the theater (what sort of projectors they used, how they were placed in the theater, what were the options for display, etc.) and researched online for the best practices for connecting the analog output of my decades-old video mixer to the theater's state of the art projector with minimal distortion or loss of quality knowing that I would not have a chance to test anything until a few hours before the performance. In fact, the anxiety caused by the distance and the uncertainty as to whether my projections would work or look good (and the subsequent impulse to eliminate that uncertainty) dominated the month leading up to the performance.

Through communication with Moloney, I understood that there would be two projectors with different sources incorporated into the performance: my footage and footage compiled by the band. I did not know where the projectors would be placed in relation to each other or the band or what kind of imagery the band planned to use. To cloud things even more, Sunburned plays improvised music and while I thought I knew what they *might* sound like based on recent recordings, I had no insight into any plan for their performance (I still had no clue as I left the green room for the theater's tech area where I stationed my equipment minutes before the performance.)

Methods

As the month progressed, I mapped out several strategies for performance. The first was to return to Max and create a network of Vsynth objects controlled by an external MIDI controller. I would record the loops generated by this patch and then process them live using my video gear during the performance. Since Max was no longer my main tool, I had trouble creating results that satisfied me immediately, and I abandoned this idea but continued to experiment with pre-recorded footage.

My next idea was to use my VSERPI device to generate the loops using its video synthesizer program. I ran the VSERPI through my video gear to a small television and used a digital camera to capture that footage. I imported that footage into Adobe Premiere to color correct, edit the video into repeating loops, and blend separate bits of footage together. I would then further process that footage with my laptop and the video gear during the performance in North Carolina. Figure 7.2 is a still from a loop I used frequently during the performance.

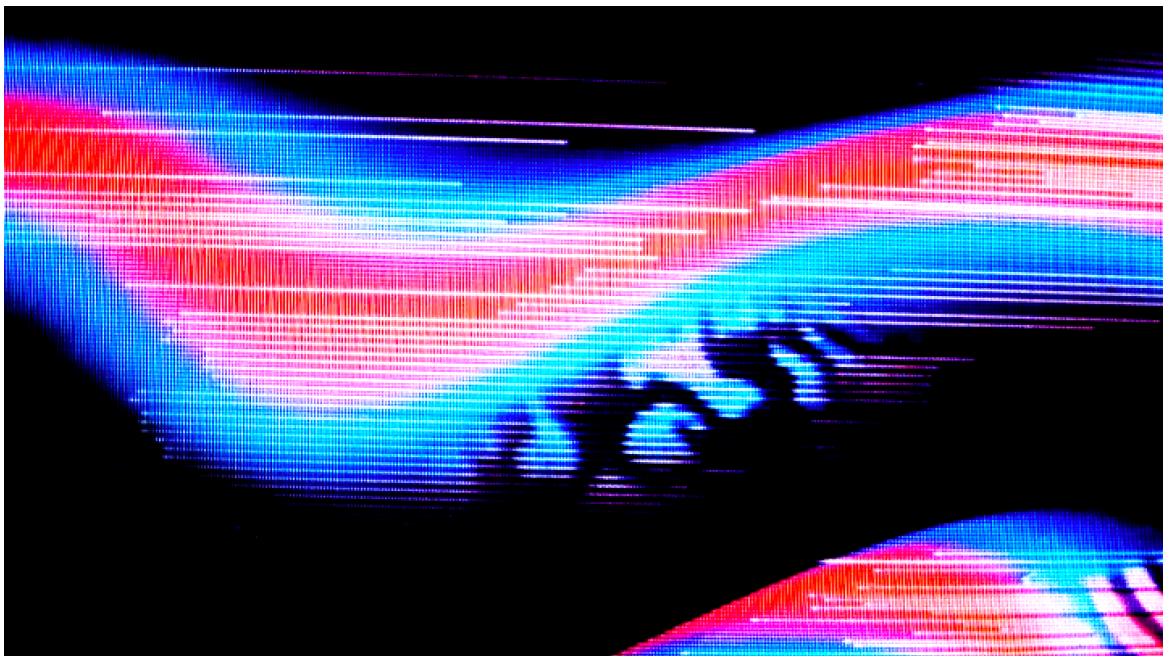


Figure 7.2. VSERPI footage *Source: Author*

The VSERPI produced the red and blue waves that cycle upwards. Below the wave's crest you can see the results of a filter applied to the waveform which causes strobing blobs of color that resolve as the wave reaches the top of the screen. The thin horizontal lines come from a second bit of footage I took of analog mixer feedback processed through the circuit-bent video enhancer. Because of my use of the mixer's sample-and-hold feature, the mixer feedback freezes for a second, jumps to the next image, freezes again, and continues the repeating cycle.

As I worked on this idea, I waited for the equipment I ordered to optimally connect my video mixer to the theater's projector to arrive. After the first round of packages were delivered, I realized I ordered an incorrect component, and I ordered the correct component with a next-day delivery. Five days before the performance and two days before we were scheduled to leave Louisiana, I unboxed everything and incorporated my new devices into my signal chain and monitored the final product on my desktop computer. I was disappointed to say the least. The hundreds of dollars of converters I purchased and had rush-delivered produced similar results to a \$15 AV to HDMI converter. The lush colors seemed flat and desaturated and all of the analog grain and texture had been washed away.

The night before we left for North Carolina, I thought about packing up all of my gear (a 10" CRT television to monitor the projections, a video mixer, multiple MIDI controllers, the VSERPI, my laptop, the circuit-bent enhancer, camera tripod, folding table, a nest of analog video cables and power supplies, and all of the converters) to produce an incredibly unsatisfying result in front of a paying audience of concert goers and world class musicians on a \$35,000 projector. I stayed up until early in the morning creating a project in VDMX that incorporated the VSERPI footage as well as a number of parameters for controlling different effects.

The VDMX project relied on four layers of video separated into two groups of two layers. Each group had a layer used for video playback (the VSERPI loops and a collection of video loops available through VDMX of white shapes moving across black backgrounds) and a layer of feedback. The layers could be mixed within their individual groups and then groups would also be mixed and composited before being displayed.

VDMX has several mixing or blend modes to choose from but I used the Lighten Blend Mode which keeps the lightest colored pixels between two images. For example, in the picture below I have blended two layers in VDMX: a black and white checkerboard and a video of flowers blooming against a black background. Because the white squares of the checkerboard are so bright, VDMX keeps those squares intact and replaces parts of the black squares with the lighter pixels from the video (Figure 7.3).

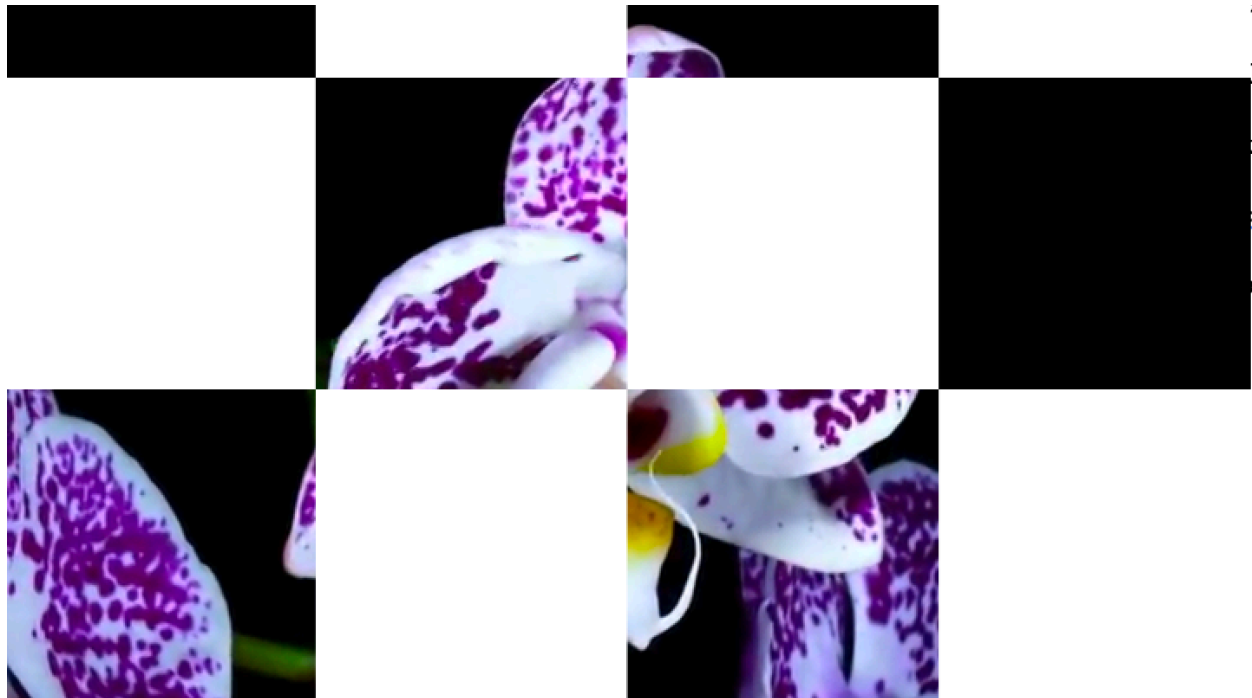


Figure 7.3. VDMX Lighten Blend Mode *Source: Author*

And Figure 7.4 is a second example of one look I planned for the show. Below are two preview windows in VDMX.

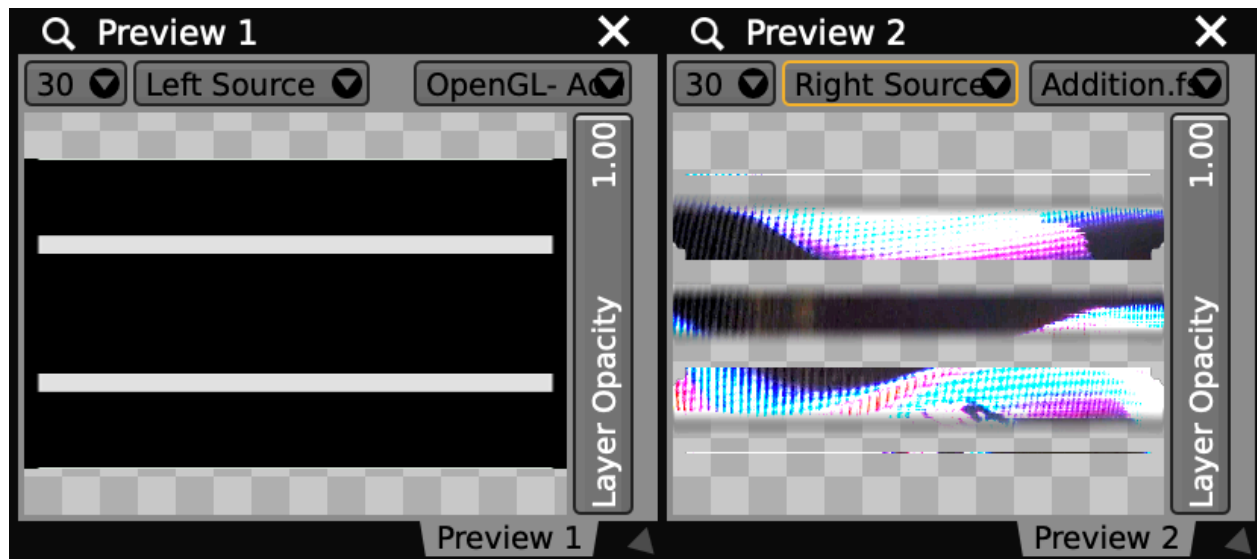


Figure 7.4. VDMX Preview Mode *Source: Author*

The Left Source shows the layer with one of the black-and-white shape videos using effects to shift the video up and down and mirror the composition providing symmetry as the video changes position in the space. The Right Source shows the blue and red wave discussed above. I added a Layer Mask to Right Source and used Left Source as the layer input. This produces the transparent effect in the Right Source (the gray checkerboard on the right that corresponds with the white lines on the left). So, the VSERPI footage becomes transparent wherever the footage on the Left Source becomes too bright.

By changing the position, brightness, blur amount, zoom, and adjusting the feedback loop within the left channel, I could create new transparencies in the right channel. By creating transparencies in the right channel, I could allow the elaborate feedback chain in the right channel to create a new background that responded to changes reminiscent of the liquid light shows discussed previously in the chapter on *Wish*. Below is an example of the final product.

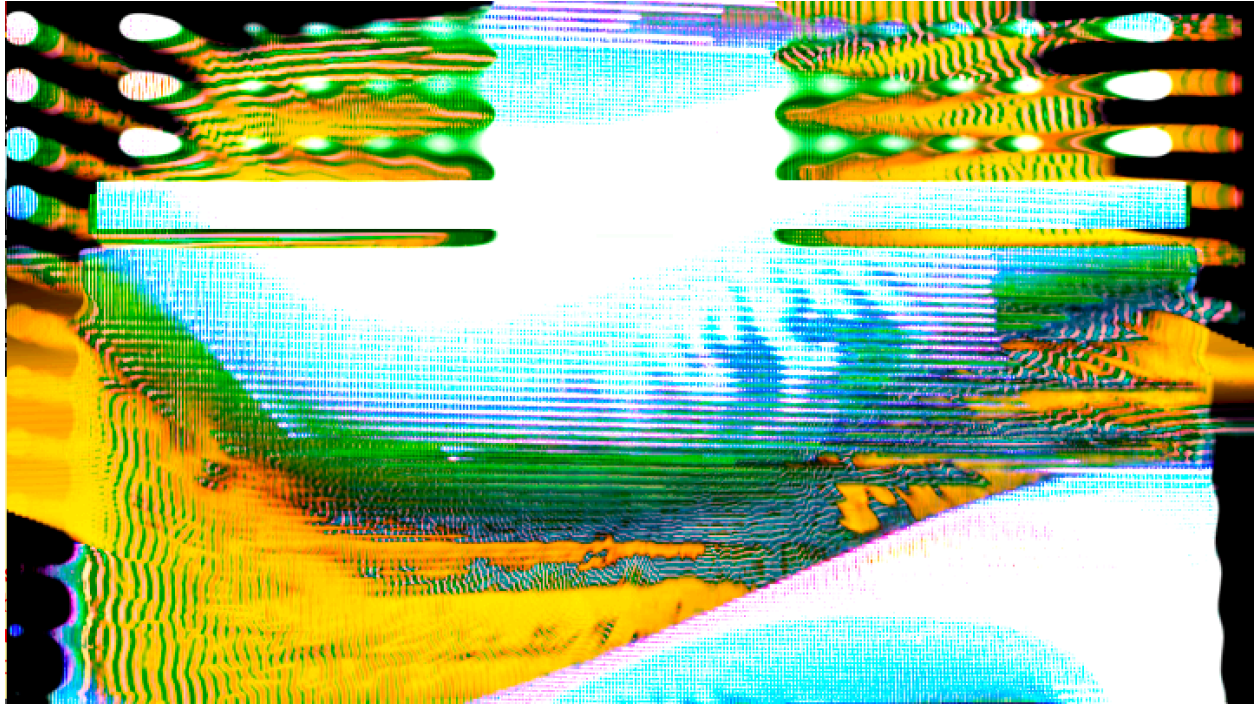


Figure 7.5. VDMX Example *Source: Author*

Blending the Left Source with a layer of blurred and sharpened feedback causes the descending horizontal lines to discharge circular blobs of white from their ends. These blobs of feedback will merge with each other like droplets of water, modifying the masking layer on the Right Source which VDMX uses to display the VSERPI footage from the Right Source. The right side's feedback loop replaces all the transparent pixels caused by the masking layer and produces the green and yellow colors in the background. Over time this feedback loop changes its hue, becomes more and less sharp, and changes the angle of its rotation. Due to the chaotic nature of feedback, a minor change in each of these results in vastly different outcomes.

To trigger the different looks, I saved several presets for each layer that I could recall during the performance. I also mapped some of the effects parameters to faders and encoders on a MIDI controller connected to my laptop. I continued to develop this project in between shifts in the driver's seat on the road to Durham, after we arrived at our hotel in Durham at 2:00 AM

Friday morning, Friday evening after the first set of the festival, and Saturday afternoon before my 2:00 PM call time.

Performance

I arrived first to the theater Saturday afternoon and began to unpack my things. As opposed to the litany of items described above, I only brought my laptop, a MIDI controller, and a digital camera and tripod to record the performance. I also brought a backup flash drive in case Moloney and I needed to share any files, and my own HDMI cord to connect my laptop to the theater projector. The theater sat 200 people and included a balcony that wrapped around the stage with additional seating. The band would perform on the floor in front of the audience with an approximately 8' high rectangular projection surface behind them. Above that surface was an additional projection surface measuring approximately 18' feet high.

After I arrived, I met the sound and lighting technicians who showed me where to set up my equipment. Sunburned arrived from Massachusetts in their van shortly after and the group consisted of Moloney, Thomas, and Schneiderman, as well as longtime member Dave Bohill (guitar) and contemporary additions Sarah Gibbons (Mellotron, theremin, keys) and Shannon Ketch (vocals, rants, and costumes). As the band arrived and began to set up their instruments, I experimented projecting onto the surface above them. As Moloney assembled his drum kit, we talked about our respective projections and how we would layer them together. Since one projection surface was above the other, it seemed that we would stack our projections accordingly. I returned to my position at the top of the center riser when Moloney came to me with a problem. It seemed that Sunburned's projector was not bright enough to cast onto the surface behind the band. Moloney asked if I could incorporate the band's footage into my VDMX project. I remember panicking in the moment because I had not planned for this but I

also did not want to disappoint anyone, so I gave Moloney the spare flash drive to transfer his footage. Luckily, the video the band had compiled blended well with my VDMX system, and the video's psychedelic blend of science fiction imagery, nature footage, and microscopic life created a new layer to the projections as opposed to purely abstract forms.

Because we were now using only one projector, I had to decide on which surface I would project the visuals: the big surface above the band, or the smaller screen behind them which could cast unwanted shadows. I felt nervous and stressed and anxious and did not want to make the wrong decision nor did I want to inconvenience anyone, so instead of trying out the bottom screen with the band or asking about other projection surfaces, I decided that the top surface would be the best solution. After spending time backstage with the band, I kept on focusing on the choice I made, and whether it was the right one. I went to talk to Duke Performances staff members running lights and sound, but it was too late to make any adjustments as the next acts conducted their sound checks.

After watching the first two acts perform, I said goodbye to the band and made my way from the green room backstage to the top of the risers. Cory Rayborn, Three Lobed's founder, gave a brief introduction to the band before they took the stage as he did before every performance that weekend. As Rayborn situated the band into the broader context of the label and its anniversary, I started projecting Three Lobed's logo onto the surface above him, complete with shifting feedback patterns. Sunburned quietly took the stage and sat behind Rayborn against the back wall and as he left they began to rhythmically slap the floor of the theater as disembodied voices. The clapping rhythms led to wordless howls as Ketch, dressed in blue work coveralls and a homemade lizard mask complete with a thin red tongue draping out of his mouth, conducted the band with his back to the audience. The band spent several minutes exploring

instrumental textures from some fictional exotic locale while Ketch delivered his mutant rants wielding a five-foot long tree branch. Snippets of Ketch's monologue include "You won't let me in your river bed ... Let's go out to lunch. Way out ... I'm just waitin' for the salad bar. Oooooooh, melted cheese." At one point, Ketch's complaints about rubber bands preventing him from accomplishing daily tasks introduce a lazy guitar melody that builds into a spaced-out jam with whirring synths buried deep in the mix. Listening back to Jonas Blank's recording of the performance, it reminds me of an imaginary soundtrack to someone on the verge of a mental collapse, or an alien visiting our planet and having a bad day.

Over time, Moloney developed a driving rhythm that led the rest of the band's explorations and marked one of the only recognizable rock and roll moments of the band's set. As Ketch raps about "hot buttered croissants" and as well as other indecipherable ideas the groove abruptly ends. Halfway through the performance, Moloney leaves the stage only to return with an empty case of Modelo beer on his head. He takes a running leap and lands in a perfect lunge with arms raised above his head to a small round of applause. Over the next twenty-five minutes, the band developed another groove that collapsed into howling chants and abstract electronics leading up to a brief guitar-led outro until Ketch ended the performance by saying "Thank you, Duke."

During Sunburned's performance, I tried to match the intensity of the music with my visuals. At the beginning, I selected a look and then enabled an effect in VDMX that would freeze an image and then slowly sort the pixels creating a smearing effect. As the band would develop a groove, I would disable this effect and let the visuals run smoothly. Moloney's more realistic visuals worked perfectly alongside my formalist patterns and shapes and the contrast present in his imagery made it easy for VDMX to mask parts of my visuals.

I imagine the co-creation of imagery as another type of collaboration present in the performance, with digital technologies allowing me to remix Moloney's compiled footage in real time, like someone might sample a record. Incorporating Moloney's visuals also led to some unexpected combinations. During the performance I would select a portion of his footage to loop, without knowing what material was present in that loop. At one point a disembodied brain appeared on screen atop a green and orange background I had created. The brain retreats into the background before a pair of eyes appear before the footage quickly cuts to scenes of cellular life and nature. Below, I have included a still from a video taken by David Schwentker from the audience that night (Figure 7.5). The image depicts the band: (from left to right) Gibbons, Ketch, Bohill (behind Ketch), Thomas, Moloney, and Schneiderman.



Figure 7.5. Sunburned Hand of the Man *Source: Personal communication with David Schwentker*

Above the band are the projections, grainy footage of a crater, with several yellow blobs of feedback, and strokes of black space. Over time the yellow blobs would change colors, congeal,

and break away while the strokes of black rotated clockwise throughout the image. As the imagery in Moloney's footage changed, my contributions would adapt based on the colors of the pixels in the footage.

Reflection

Six days before the performance, I messaged Moloney with a quick clip of something I worked on for the show and I started asking him questions about how the projectors would work or what they had planned musically. Moloney told me that it will be easy and not to sweat about anything, that the show will run smoothly, and that the members of Sunburned never know what the performance will be like in terms of pace or mood beforehand. I told Moloney that I am definitely a sweater, but that it was good to know that he had faith in everything working out in the end. I think about this exchange now, when I have been comfortable improvising and adapting to last minute changes in the past, and I have tried to understand where this anxiety originated.

Reflecting on the performance at Duke, I understand I was out of my comfort zone in a situation I perceived as high stakes due to the occasion (the 21st anniversary of a celebrated record label) and the audience (200 paying fans), and the rest of the line-up (I would estimate that 20% of my music collection consists of artists who played at this festival). In contrast to previous collaborations, Moloney did not need to see what I was working on, nor was he my teacher or supervisor. While we are friendly when we see each other, we do not have the day-to-day rapport that I have with past collaborators. I also do not typically perform in front of audiences like the one at Duke, where musicians whose recordings I obsess over sit in the audience amongst other fans (many of them artists and musicians as well). Without trying to speak for Moloney, I guess that decades of practice and friendships with the other performers has

put his mind at ease. Trying to understand this collaboration now has also put past collaborations into perspective in terms of the opportunities they can provide for less-established artists who can then return the favor to other artists in the future.

This collaboration also gave me the opportunity to work in a state-of-the-art theater space and I regret some of the choices I made in executing the projections. I spent much of the car ride back to Louisiana replaying the decisions I made in my head. I envisioned a spectacle with projections layered on the bodies of the performers combined into a living tableau. Instead, I panicked and projected everything above the band, creating two disconnected performances. However, it was a learning experience for the future. Specifically, I learned to prioritize technical concerns during the load-in process. Instead of experimenting with the different projection surfaces or communicating with the lighting designer, I spent time fine-tuning my projections with Moloney's footage. The former could only be done through Duke Performances staff who were on a tight schedule, and the latter I could do on my own in the hours leading up to the performance.

Sunburned was gracious and thankful for my work, though was still disappointed in myself and wondered if they were able to see much of the projections displayed above their heads. I said goodbye to them Saturday evening as Lee Ranaldo (another co-founder of Sonic Youth playing the festival) and filmmaker Leah Singer inspected the space before their collaborative performance the following evening. The next night, Ranaldo would play a guitar suspended from the ceiling and Singer would project her films onto a screen behind Ranaldo. It made me question my choices more. Ranaldo cast a shadow onto the projections, which grew larger as he approached the projector located down stage right. Would the six members of Sunburned's shadows have completely blocked out the projections? Could this have been fixed

by using another one of Duke's projectors to cast a copy of the projections mirrored vertically onto the surface above in addition to the projections cast onto the band? My friends who attended the festival were supportive and it felt surreal receiving feedback from artists whose music I enjoy who either witnessed the performance or heard about it second-hand. Most feedback emphasized the psychedelic nature of the visuals and how it complemented Sunburned's performance.

Like several of my collaborations in the HBB, at the end of the festival I had a performance-ready instrument that I could continue to use and develop. Developing the project at the last minute did not allow much time for revisions or edits or a full realization of how the thing works. Writing this chapter has led me to revisiting the VDMX project and helped me to develop a more complete understanding of how the layers and effects work together. By continuing to edit and streamline the project (for instance removing redundant effects or identifying specific parameters for MIDI mapping), I can incorporate it into future performances or use it to create looping animations that can be further processed with video hardware.

In contrast to my work in the HBB, there was no rehearsal process. The festival experience was like most concerts I have played in the past. There was no complete run-through in advance of the performance, only a quick load-in and soundcheck. You then spend hours waiting for the show to begin, and then hours waiting to perform, and then at the end of the night you break everything down and pack it into your vehicle. And after driving from Massachusetts to North Carolina on Saturday, Sunburned would have to return home the next morning. Though, that downtime allowed for more interpersonal interactions between everyone. While the members of Sunburned had just spent hours in a van together and had decades of collective friendship, it was helpful for me to spend time with them in advance. They are funny people, and

that humor makes itself known in their stage performances. As an outsider looking in, I laughed so hard riding around in their van looking for beer that I had trouble catching my breath. It eased the anxiety I felt about the performance to sit in the green room backstage and listen to them half-heartedly play covers on the guitar, crack jokes, and riff on extended comedic bits.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

As described in Chapter One, the chapters in this study follow roughly the same organizational structure. In addition to being a useful model for writing about collaboration, it operates as a checklist for doing collaborative work. The model created includes planning, research and defining methods, deadline and performing, and reflecting. Then I will discuss collaborative structures in terms of the relationships between collaborators and creative independence. Next, I will describe methods of compensation for collaborative projects. In closing, I will evaluate the collaborations I described in this study and reflect on my creative growth.

First, collaborators enter a planning period. You have conversations with your creative partners regarding things such as project goals, aesthetics, styles, and deadlines. This is ideally when you would discuss compensation (I elaborate on specific forms of compensation later in this chapter). This period can include one meeting or several meetings (like in Chapter Two). If it is an ongoing collaboration like my work with Mitchell, we now have planning periods before each project and we go into a rehearsals, live performances, or recording sessions with a specific set of goals. Sometimes these planning periods are hands-off, like my work at Duke University with *Sunburned Hand of the Man* in Chapter Seven. This is where you should make any special requests from your collaborators as well. The planning period is also when collaborators decide upon their methods. Based on conversations with directors I realize that I should use DSP or play guitar during the performance. Or I decide if a project calls for strictly analog visual effects or if it would be better suited for a combination of digital and analog.

After the planning stage, one would move from research and refining methods with an understanding of their own influences. This shapes the crafting and rehearsal process for the

collaboration. Depending on the nature of the collaboration this could be a solitary process such as designing a Max patch or composing a piece through writing and rehearsing. This could also be a community effort like the development of the blizzard sounds in Chapter Two. Or like in Chapter Three, this could be a combination of the two. With *Wish*, Jackie and I collaborated directly on the concept but worked individually on our respective contributions. As collaborators approaches the end of this stage, some sort of authorization of the material happens. Directors may approve samples of the sound design, or maybe a complete run-through of the performance takes place, or collaborators exchange of recordings. This step is important to make sure that everyone is moving towards the same end goal.

Eventually, a deadline looms. In my experience, this can be as simple as a practice session with Mitchell or the premiere of a performance in the HBB. This typically involves me performing my contribution or the successful playback of prerecorded material. As is often the case, sometimes situations progress unexpectedly. Issues with technology can force performers to adapt (like in Chapter Seven), or they may deviate from the original plan (which happens occasionally when performing with Mitchell). Consecutive performances can also open new space for experimentation and growth (like in Chapters Three, Five, and Six). For any future scholars who may use this method, I suggest avid documentation of the previous three steps to ensure accurate recollections of the events that took place.

Then, I suggest an individual and group reflection period. As mentioned in this study, different collaborations lead to different reflections. I found myself reflecting on my work alongside the cast members of HBB productions, my memories of my collaborators, the experience or knowledge I gained, personal or artistic growth, and collaborative hierarchies.

Personally, I place value on checking in with partners after a performance to get a feel for their physical, emotional, and mental state.

While not necessarily a stage of collaboration, it is important to note the collaboration's background and the history of the collaborators. Is your collaborator responsive? Are they uplifting? What are their prior expectations of you? Do they expect you to recreate prior work or do they have an investment in seeing you grow?

For those engaging in future collaborative work, it is important to be able to decide whether you are engaging in collaboration or whether others are taking advantage of your work. Occasionally, a friend or stranger sends me an email or a direct message over a social networking site informing me about their upcoming creative project before they ask me whether I would like to collaborate with them. Typically, these projects are multi-media undertakings and focus on an upcoming album release by a single artist or group. Orbiting this album release are live performances, music videos, promotional photography, and the creation of other digital promotional materials. In these situations, they usually ask me to edit music videos in some capacity, often by adding effects in post-production to video taken by a videographer working with the main artist. I often balk at the use of the word *collaborate* because I envision these scenarios as more hierarchical than collaborative. When talking to friends about these requests, we joke about inverting the situation. Instead of editing a music video for a song that is already completed, maybe I should ask them to write an original song for a video I have created. Though, certainly projects discussed in this study like *Wittgenstein's Mistress* and *Creature* had a hierarchical creative structure. Additionally, it seems the person asking for my contributions uses *collaborate* to circumvent expectations that come with hiring someone for a job, namely compensation. But I only received payment for one of the projects described in this study and

monetary payment is not always necessary in collaborations. In the following section, I describe models of collaborative structures and compensation models using my experiences described in the previous chapters to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of possible collaborations.

Collaborative Structures

Collaboration requires at least two individuals. For the purposes of this analysis, I will label this a direct collaboration. In shows with large casts like *Wittgenstein*, I presented my work alongside the performances of the eight women playing Kate with a script from and direction by David Terry. In *Creature*, my pieces accompanied dances choreographed by another graduate student and performed by cast members in addition to scenes without music and acted out by other performers under the direction of Tracy Stephenson Shaffer who also presented her academic labor through the performance's script. I identify these collaborations as managerial collaborations.

In collaborations with a managerial collaborative style everyone contributes a piece to the final project. In a managerial collaborative style, a leader (typically the director) assigns responsibilities, expresses a vision for the final project, and assembles the various components that constitute the staged performance, album release, music video, or installation. Examples of a managerial collaborative style include Chapter Two's discussion of *On a Snowy Evening*, Chapter Four's discussion of *Creature*, and Chapter Five's discussion of *Wittgenstein*. Depending on the components of the project and the number of collaborators, this can contribute to a sense of alienation from the final project and the other collaborators which can preclude the development of an interpersonal relationship between the group. In stage productions like the ones produced in the HBB, individuals involved with those performances spent time together in rehearsals and run-throughs. Directors are typically available to meet on campus and can offer

feedback on progress. However, in the scenario described above, I am not working on a performance with a five-day run, rather a sprawling album release cycle. Artists and videographers will work on location, but public-relations specialists, graphic designers, video editors, and recording engineers will all most likely work at their own studios. Now, it is possible to collaborate remotely via cloud storage systems and communicate through tools like Slack or Discord, which some artists may prefer over in-person communication. There is also a question of distance between the collaborators and the strength of their relationship. While I live on opposite ends of the country from Sunburned's John Moloney and we have only met each other in person a handful of times over the past decade, we correspond via social media messages and comments as well as through postal services by exchanging records and CDs which typically include handwritten notes, concert flyers, and promotional stickers. This stands in stark contrast to my collaboration with Jackie when we had dated for three years prior to *Wish*. Mitchell and I developed our friendship through collaboration. I do not have a prior relationship with a stranger.

In contrast, Chapter Six's discussion of my work with Mitchell offers an example of a direct collaboration. While we may play on bills with other bands or work with engineers to record sessions, we have an immediate connection to the project in the moment of performance. It would be a mischaracterization to say that we *collaborate* with a recording engineer, rather we *hire* one for their knowledge and expertise. I envision my collaboration with Mitchell as an ongoing process with many projects along the way such as live performances, practices, recording sessions, and album releases. Occasionally, we collaborate with others on a certain project. For example, in July of 2022, Mitchell and I went to KLSU-FM's production office on LSU's campus. We performed a 15-minute improvised guitar and percussion set. The staff at KLSU produced a video of the performance and an interview with the two of us and uploaded

the videos to their YouTube channel. KLSU, Mitchell and I all mutually benefitted from this arrangement. We received a high-quality video of our performance and the exposure offered by KLSU, and KLSU got content for their online presence and fulfilled their responsibility of interacting with the local music scene. In *Wish*, Jackie Rawls and I received help from other graduate students to help us make the mattresses/projection surfaces and the spray paint on the performance's promotional posters. Both were essential parts of the project but not the focus of the performance. In exchange, I installed sound in QLab for another graduate student's performance and acted in another's.

Finally, Chapter Seven's discussion of my work with Sunburned Hand of the Man provide examples of a performance situated between direct and managerial collaboration. Until last minute technical issues, John Moloney did not suggest or attempt to influence the content of my visuals. Sunburned's performance would be interesting without my visuals, though I audience members would be reluctant to pay attention if we removed the band from the performance. But we both performed alongside each other to create something new in the moment. Returning to the scenario described earlier, I believe that one way to make this project more collaborative would be to provide live visuals in a performance setting. Not only would the collaboration be more dynamic between the participants, but it is also much easier to divide percentages of ticket sales or a performance fee than to negotiate budgets with someone who may expect collaboration to be free of compensation.

Collaboration also asks questions of creative independence. Some artists prefer creative constraints like the ones offered me by Terry for *Wittgenstein* and Shaffer for *Creature*. Personally, I enjoy constraints but value creative independence. As collaborations get more managerial (and potentially less collaborative as a whole) there can be a limit on creative

independence. For example, a musician wanting more shots of themselves included in the music video as opposed to abstract or non-representational forms.

Compensation

The ideal compensation varies from project to project and there are quantifiable forms of compensation and forms of compensation that are less quantifiable and more experiential and intangible. It is easy to quantify things like a portion of the performance fee, album sales, and royalties, or the amount of academic credit earned on a project. It is more difficult to quantify mentorship, guidance, and the opportunity to perform on a larger stage or to a broader audience. In some projects, no compensation exists besides the satisfaction of successfully mounting a performance or the further development of an artistic relationship with another person. I agreed to work with Sunburned because of a deep love and admiration for the band and for a chance to perform at festival alongside many of my favorite artists. They also offered me a portion of their performance fee, though I declined to ask what my payment would be in advance. As discussed in Chapter One, the Department of Communication Studies at LSU has a system set in place where students can receive academic credit by working or collaborating on HBB productions. In the projects discussed in Chapters Four and Five, I received three hours of graduate credit for my work in each of those performances. Mitchell Mobley and I split our share of the venue's admission fee after the performance at Southside Arts Center described in Chapter Six and split the profits of selling our recorded material after we recoup any production costs, but there is no compensation exchanged between the two of us. Likewise, Jackie and I collaborated without compensation on the production of *Wish* discussed in Chapter Three. I compensated the graduate student who assembled our mattresses by designing and installing sound on their production the

following semester which fulfilled the collaborative requirement in the HBB director's contract (another departmental system set in place to facilitate collaboration and compensate labor).

The further development of the relationship is important to the process and could also be classified as a type of experiential compensation described earlier. Jackie and I envisioned *Wish* as an extension of our personal relationship and the mounting of the performance to connect with each other and develop our artistic voices. Mitchell and I belonged to overlapping friend groups and knew each other beforehand and have become significantly closer since the start of our collaboration. My relationship with John Moloney has developed from me being a fan of his work, to working alongside each other and we have also discussed future collaborative projects like split CDs or cassettes so there is room for further collaboration as well.

We can also understand compensation in terms of mentorship and experience. Not only did I receive academic credit for designing sound for performances in the HBB, but I also received the opportunity to work under experienced directors and had the chance to gain insight from them through long periods of working in the space on tasks like light hangs and strikes. I applied to graduate school for those opportunities. While I am providing labor, I enjoy participating in DIY performances. To elaborate on this, I return to my reflections from Chapters Two, Four, and Five. Working under John LeBret led me to incorporate some of his aesthetic into my own. The guidance and encouragement I received from the other performance studies faculty at LSU prompted me to push my creative boundaries and experiment with unfamiliar ways to create sound for performances. Against my better judgement, I would have done visuals for *Sunburned* at no cost simply because I believe in them, and it was a monumental opportunity for me.

Evaluating Collaborations

In this section, I apply the schema described above to the collaborations I have analyzed in this study.

On a Snowy Evening – Managerial style. High degree of creative independence. High interaction with fellow collaborators. No quantifiable compensation. Experiential compensation in form of learning from John, getting familiar with live guitar performance, and traveling to the 2015 Patti Pace Festival.

Wish – Direct style. Very high degree of creative independence. Very high interaction with fellow collaborators. No quantifiable compensation. Experiential compensation in the form of producing a performance and achieving goals.

Creature From The Primordial World – Managerial style. Medium degree of creative independence. High interaction with fellow collaborators. Quantifiable compensation in the form of academic credit. Experiential compensation in the form of developing new ideas in Max and witnessing the staging of academic theory.

Wittgenstein's Mistress – Managerial style. High degree of creative independence. Medium interaction with fellow collaborators. Quantifiable compensation in the form of academic credit. Experiential compensation in the form of developing new ideas in Max, traveling to the 2018 NCA convention, showcasing a 90-minute improvised score.

Mitchell – Direct style. Very high degree of creative independence. Very high interaction with fellow collaborators. Quantifiable compensation in the form of ticket and album sales. Experiential compensation in the form of broader recognition of our work, the joy of performing and creating with another person, the development of a deep friendship.

Sunburned Hand of the Man – Direct style. High degree of creative independence. Medium interaction with fellow collaborators. Quantifiable compensation in the form of performance fee. Experiential compensation in the form of performing out of state to new audiences, sharing the stage with iconic performers, partnering with a band that I admire.

Reflection

Reflecting on the past six chapters draws my attention to the variations of the elements that comprise a collaboration: the mixtures of artists and artistry, the levels of trust, the histories and personal relationships between the collaborators, the power dynamics, and the end goal. I think about the efficacy of the model I devised over the past six chapters for writing about collaborations. I also wonder whether the body of this dissertation offers any insight to successful collaborations.

Before I conclude this study, I want to reflect on a recent artistic experience. While I worked to complete this chapter, I also prepared for a live performance at Chelsea's Live, a club in Baton Rouge that holds approximately 600 people. Wumbo, the rock group I perform in, celebrated the release of our second full length record on stage with two other acts. These two events occurring simultaneously has led to many emotional moments as I think about the passage of time and my artistic development. As described in Chapter Six, I began recording with Wumbo through my collaboration with Mitchell. This led to joining them as a featured performer until my integration into the band. Before my work on *Snowy*, I had very little experience performing music for anyone, much less playing for a paying audience, now I was on a stage in front of friends, peers, and strangers playing original music with a band that I admired before I joined. One of our new songs, "Buffalo Skinner" (written and sung by Mitchell) relies on the repetitive strumming of C major chord for the rhythm. Mitchell provides the rhythm. Jake

Heflin, the other guitar player provides the lead guitar and I drone on two C notes an octave apart in-time with Mitchell's rhythm playing. For several minutes I just play one chord until I perform a noisy solo at the end. The rehearsals for this performance reminded me of a Sonic Youth recording I enjoy, a mislabeled video of their performance at their performance at the Poly Arena in Leicester, England on March 21, 1989. In their performance of their song "The Sprawl," the main rhythm gives way to fast-paced bridge of minimal and interlocking guitar figures. I used to watch this video and imagine the experience of being in synchronization with another in a live performance on stage. I tried to imagine the way the members of Sonic Youth felt in that moment. Were they excited? Were they tired? Were they happy? Were they hungry? What were they? But I knew that I wanted to have that experience. In those rehearsals and on stage, I felt that experience. I felt myself locked-in with Wumbo's rhythm section (Ben and Jeffrey Livingston, brothers and extremely talented musicians, and with Mitchell's playing. We made eye contact throughout, and I felt my energy growing throughout the performance and the intensity of my strumming increases. Finally, Mitchell sang the end of his last chorus, I stepped on an effects pedal that provides distortion and amplifies the high-end harmonics. It sounds incredibly nasty when applied. As the rest of the band continued with the song, I released all pent-up energy into that 30-second solo before the song ended and we left the stage.

The process of writing this study required a significant amount of reflection, both in discussing the collaborative performances, but also my personal history as I grew from a child interested in music to an adult who has developed my artistic skills through directly working with other people in collaboration. I have also reflected on the importance of the HBB in the development of my practice, and the people who helped facilitate that practice: my professors, the past HBB managers, my fellow graduate students, and the undergraduates who volunteer in

the space. In the Fall of 2022, I transitioned into the role of the HBB manager. During orientation week, I met with the performance studies graduate students and faculty for a HBB orientation. I began my introduction with an acknowledgement that without the space, I would not be where I am today. As I met my Introduction of Performing Literature students, I gave them an overview of my performance experience. I mentioned that I do not mean to stun my students with my accomplishments, I recount my experience to emphasize that the fact the HBB is there for this reason: experimentation and creative growth.

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Vita

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His experimental guitar recordings have been released independently, as well as by Dadaist Tapes (Belgium). His work has been reviewed in *The Advocate*, *Bandcamp Daily*, and *The Wire*. Currently, he is the HopKins Black Box manager.