



Berklee
College of Music

Modern Portfolio for the Contemporary Guitarist

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Master of Music in
Contemporary Performance

Supervisor: Casey Driessen

By
Aaron Sutton

Berklee College of Music, Valencia Campus
Valencia, Spain
July 2016

Table of Contents

- I. Introduction Pg. 1-2
- II. Portfolio development Pg. 2-4
 - a. Benefits of Building a Modern Portfolio*
 - b. Identifying Career Goals*
 - c. Choosing Relevant Content*
- III. Creating Content Pg. 4-9
 - a. Audio Recording Techniques*
 - b. Video Production Techniques*
 - c. Digital Image Editing Techniques*
- IV. Portfolio construction Pg. 9-12
 - a. Professional vs. Personal Identities*
 - b. Social Media Presence*
 - c. Website Development*
- V. Conclusion Pg. 12-13
- VI. Bibliography Pg. 14

I. Introduction

For as long as I have been playing guitar, the number one question I get asked the most is, "Is there anyway I can hear your playing?" My reply was always, "Not yet, but I'm working on it," even though it was never truly my top priority while being busy focusing on other things like school or making sure I worked enough to pay rent. However, I always knew it was something I was desperately in need of in order to further my career, though I was not sure exactly where to start. I spent many nights watching videos of other guitarists online, always telling myself that I needed be putting out something of my own for people to see. Unfortunately I had zero video production skills and limited experience in producing quality recordings of my own playing and lacked the time and resources to do so.

Upon arriving at Berklee Valencia and seeing the facilities that were now available to me, I realized that by working to develop content for my portfolio I would not only end up with new content, but would also emerge a more well rounded guitarist with wider array of skills. I would need to devote time to getting acquainted with the world of video production and digital image editing software. Likewise it was crucial I become as comfortable with engineering my own recordings as much I was at playing the guitar itself.

Finally I would need to devise a plan to tie everything together into a streamlined package that would be easily accessible to the broadest

amount of viewers. Throughout the course of the year, I would proceed to put my plan into motion and begin developing a portfolio that would not only be a useful tool for my post graduation career, but also help mold me into the player I knew I would need to become in order to succeed in reaching my goals.

II. Portfolio Development

a. Benefits of Building a Modern Portfolio

I always knew that creating content and developing a marketable image for myself was something that would need to happen, but did not realize how crucial it would be to beginning my career as a working guitarist after graduation. The music industry as a whole has changed a significant amount over the past decades, resulting in an unfortunate decline in session work and job opportunities in the United States. In Los Angeles, session player wages have dropped over 68% over the last 15 years and in 2013 the total income of players was at an all time low (Zerolnick 2014). Similarly, the Nashville Songwriters Association has stated that the number of working players and songwriters has dropped 80% since the year 2000 (Rau 2015). Due to this drop in the workforce as whole, it is becoming more and more competitive to find work as a musician in the modern day. However, I saw that most modern guitarists were gaining notoriety and obtaining gigging opportunities based off of their online presence. With sleek social media accounts and videos

showcasing their skills, many were being offered endorsements and even being hired to perform with big name artists.

b. Identifying Career Goals

I decided to carefully think about the different career opportunities and revenue streams that I would seek out after graduation. My primary goal is to become a regular in the local studio scene back in Dallas, while simultaneously developing a home studio and being contracted to do guitar work for other studios or production companies around the world. Secondly I plan to market myself as a capable live performer with a compatible personality for touring opportunities. In order to maximize the diversity of my revenue streams, I would seek to become a product specialist for different musical gear companies by making video product demos and performing at live clinics.

c. Choosing Relevant Content

Based on the variety of my career goals, the content I create would need to be deeper than simply showing how well I can play, but also convey multiple things on a subconscious level while standing out amongst other guitarists. I decided that by engineering and playing in multiple recordings and coupling them with videos I would film and produce would be the best way to achieve my goal. In order to stand out amongst other videos and showcase my video production skills I decided that using a technique where I would “clone” myself on screen allowing me to play multiple guitar parts simultaneously and inject a taste of my own sense of humor into each video. The end result would be both an

audio and visual product showcasing my varying skills as a musician and my level of professionalism.

In order to complete the package I planned to create a personal website as well as professional accounts on multiple popular social media platforms that would allow me to share my content with the widest audience possible. By having both audio and visual content available on multiple platforms, distributed through professionally designed social media platforms, would be the best way to maximize the effectiveness of my portfolio.

III. Content Creation

a. Audio Recording Techniques

The first step in creating my content was to engineer the audio recording that would be used in each video. I was already aware of a good amount that went into the recording process but I had rarely had the opportunity get hands on experience in doing it myself. I decided to choose Pro Tools as my DAW of choice, as it is an industry standard and is used by many studios around the world. I had only ever previously made primitive recordings and really started focusing on how to maximize my efficiency in the studio.

The most basic thing I learned was the benefit of being organized with my file management. Making sure that everything was labeled correctly and divided into specific categories such as date and file type really allowed me to start with a clean slate for each project and be able to

easily flow through each step of the recording process or revert to previous steps when changes needed to be made. In addition to being organized making, copies of all my files located on multiple drives to provide backups in case of emergencies.

I decided to primarily use my Fractal Audio Axe-FX modeling unit to record my guitar parts, as I wanted to ensure I could create quality D.I. guitars sounds so I would be prepared to create quality recordings even when faced with limited access to high-end guitar amplifiers and microphones. When it came to the tracking of my guitar parts, I was able to take advantage of the pre and post roll functions to make recording without requiring outside help a breeze. Rather than hitting record once and trying to catch a full song in one take, I became comfortable punching myself in and out of sections in order to make sure they were all as clean as possible. With this technique I became very aware of very intricate aspects of my playing such as timing and volume to ensure that each part would blend seamlessly together resulting in the best takes with little to no editing required. As many session guitarists today work by sending overdub parts via the Internet, this was one of the crucial skills I sought to develop in order to successfully run my own guitar studio.

After tracking my guitar parts I would also record the bass guitar parts when present in certain songs using the same techniques. I frequently used a program called "Superior Drummer" to program the drums for my songs and used another program called "Midi Guitar" by a company called "Jam Origin", to use my guitar as a digital controller to

program different synth and auxiliary parts by arranging and playing them on my guitar.

The most foreign aspect of the recording process to me was the mixing stage. Once I had all of my parts recorded, mixing them into a cohesive product was the biggest challenge. After consulting with my production professor, I was instructed to begin with focusing on what I believe the most important aspects of the recordings are then mix the other parts around them. Naturally I wanted to focus on the guitars and would often begin by tweaking their EQ by targeting the harsh frequencies around the 4k area and bringing them down to smooth out the overall sound of the guitars and adjusting the low end frequencies to leave room for other parts. Having always been big on using effects on my guitar sounds, I began to see how they work in a mix setting. Rather than applying effects like reverb or delay to the guitars themselves, I learned how to create separate tracks for effects and routing the guitars to those new tracks and dialing in the amount of effect I wanted until it sat well amongst the other instruments. From there I would work around the guitars focusing closely how each of the other elements of the song reacted together and adjusted them as needed. Once each song was completed, the result would be a product that would show my skills not only as a trained guitarist who is comfortable playing in the studio environment, but also a capable engineer who is adept in all aspects of the recording process from tracking to editing and mixing.

b. Video Production Techniques

The next step once the audio recordings were completed was to begin creating the video content to pair with the audio. Having never been familiar with cameras or photography before this was my biggest challenge, but was very rewarding in the end. First off I chose to use the cameras available through the school being Canon EOS 700D models. After participating in the music video production class I was able to learn the basics of camera settings. I would film everything in high definition, which was done by setting the cameras to record at a frame-rate of 30 frames per second and a resolution of 1920x1080, the standard for high definition video. By deciding to incorporate the cloning element to my videos I had to go about doing the actual filming in a slightly different manor than traditional videos. My first challenge was to select the locations for my videos while taking into account what was in the background and the lighting situations. In order to achieve the clone effect I would need to perform my songs multiple times in the same setting and then edit them over each other to give the effect of two of me. This is where the background and lighting is the key to the success of the video as if there are any irregularities such as moving objects or shadows; they would be easily visible and ruin a good take. The camera was placed on a sturdy tripod and would remain in the same spot throughout filming of scenes where there would be two of me. In order to easily sync up the video with the audio, I prepared special edited versions of my songs with a metronome click track and adding a few measures to count off each track. The edited versions were then added to my iPod, which I would link

to a Bluetooth speaker to play the songs I would perform along to. The camera would pick up the audio in the room with the edited audio tracks making it easy to visually line up the originally audio to the filmed performances. Once the best performances for each part were recorded, I performed each part a second time but with the camera having been refocused to capture close up recordings of my hands and the guitar to be edited into the film.

The videos were edited using Adobe Premiere Pro video editing software. Each clip was imported into a new project and then split into two parts for each of the clone versions. They are then stacked together and then one of them is cropped from the opposing side to reveal the other part playing along. From there I would add in the close up clips for intricate parts to highlight my playing in specific spots. The final step was to add a closing title page advertising my social media accounts. The videos are then exported in the same high definition specifications as they are recorded. For a master copy I export one in a photo-jpeg codec to store and another in the H.264 codec, which is easily uploadable to the Internet.

c. Digital Image Editing Techniques

Once the audio and visual content had been created I had to shift my focus on how to develop the visual content for my website and social media accounts. Having also never been previously familiar with Adobe Photoshop it was also a great learning experience. I knew I wanted to feature sharp looking pictures of myself to add to each platform so for the sake of time I opted to have some photo's professionally taken at a local

department store with a white background. They came out very well but I chose to have them unedited by the store and took them home to edit myself. My first step was to digitally remove the background of each picture leaving only my portrait intact. By using the lasso tool in Photoshop I carefully traced around myself and removed the background of each picture. Each picture was then stored as .Png file, which I learned is a very Internet friendly file type while also leaving the photo itself free of a background making it easily layered over other content. I replaced the white background with a soft grey by searching for a grey background on Google and then layered the two images together, which came together very nicely. Working with Photoshop really allowed me to explore the different image types and standard settings for different online platforms. One of the biggest skills I acquired was the ability to resize my own images. Be it by pixel size or physical measurements, it made tailoring each photo to the desired size for each account very easy. Now not only do I have quality pictures for my different media platforms but also easily adaptable images for promotional material.

IV. Portfolio Construction

a. Professional vs. Personal Identities

After I had the final versions of my videos, recordings, and images completed, it was time for me to establish how to go about putting the pieces together. I wanted to blend the lines between individual and entity to give all my platforms an approachable feel while still seeming

professional. I had spoken with a mentor of mine back home who stressed the importance of maintaining a personal Facebook account on top of my other media accounts as I still needed to maintain that direct link between me and possible clients who would be more interested in communicating with me on a personal level rather than going through a business oriented account.

b. Social Media Presence

When choosing the social media accounts from which to build my portfolio with I sought out the ones that were the most musician friendly and were relevant to the mainstream. I needed platforms to easily broadcast my content while being just as easily discovered by new viewers. I chose to go with the following platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Sound cloud, LinkedIn, and, most notably, YouTube. Approximately 80% of online viewers turn to YouTube as their primary source of music and music videos, making it the primary source to release my online content (IFPI 2016). Additionally, each of these platforms performs well together and content is easily shared between each one thus maximizing my sharing capabilities. I created new accounts on each platform with a new email I had registered for professional business use. I selected one of the images from my edited photo shoot and used it as the basis for all of the banners for my social media accounts along with my name and tagline. Each account is now visually coordinated to match one another to be easily recognizable as my own. Each account is also equipped with the links to the others to inform new viewers of my other platforms my content is available on. The most difficult aspect of creating each social

media account was actually creating the different main header images. Each platform has different image size requirements and often automatically makes its own adjustments when uploaded. Luckily I had taken the time to get acquainted to Photoshop and problem became a non-issue. I merely had to search for templates for each account and adjusted my images as needed. Now they are all individually formatted to be best viewed on desktops and mobile devices.

c. Website Development

The final step to finalizing my portfolio was to build my own website. My first step was securing a domain name, which I bought from Google. I had never designed a website before and have no skills when it comes to coding. I then decided that in order to build and maintain a website myself I would need to use a third party website building platform. After investigating the differences between the most popular ones, being Wix, Square Space, and Weebly, I opted for Wix as it was very intuitive to use and cost effective. I drew inspiration for my own website by viewing the websites of some of my favorite guitarists and other popular artists in the industry. I viewed the websites of some of my favorite guitarists such as Andy Timmons, Steve Lukather, Time Pierce, Justin Derrico, and Pete Thorn to get a sense of what direction I should go in. From what I found, most of them actually had relatively messy websites or were formatted in ways I felt were outdated, though they all had a plethora of background work and supporting materials to make up for their lack of web design. From there I determined that creating a minimalist website with the basic necessities was the best way to go as I

did not have nearly as much content or past credits as others did. My final layout would contain a home page with my name, a bio page feature a short history of myself as a musician, which was also similarly difficult to write due my lack of previous works, but I feel I touched on the important topics and succeeded in making it effective for new viewers to get a sense of who I am. Next would be a page for my videos, both ones that I created and any future videos I might feel pertinent to include. Then a picture gallery was also typical in all other websites I inspected, ending with a final contact page with links to my other social media accounts and my working email address. I chose to keep the style of the website as a whole very sleek and modern. It's sleek and minimal, yet effective and organized. It is also optimized to be viewable on both desktop computers and mobile devices. It was overall rather easy to build thanks to the Wix platform and will be easily updatable for the addition of future content.

V. Conclusion

Now that everything is finished I look back on all of the different skills I have been able to develop in such a short amount of time. By deciding to develop an entire portfolio on my own it forced me to be conscious of all aspects of my career and the fill the voids where I was lacking. Not only do I now have the professional means to convey myself as both a working musician, but also have a product that will consistently grow along with my career. I can easily create new content and have the means to continue to release it as to better further myself as a musician. I

am now far better equipped to maintain the different aspects of my career beyond just being able to play my instrument. Musicians of today are constantly being forced to adapt to new technology and find ways to stay relevant in an ever-expanding world. Now I can finally begin to shift my focus from needing to begin building my portfolio to continuing creating content with which to help it grow. I feel I have set myself up with indispensable tools that I can use to procure working opportunities in the future while allowing to me to function independently as my own artist.

Bibliography

"Consumer Research." Music Fans Have More Choice of Licensed Digital Music Services. Accessed June 27, 2016.
<http://www.ifpi.org/consumer-research.php>.

Rau, Nate. "Nashville's Musical Middle Class Collapses." The Tennessean. January 28, 2015. Accessed June 27, 2016.
<http://www.tennessean.com/story/entertainment/music/2015/01/04/nashville-musical-middle-class-collapses-new-dylans/21236245/>.

Zerolnick, Jon. "Keeping the Score The Impact of Recapturing North American Film and Television Sound Recording Work." Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy. 2014. Accessed June 27, 2016. http://www.laane.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Keeping_the_Score-Full_Report.pdf.