

Culminating Experience

Intro

Music has always been there, close to me. My understanding of it has changed through the years and now I have finally learned to use my capabilities to create music that captures my own unique identity.

I started playing classical percussion at age six. A couple years later I dropped the Conservatory because I wanted to *rock*. At that time I started my first band. My cousin played a Yamaha synth – I played the buckets – and the lyrics were explicit. We recorded an entire “bucket-synth punk” album to cassette.

In primary school I used to listen to a lot of my parents’ Andean and Latin American records, as well as classical music. I relished in my grandfather’s huge cassette collection.

Later, in high school, I started to listen to rock, punk, hip-hop and all kinds of “alternative” music. I also started playing drums and joined a couple of metal and hard-core bands. My major at school was Music Production, which led me to technology: a tool that made music production easier. During this time I also wanted to, somehow, utilize Ecuadorian music as part of the sonority of my own project.

Before coming to Berklee I started to study the history of the music in Ecuador and listen to a lot of Afro-, Andean, postcolonial, traditional, popular and academic music more carefully. I investigated what exactly I liked about this music and how I could draw from it. I recorded my experiments but wasn’t quite happy with the results. I also began making beats with software; getting to know some tools and production styles such as hip-hop, glitch and dubstep.

Coming to Valencia, I had great expectations. I wanted to find my identity as an artist. I wanted to be honest and authentic with my music. I wanted to feel satisfied and comfortable with studio and performance tools. I wanted to be current with the popular music environment, the industry and its many different “scenes.”

I had an idea of what I wanted but it wasn’t totally clear and I didn’t know how to get there.

FANTOCHE

My Culminating Experience is the end of my search for an artistic identity. It is also the beginning of a path full of hard work, continual learning and innovation.

My work consists of an EP called "Noespor nada." It features 3 original tracks, produced in Ableton Live, that merge Ecuadorian sounds and rhythms with styles like hip-hop, glitch and bass music. I am making "Postcolonial" electronic music under the alias Fantoche.

In addition to the EP, I created a live performance that includes visual projection onto a mapped structure and a custom mask equipped with LEDs for a mini light show on my face. Both visual elements are synchronized to the music to create a synesthetic experience.

The approach

Rhythm is my strength. I am a drummer and a percussionist, roles that are at the core of my creativity as a producer. I wanted to find a way to use Afro Ecuadorian and Andean rhythms and patterns to make beats in an accessible style.

In order to understand how this traditional music works rhythmically, I transcribed the patterns of the different instruments played in the "Marimba" from Esmeraldas in the north coast of Ecuador, "Bomba" from an Andean valley inhabited by Afro descendants called Chota and some Andean music from Cotopaxi.

After a period of research and experimentation, I developed an understanding of how these patterns work and how the different styles are similar. I devised a rhythmic formula for using all of this information in an electronic music context.

The main features of the formula are the polyrhythms 3:2 and 4:3. I divided the cycle in 4 beats (1/4 notes). The backbeat, when existent, goes on 3. The kick can go on 1 and 3, on all 4 beats (when using 16th note subdivision). The key placement of a kick, big drum or percussive element is the second 8th note triplet of beats 2 and 4. The subdivision between beats can change between 1/4 note triplets, 8th notes, 8th note triplets, 16th notes and 16th note triplets –these rhythms can coexist and form the polyrhythms.

In this way, two 6/8 and one 4/4 measures are occurring at the same time (not quite 12/8), so I can make a beat that has a hip-hop feel with Afro Ecuadorian polyrhythms falling in between. I can easily mutate the beat into a 4 on the floor, no-backbeat, 16th note-feel groove that is closer to Bomba and the popular music in Andean towns.

In terms of melody I mainly use the major and minor pentatonic scales that are more commonly utilized in popular and traditional Andean music, as well as the minor harmonic scale. Sonority is a distinguishable quality of the postcolonial Mestizo music, especially the Pasillo. While Pasillo is not originally from Ecuador, it was there that it found its own identity and developed a great deal. This music is known to be expressive and melancholic.

Besides these elements, my preference and tendency is toward an organic sound; I use a lot of woody sounds from sticks, all kinds of drums, a variety of percussion samples and Foley sounds. I recorded many of these sounds myself in the AKSS. In this AKSS session I sampled my own percussion instruments and almost every one available in Berklee Valencia's equipment room. I also sampled a few records of the aforementioned Ecuadorian styles and used synthesis to recall the organs utilized in some Mestizo music; organs that eventually came to characterize a style developed from the "techno cumbia" popularly known as 'Chicha'.

The sound design in my project is largely comprised of deep bass, hypno-tribal grooves, glitchy edits and natural soundscapes. These elements coalesce into music that is psychedelic.

Despite their singularity, all 3 tracks create a cohesive EP. Together they represent my understanding of the music I have been listening to ever since I was a kid. I successfully merged these traditional styles, rhythms and sonorities with electronic music utilizing the technological tools I feel most comfortable working with; my computer, and all the technology available nowadays.

Complements

In developing a live performance, I realized that the music alone would not be enough to create a compelling audience experience. I decided to utilize the skills I acquired during the MTI program, namely adding a visual component: projection mapping and an Arduino-based LED mask.

For the projection-mapped visuals, I first designed structure using Sketch Up. Then, over a 2D version of my design, I animated the visuals using After Effects. Finally, I used Resolume Arena to map the cardboard structure and project onto it.¹

For the LED mask I used an Arduino Uno and the Max for Live device Maxuino (MAX object). These tools allowed me to program a LED show utilizing the midi sequencer in Ableton. For the mask, besides the LEDs, cables and the Arduino, I utilized paper and glue to shape it and paint to make it more aesthetically pleasing. The aesthetic of the mask is related to the mapped structure and the visuals, as well as the mini LED show that synchs with the music.²

To perform the music I utilize Ableton Live, a Novation LaunchPad and a Korg NanoKontrol. Additionally, I use a Native Instruments Maschine as a sampler. It runs through Ableton in synch with Resolume Arena via MIDI so I can launch audio and video clips simultaneously.

¹ Skills acquired in the Music Video Class and in the projection-mapping course

² Skills acquired in the Makers Lab.

Innovation in Music with Technology

The main innovation in my work was the development of a unique, genre-merging style. I used Ecuadorian music as the basis and inspiration for a new style that feels contemporary yet authentic. Using technology, I successfully merged the traditional and popular rhythms and sounds with different styles of electronic music to represent Ecuadorian music in a new, exciting format

The way I approach the creation of music has changed – improved – during the last year as I was introduced to new tools and techniques. I also came to understand that it is necessary to be able to work in other fields such as photography, video, animation, visuals, and programming. It is necessary to always be ready to learn; to learn quickly and troubleshoot any new technology that will make my vision a reality.

From this whole learning process I have acquired a new skillset that has transformed me from a music producer into a multimedia artist.

Challenges

The main challenge I faced from the beginning was to find the way I could merge the popular and traditional Ecuadorian rhythms and sounds with styles like hip-hop, glitch and bass music. It was difficult to fuse these disparate elements together into music that flows naturally and can be commercially exploited.

Before I arrived at the solution, I made a couple of tracks that explored the rhythms and sounds I was going for. Through this process I found a way to make music that felt authentic and had potential to evolve.

What I didn't expect to be a challenge was figuring out a workflow for the live performance, a set up I could feel comfortable with. It was a challenge learning to run the visuals, the LED mask and the music together as one complete audio-visual experience.

Also, when working with technology inconveniences are inevitable, so troubleshooting was necessary. I had to find alternative solutions and maintain my creativity.

Future

It was long ago that I first got the idea of reformatting Ecuadorian music; fusing it with electronic music. I didn't know how but that idea was stuck in my head. I have finally accomplished my goal, and yet through the process I've discovered that other Latin American artists have been reformatting traditional music for years.

It started in Argentina with the “Cumbia Digital.” Nowadays there is a vital, emergent scene of “Electronica Latinamericana,” which fuses traditional sounds and rhythms from Latin America with a variety of electronic music styles.

My plan is to release the EP digitally under my own independent label called “Cruzloma.” I will make it available for free download on Soundcloud, and charge for it on Bandcamp. I will promote it, as well as my **Fantoche** brand, through the main social media networks: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Before releasing the EP, I will establish the Fantoche brand through the aforementioned networks and do a quick promotional campaign using high quality videos. The videos will feature segments of the EP and visuals that reinforce the aesthetics of the album art and the live performance. This is my strategy for growing my fan base.

While I am currently self-managed, I will seek a label soon. My first choices are 2 labels: ZZK records (Argentina/USA) and N.A.A.F.I. (Mexico). I identify stylistically with these labels, not to mention they have a legitimate presence in the industry. I will prepare a professional-looking press kit to send to them once all of the content is finished.

In addition, I am organizing an EP release party in Quito, which will be the first of many (Fantoche parties), and the beginning of a new scene in Quito. If I work hard at producing good music and captivating, innovative performances, I will have the opportunity to continue traveling and growing.

My most immediate goal is to release a couple tracks and/or remixes through ZZK, N.A.A.F.I., or any other label that shows interest in my work. In May 2016 I will release my EP and book some shows around Latin America.

I feel enthusiastic about achieving these goals, though I am conscious of all the hard work and learning involved.

Conclusions

I have learned a lot through this process and I feel I am now ready for a career as an artist – it has taken time but I am ready. I have acquired a skillset and a mindset that promise continual growth and innovation in every aspect of my career.

It was also very important for me to find a way express myself honestly and authentically through music. Acknowledging and exploring my roots has been my mission and my path to success.

I also realized the importance of dialogue and collaboration with other artists and technicians from other fields. I realized how much we can learn from each other; how dialogue and collaboration can help me to develop a broader understanding of my craft and a broader range of creative skills.