

MUSIC LESSONS: DEMOS, DRAFTS, & DISSERTATIONS

Dale Boyle

Recording an album is a multitasking marathon. As a singer-songwriter I start with writing, arranging, and recording songs. This alone can take several months to complete. I then move on to editing, mixing, mastering, creating graphics, and writing liner notes, all of which require many more months of work. Without a doubt, creating and releasing an album involves a nearly overwhelming list of tasks. In many ways, writing a dissertation is similar. Choosing a research area, securing a supervisor, defining a manageable question, locating a research site, collecting and analyzing data.... And then comes the writing and the seemingly endless rounds of editing and reshaping of one's dissertation (or thesis). Needless to say, it's a lot to take on.

I am a singer, songwriter, and recording artist. And for nine years of my life, I was also a graduate student (Masters & PhD) at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. At the Masters level, I explored how African American history could be taught through music. At the PhD level, I carried out a qualitative study that explored how a university professor, Dr. Daniel Levitin, incorporated music in a cognition psychology course. Music was and continues to be a part of both my academic and non-academic careers. In each occupation, I have frequently found myself frozen in anxiety and reluctant to engage in such a daunting project. Every time I gear up to record an album, the same thought runs through my head: "Once I start this, I'm in for a long, difficult ride." I had the same gut feeling when approaching my dissertation, and frequently my tendency was to avoid rather than engage in the task at hand. Simply put, the sheer size of the work to be completed was overwhelming!

IT'S JUST A DEMO

One day, when working in my studio, I realized something significant while recording "demos." Demos (the term comes from the word "demonstration") are musical recordings that serve to document the basic structure, melody, and working lyrics of a song. Demos are generally recorded quickly and are not intended for official release. Due to the laid-back and provisional nature of the demo, recording demos was (and continues to be) enjoyable and anxiety-free. Recording a demo of a song is quite similar to recording the "official" version of the song, yet the stress is removed. Hmmm.... If the steps and outcome were essentially the same, then the difference was largely in how I viewed the activity of recording demos. Interesting.

I realized that when demoing a song I placed considerably less pressure on myself and I approached the recording with a free, easygoing attitude. The "aha!" moment occurred when I was in the studio with my band recording a demo of an up-tempo blues song called "The Rent Ain't Paid." We were early in the recording session, adjusting microphones and checking volumes when the producer said, "Let's give

the song a run through.” Thinking this was a test run and that several takes of the song would follow, we launched into the song. After we finished, the producer shouted, “That’s great! We got it!” That was it. One take. Done. With the pressure to be perfect removed, I enjoyed myself and performed well. This was a pivotal moment for me as a recording artist.

Since then, I have adopted this demo approach when recording official albums. I should stress here that while I understand the benefits of a demo approach when recording, it still takes a conscious effort to maintain this attitude when recording an album for official release. It’s very easy for me to become fixated on minor details, so I need to watch for the warning signs. I specifically recall recording the electric guitar overdubs for a song called “Throwback” and not being quite satisfied with my performance. By the time I captured a decent performance of the guitar part, it sounded rigid. I wasn’t having fun, and it showed. So, I took a fifteen-minute break and reminded myself to relax and be more adventurous. I tried all sorts of off-the-cuff guitar parts. Ultimately, I discarded most of what I recorded, but there was one guitar riff that stood out. It bore no resemblance to what I had originally intended to record, but it was perfect for the song. I stumbled upon this discovery by taking a demo approach.

I learned to approach writing my thesis (that is what we call it in Canada) in a similar demo-like fashion. I did not have an “aha!” writing moment per se, but rather, I gradually embraced two key points: First, I realized that always focusing on the magnitude of the entire thesis was hindering me as researcher and writer. Over time, I learned to cut myself some slack and take it day by day. Second, in taking a demo approach to my thesis writing, I learned that not every idea, sentence, or paragraph had to be a keeper. It’s just a demo.... It’s just a draft. Like a demo recording of a song, I learned to embrace thesis writing with a more exploratory and laid-back attitude. Now, this took work. I had to consciously tell myself, “Just write. You can modify or even delete it later. It’s just a demo!”

A case in point occurred when I developed what I call “Musical Memos” in my PhD research. Writing musical memos involves selecting key phrases and words from interview data and then assembling these in a succinct lyrical (and musical) form to highlight the essence of what was reflected in the data. I am quite comfortable with musical memoing now, but initially I was apprehensive. I invented this technique, so there were no guidelines in place for me to follow. Quite simply, I had to experiment to see what worked best for me. Ideas that didn’t pan out were tossed. Ideas that resonated and served me well were explored further. In adopting a demo approach to writing musical memos, I ultimately developed a method that bridged my skills as a researcher and songwriter. This, in turn, allowed me to highlight, express, and represent data in salient and artful ways.

Of course, we cannot demo forever. Eventually, I officially submitted (released) a final thesis as part of my program requirements. However, the period leading up to this submission included a time of loose, laid-back, demo-like work.

The relaxed, pressure-free atmosphere of recording a demo has at times produced great results. In some cases, I have opted to officially release my demos. The same phenomenon occurred with my thesis writing. Occasionally, amongst all my ideas and explorations, I unearthed a “diamond in the rough.” In the context of music recording, the discovered diamond might be a unique melody, turn of phrase, or interesting chord structure that might lead to a strong song. In thesis writing, the gem might be an unexpected connection or analogy. For example, in my PhD research I struggled with how to best conceptualize what Professor Levitin did in the classroom: he was entertaining and funny; he was confident and frequently ad-libbed; he engaged students and facilitated their input and involvement. And he did so with ease in a classroom with near 600 students. It was in writing about the classroom events that I began to see Professor Levitin’s teaching as analogous to an improvisational performance, and this insight proved to be a breakthrough in my research. The take-home point here—and this is key—is that I discovered that thesis writing was more than a means to record my ideas, but rather, a way to discover ideas!

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Despite my inclination to write alone, because I am an introverted artist, I need to keep reminding myself of the benefits of collaborating with others. I specifically remember co-writing a song called “When You Wake” and struggling to find a fourth line in the following verse:

When your day spins like a wheel
Same road, same scene, same signs
When you turn back for home
NEED LINE HERE
I’ll be here when you wake in the morning

I recall saying, “Ok, we need a rhyme for home... Rome, foam, sown... like seeds being sown. Nah, that’s no good.” I was thinking literally and quickly dismissed “sown.” But my songwriting partner, taking a metaphorical perspective, said, “No, that works. How about ‘Let this seed be sown’ ...You know, as in let this be known?” “Let this seed be sown” became the fourth line of the verse—and my favorite line of the song.

So what does this have to do with graduate studies? I share this story as a reminder to make sure to keep your supervisor, committee members, and critical peer advisors involved in your graduate research. Basically, if you take a demo approach to your graduate work and writing, you are going to come up with all sorts of unplanned ideas and connections. Some will be great, and others won’t. However, sometimes when working in isolation you might toss out a good idea, or seed of an idea, that others can help you salvage. As with the song “When You Wake,” it took both of us to create the lyric. By the same token, my songwriting partners help me see when a lyric I love doesn’t work. Likewise, my advisors and critical friends helped me cull poorly formed ideas from my dissertation. The bottom line is that it’s important to remember that you are not alone in completing your graduate work.

Using your colleagues, at least as a sounding board and occasionally as collaborators, not only removes the feeling of isolation, it can lead to some very interesting discoveries about your research.

GRADUATE WORK: A STEPPING-STONE

Musicians spend years honing their craft, rehearsing with other musicians, performing, and writing songs before recording their first album. Almost every recording artist I know (myself included) has agonized about their debut recording. After years of work, it feels like the culmination of your life's efforts. Writing a thesis generates similar feelings. Over twenty years of schooling lead up to this one written work. It's no wonder that graduate students are often characterized as sleep-deprived and anxiety-prone. However, as important as the debut album and dissertation are, it is important to keep in mind that they are not the capstone of your career. They are just the beginning.

And you know what? Your thesis will never be perfect. Your views will change. A few years after my first album came out, I realized that my musical ideas have developed too. And you know what? That's ok. I'm not trying to downplay the importance of a debut album or thesis/dissertation—but cut yourself some slack. Consider the bigger picture, and remember that this just one stepping-stone along your path.

IN CONCLUSION...

As you read this, you may think that I have a well-functioning philosophy in place and that I have it pretty much together. Well, on a good day I do. Other days, not so much. My philosophical approach is constantly being tweaked, and (I hope) improving. I still have to remind myself of something that my doctoral supervisor told me many times: "Trust the process."

Ultimately, completing graduate studies takes a lot of work. To finish while keeping anxiety at bay requires conscious effort. This is easier said than done. It takes work. But trust the process: let go of control, try making demos, relax and hang on to some of the fun. These lessons will help you make your way towards your goal: a completed dissertation. And remember, just as music fans only hear an artist's officially released music, your general academic audience will only read your final dissertation. They will not see the numerous draft versions that led you to the final product. That period of discovery is yours to enjoy as you explore and develop what you want to ultimately present to others. And while the end products of our endeavors are significant, it is everything leading to its completion that you will remember and value. This is true of research, art—and dare I say it—life.