

Berklee College of Music

LIFE, LOVE, & LIBERTY

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of
Master of Contemporary Performance (Production Concentration)

Supervisor: Olga Román

By Jawren Walton

Valencia Campus, Spain

July 2020

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Proposed Culminating Experience.....	4
Objectives.....	5
Sub-objectives.....	5
Methodology.....	6
Plan of Action.....	7
Justification.....	8
Execution.....	9
Conclusions.....	14
Next Steps.....	14
Bibliography.....	15

Abstract

The goal of this project is to create an EP or album of honest, thought-provoking, and soulful songs that challenge the negative stereotypes perceived of people coming from the city I was raised in, Jacksonville, Fl. Also to use this recording project to advance my career as a musician, songwriter, producer, and artist. To achieve this I have composed three songs with lyrics and storytelling to reflect the basic emotions that I believe all humans, no matter the nationality, possess. This will include topics on love, anger, happiness, fear, sadness, joy, and self worth. The sonic landscape of this project will be centered in Soul/R&B with strong influences of jazz, hip-hop, and gospel. After creating the recording I want to connect with other people by sharing this project through live performance and videos. The ability to be able to think, feel, speak, and express yourself freely is the ultimate human common denominator we all seek in life. This led me to the theme of my culminating experience. *Life, Love, and Liberty*. All of these elements are concepts that the artists that have influenced me spent their careers exploring and expanding on.

Keywords: Creative Project, Saxophone, Hip-Hop, Jazz, R&B, Soul.

Acknowledgements

This artistic journey would not be possible without the wisdom, knowledge and understanding that was given to me from my grandparents, manifested through my parents, and delivered to me. My mother and father were always brave enough to go against the mold and encourage me and provide an environment of creativity. They always gave me the freedom to explore whatever path that provided me with ultimate happiness. I wouldn't be anywhere close to who I am today without them supporting me in every aspect of my life. Also this project is dedicated to my first child. My baby girl Jaia. She was born while I am in Spain completing this masters program. I wake up every day with her now and it's a pleasure to see her growing and developing every day. A lot of artists consider their music their baby because of the whole process that you go through to produce a song. Now I am going through those same emotions in a literal and physical way. All these things are shaping my life day by day and allowing me to be the best version of myself. I personally feel blessed to have the opportunity to speak through my art.

Introduction

My passion for music began long before I picked up an instrument. My parents often tell me stories of me making up melodies as a child and creating my own songs. Also growing in a Southern Baptist Church environment I was exposed to gospel music at an early age. The sound of wailing drums, bass, piano, rhythm guitar, screaming organ, accompanied by harmonious vocals from the choir, is my foundation for my concepts of music.

Artists like Fred Hammond, Donnie McClurkin, Kirk Franklin, and Kiki Sheard are still a heavy influence on my sound. Although gospel music was the landscape for my informal music training, my parents still played music around our home that they listened to as youth. My mom was a big fan of Stevie Wonder and my dad was a huge fan of Parliament Funkadelic so I had an interesting mix of intriguing sounds. I also heard a lot of reggae and island music since my father is from Jamaica and also from living in Florida.

I went to an arts middle school and high school through a county wide “magnet” programs which allowed kids from different zip codes to access better education. Through this program I was able to have access to arts and music education, and started playing the saxophone starting at age 11. I Think I could have gotten good at playing whatever instrument I wanted but for some reason I wanted to spend the most time working on the saxophone. In the academic setting I was able to receive superior ratings at festivals which fueled my passion even more. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend Douglas Anderson School of the Arts Jazz Band in Jacksonville, Fl for my high school years. This arts environment allowed me to be surrounded by like-minded young musicians. During this time I was able to travel to New York and really feel the heart of jazz. By this time there was no doubt in my mind that I would be spending the rest of my life with music.

I completely fell in love with jazz music and, even on a broader spectrum, all music from African American culture and the African Diaspora. After focusing on jazz techniques through the tenor sax, I got accepted to University of North Florida to study Jazz Studies under the tutelage of Bunky Green. From there I continued to network and gig around Jacksonville as well as Central and South Florida. I found that there would be more opportunities to play if I was open to gigs in more genres like funk, R&B, and even pop. This was great for me because this was still the music that I grew up listening to. During my time in college a friend and bass player, Jeremiah Hunt, gave me the opportunity to play funk sax in a group he was the musical director for overseas in Macau, China. Even though I hadn't completed my studies, I decided to go because I felt I would learn more from real world experience. In China I really got to learn the art of performing and being attentive to the vibe of the audience. This opportunity was a contract with a hotel to provide entertainment for 3 months. They liked the group so much that it became 9 months! After returning home to Florida I really started to think if there was a way to not make that just a one time thing. I did take the time to finish my bachelors and still continued to play in church, weddings, jazz gigs, any gigs really.

But there was still something missing. The feeling and appreciation that I had felt from playing overseas, was missing. After graduation I put together a group of musicians that I had been constantly playing with and we made a video of pop covers and sent it to all the overseas hotel groups I had heard of to date. Surprisingly enough I got a call to bring the group to Abu Dhabi for 6 months. This was the first big production for me as band leader. After figuring out this formula, I have been going back and forth between my hometown and the Middle East and China doing these types of cover gigs.

Although I always have an amazing time traveling and living the musician life, I still always felt like I haven't been able to focus on what I want to say musically. Being able to be hired and have other musicians trust your leadership as a saxophonist, vocalist, and band leader, is amazing, I still want to take the time to know what my message is and deliver that through music. That's why the opportunity to come to Berklee Valencia was perfect for me. I would finally have the time to focus on my own music. The last overseas cover band contract I accepted was May-July 2019 in Bahrain. Throughout my travels I have learned how much people appreciate this music and are looking to learn more about it which is the fuel behind my purpose. Now it is time for me to focus on my individual artistry.

Proposed Culminating Experience

I have recorded a collection of songs that showcase all the musical skills I have acquired over the years as a musician, singer songwriter and performer. They will also be accompanied by live session versions of the songs and visual representation with a single release music video as a future plan of action. I want to use my recording project to strengthen my artistic identity in a way that will advance my career as a musician, songwriter, producer, and artist. The idea of the album or EP is dedicated to my daughter who was born on February 6th, 2020, while I was in Valencia. I've been so inspired yet scared and feeling every emotion in between. I was changing every day as my baby girl was growing and changing, as my thoughts and goals were also changing daily. All of these things I wanted to capture through songs.

A topic that is important to me is debunking all the stereotypes and myths that are associated with being a black man, like poor education and not taking care of your children. I want to compose songs that challenge these topics and give new meaning to the genres in which most African American music is delivered. Typically pop, hip hop and R&B tend to lack lyrical and musical depth. This is why I want to make sure I bring messages of positivity through song. Also I want to make sure that I am making music that is thought provoking, challenging, yet enjoyable at the same time. The concept came about as Victor Wooten and Steve Bailey came to Berklee Valencia as guest artists. I do have several tattoos and one that they noticed were the ones on my fingers that say *bold soul*. This has been the motto for my life for a few years now. To live boldly in your truth and to always let that shine through your soul. For me music is the best way to achieve this. My approach to achieve this musically is as such:

Objective

My objective is to solidify myself as an independent performer, multi-instrumentalist, and singer/songwriter in the field of urban African American music which includes the elements of jazz, funk, hip-hop, reggae, and R&B. As a songwriter I want to speak through these genres of music and share messages of love and, ultimately, use my voice and my platform to educate and inform those who may be unfamiliar with some of the struggles African American men in particular face on a daily basis in America. In doing so I want to share these messages through the genres of jazz, funk, hip-hop, reggae, and R&B because to date, these genres are commonplace in the communities in that I have lived. All of which can be related to music that is danceable therefore making it a bit easier for the listener to enjoy while their soul is being fed at the same time.

Sub-objectives

- Analyze the genres of music that have the most influence on my playing style which include gospel, jazz, funk, hip hop, and soul music. Write, record, and produce songs that reflect these genres with a message of positivity
- Use my skills in Jazz techniques to play thoughtful, melodic solos
- Use approachable time meters of African rhythms to display the influence of African music around the world

Methodology

My methodology for this project is self ethnography and creative research. One of the things that I do to get inspired is just sit and observe. Stillness allows me to have my thoughts be clear and easier to understand. Through this process I was able to ask myself a few questions. What do all of my musical influences have in common? What has years of experience performing with different groups of various genres taught me about people? What has touring taught me about the perspectives of different audiences? These questions to me all have similar answers. I think all of the answers to these questions touch some of the core values that I think all humans pursue. I think we all have the basic desire to pursue our best life. That means many different things to different people. As humans we shape our entire life's whatever our personal definition of success is. This is something that is very unique to me because that success has so many different definitions but we all have the same drive to find out what this means.

Another common human factor is I believe we all have an innate desire to find love. And this could be in varying forms. The most beautiful and classic songs are about life in some form. Usually that for another person. Also as musicians we all have a love for music that is very difficult to put into words but we find ways to express it through our instruments. Also in our quest to find out the meaning of life and love, I believe the most essential element in this pursuit is to be free. Our individual liberty is the backbone in my opinion of what drives the other too. Finding love and your meaning of life often create a sense of pure liberation. The ability to be able to think, feel, speak, and express yourself freely is the ultimate human common denominator we all seek in life. This led me to the theme of my culminating experience. *Life, Love, and Liberty*. All of these elements are concepts that the artists that have influenced me spent their careers exploring and expanding on.

Plan of Action

- Compose songs in the styles of R&B, jazz influence, hip hop, funk, and soul
- Arrange songs in a way that make them easily digestible to the average listener
- Record the compositions with my voice being the main instrument and the sax supporting the melodic counterpoint
- Mix the records using modern technology to emulate the sound in which these genres were most prominent.
- Have a series of live performances with other Berklee students around Valencia to show the experience of connecting with people through live interaction in music.

Justification

This body of work is a pure artistic expression from my soul to the listener. It will be up to the listener or the audience to interpret the impact of the music according to their experience. I am doing this project to pay homage and preserve the essence of what I consider African American music. Modern music contains elements of jazz, funk, R&B, and gospel which is where I personally found avenues to express myself musically. As time has progressed and music evolved naturally, I find it that some of these essential elements have been lost over time as we continue to transition to digital consumption of music. The research that I do on these genres will challenge the scholastic side of things. Sharing and exploring the nuances of music from one culture to another leads to optimal growth musically in the academic world. This will make me more eligible for teaching positions in the near future. I have already taught within music on the Secondary level. This will only make me a more versatile artist. Also being a saxophonist primarily, challenging myself to sing and hone my skills as a songwriter sax already drastically expanded my options.

Execution

My influences and inspiration:

My early musical influences are a huge part of the inspiration for this project. My mother obsessively listened to the music of Stevie Wonder and does to this day. This was to the point that I knew all the lyrics and music to Stevie Wonder's classic albums before I had a total grasp on the English language. My father introduced me to funk through James Brown and Parliament Funkadelic. I can recall as a child just being fascinated by the rhythms and groove of these bands! Almost as if movement is an involuntary action when you hear the beat. He also introduced me to Bob Marley and made sure that I understood that his music was entirely about the message which was one love, one people. Simultaneously I was getting my first form of informal training playing in a traditional baptist church. This is where I learned hymns and songs of devotion to God. Also this is where I heard and saw musicians collaborating and playing together for the first time. As different as these artists and genres of music are, they all have one thing in common: they all made people dance and gave messages of hope, love, light, and even rebellion. All of which were directly relatable throughout various events in American history such as oppression, depression, and economic inequality.

The Songs

Song 1: *I Know Who I am*

One part of this project is an original song that I wrote and produced while in Valencia. The existence of this song was to initially challenge myself as a songwriter and get myself into the field of expressing some of the topics that are important to me. Being an instrumentalist you have the chance to express yourself through music but being a singer you have the extra power of the voice and the message of the lyrics. As instrumentalists we support the singer or the lyrics

which, in my opinion, will always be the most powerful element of any song. I took this as a challenge to really tell a story with a message that has some sort of personal meaning to me individually but still be relatable to people on a general level. The title of the song is called *I Know Who I am*. This statement alone to me gives a sense of power and purpose. When you know who you are you have a new sense of awareness of your place in the world which to me is the ultimate freedom.

I Know Who I Am

Lyrics and music by Jawren Walton

Verse 1

*From now on I live
Like I know who I am
I'm a vessel of God
Not a victim of man
You can call me whatever
But it won't mean a thing
'Cuz I know my name
I'm the child of a king*

*That's why can't nobody tell me that I'm not blessed
Even when my life feels like it's a mess
There's no real reason, For me to stress
'Cus it was already written a long time ago
That's why I know I am blessed*

These lyrics also came to me very naturally after doing a bit of personal reflection. I was thinking about a time just before arriving in Valencia and how troubling the process was for me to get my visa. It ended up being very frustrating because the government authorities really did not cooperate with me very well. Something my father taught me is to internalize things and to not react to a situation but be responsive. So instead of responding with anger, I

chose to write a journal to release my thoughts sort of a therapy. After writing the journal I thought that I would be able to possibly have a teachable moment for many others if I figured out a way to share my experience through a song.

The process of recording this song went relatively smooth. I already had a hip hop influence groove in mind and just needed the help of some of my friends and Berklee's best musicians to help me deliver. I worked with Sean Oliver (from Maryland, USA) on bass, Song Ah Chae (from South Korea) on piano, and Jorge Salas (from Costa Rica) on drums.

I collaborated with producer Yuhao Gao from China and engineer Vittorio Arno from Italy, two MPTI students in Valencia. We all come from different cultures with very different musical backgrounds but our common language is music. For this particular song *I Know Who I Am* I just wanted the song to be felt rather than explained from an academic viewpoint. The entire group of musicians and the engineering team knew and were fans of Robert Glasper. So this alone was a point of reference that we could connect with. We all listened to Robert Glasper's album *Black Radio*¹ and a few tracks where Robert Glasper is a collaborator providing the sonic landscape for the song. Those song were *Sing About Me* by Kendrick Lamar², *Black Kennedy*³ and *Practice*⁴ by August Greene. All of these songs feature Robert Glasper on piano

¹ Robert Glasper, Spotify, *Black Radio*, Blue Note Records, 2012.

² Kendrick Lamar, "Kendrick Lamar - Sing About Me, I'm Dying Of Thirst," posted by Kendrick Music, February 11, 2014, YouTube Video, 12:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3CnfQENkw>.

³ August Greene, "Black Kennedy," Posted by August Greene, May 10, 2018, YouTube Video, 4:13, <https://youtu.be/gnupgKrWNxI>.

⁴ August Greene, "Practice," Posted by August Greene, May 10, 2018, YouTube Video, 3:10, https://youtu.be/gu_ZF7Hrzcw.

accompanied by drums and bass. Depending on the group, the band features a rapper, singer or instrumentalist. This was the instrumentation and sound I was going for.

Also, to best reflect the lyrics that came to me, I wanted a minor key with open voicings. The basic harmonic progression is just a bVI I- progression in E Minor (C and E-). The groove is an urban hip-hop groove. I did not want to use a lead sheet because for me it would be more organic if we were not locked to a page and each musician had the freedom to contribute their own parts by simply playing their ideas. With myself on vocals and saxophone I booked a session in a practice room to explain the idea. I loved the process because I had been playing with this group since the start of Fall semester so we had developed a lot of non verbal communication. After the rehearsal I booked studio time and we recorded the idea in just an hour!

Song 2: *All Aboard*

This song was written in September. I used to live next to a train and I grew up with the feeling of going somewhere and the idea “*the grass is greener on the other side of the fence*”.

The lyrics talk about missing the train if you are not ready to get on it and about not wasting your time when people are not moving at the same pace as you.

First I came up with a bass line that resembled a *moving train*, major sounding, medium up tempo bounce to it. I wrote a lead sheet with the bass line and chords, brought to rehearsal with the same band I have worked during my time in Valencia, we rehearsed for about an hour and we were ready to go! This song was performed in Forum but we were not able to record it due to the Corona quarantine crisis. I submit the video of the Forum performance and a lead sheet.

Song 3: *Whenever You Are Ready*

I wrote this song while touring. The inspiration came out of an old relationship and all the conflicts related to being on the road and the other person not understanding my life. The message is *I am here and ready whenever you are ready*. This song was composed prior to coming to Valencia and we recorded a new version of it with the same band of musicians. I changed the bass line and the horn line, and did slight changes on the lyrics. I am submitting lyrics and recording.

Conclusion/Reflections

With this project the main goal is to solidify my artistic identity and impulse my career as a solo artist. Although I already had somewhat of an idea of what I want to do and have made steps to do so, it takes some time to fine tune and figure out how to make that work for a steady career. My plan is to take the EP's and all other songs that I have written at Berklee and truly promote them. Which is a part of the business that I am not necessarily as comfortable with. But by the end of this experience I would like for any one listening to my music and anyone who will potentially hire me to have a clear idea of what I represent musically. With all the connections I have made musically so far, I would love the chance to tour with this music.

In addition to solidifying my artistic identity, one of my biggest takeaways from this experience is the confidence that I have gained through songwriting. As an instrumentalist who can sing as well, this project gave me the push I needed to step out of my comfort zone and not have the option to hide behind my instrument and literally use my voice.

Next Steps

My next step is to make sure I have all my songs mixed and mastered and "radio ready." Fine tuning all of the details of each song to my liking . Then I would want to create some sort of live video and audio representation. Preferably in a recording studio. Lastly I want to create a social media promotion campaign to get the music to those who would be willing to listen.

Bibliography

August Greene. "Black Kennedy." Posted by August Greene, May 10, 2018. YouTube Video, 4:13. <https://youtu.be/gnupgKrWNxI>.

August Greene. "Practice." Posted by August Greene, May 10, 2018. YouTube Video, 3:10. https://youtu.be/gu_ZF7Hrzcw.

Funkadelic. "One Nation Under A Groove - Funkadelic (1978)." Posted by 1mistaGROOVE, August 3, 2011. YouTube Video, 7:23. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WOZwwRH6XU>.

Lamar, Kendrick. "Kendrick Lamar - Sing About Me, I'm Dying Of Thirst." Posted by Kendrick Music, February 11, 2014. YouTube Video, 12:03. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3CnfFQENkw>.

Marley, Bob. "Bob Marley - Wait in Vain (with lyrics)." Posted by Mr. Fingerma, February 21, 2009. YouTube Video, 4:10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WQVb_nuKvs.

Wonder, Stevie. "Stevie Wonder - Sir Duke [HD]." Posted by ChEeZeBaLL999, Feb 8, 2015. YouTube Video, 3:52. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6fPN5aQVDI>.