

# **Around The World In Indie Days**

**(Culminating Experience)**

A reflective report on conceptualising & producing an indie music TV show



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## **Index**

Description .....	3
Process .....	4
Results .....	7
Next Steps .....	8
Contribution To The Profession/ Discipline .....	10
Impact On Professional Development .....	11
Appendix .....	12

## **Description**

My culminating experience is a music show for TV/ the Web called Around The World In Indie Days. The show aims to chronicle the lives of independent artistes around the globe, watch them go about their daily lives, and present a collaborative effort between them in the form of a song, which is subsequently released for download on the show's portal and social media. The central theme is to hand over a major portion of the content curation process to the audience, and let them have a say in the collaboration process and interview questions. Upon my return to India, the show will be pitched to MTV Indies, India's first 24-hour independent music and culture channel backed by Pepsi as an anchor sponsor. The idea would be to fly down 12 Indian indie artistes per season to an overseas town renowned for their indie music scene, and have them collaborate with 12 local artistes, featuring two artistes per episode.

As part of the first episode, the show – presently based in Valencia – will feature two independent musicians from the Berklee College of Music who are students of the music business masters programme there and have been active independent artistes throughout their lives. Kareem Clarke, aka DJ kTunes, 24, was born and brought up in Brooklyn, New York, and has a five year background in club DJ-ing besides playing multiple instruments including guitar, piano, drums and the flute. Carl Pires, born in the UK and raised in Australia, is a 23-year-old drummer who has played with four bands till date and is now part of the Berklee business program band, the A69s, with whom he's played extensively within the city and also toured to Barcelona.

While Clarke has a significant following on Facebook and Twitter with close to 600 followers, Pires doesn't yet have an artiste page as he hasn't begun releasing his solo material. The show, as of now, doesn't have any digital presence as any channel or content production agency that buys the rights to go on with it is entrusted with the responsibility of curating its content, and will also manage its social media in accordance with future artistes.

## **Process**

I conceptualised the show in September, 2013 as part of my culminating experience for the music business masters programme at Berklee Valencia. Back then, although the idea was the same, I'd approached two students from the Berklee film scoring masters programme – Niko Paterakis from Greece and Joao Soeiro from Portugal – to gauge their interest in participating as featured artistes on the pilot. Both Niko and Joao loved the idea and said yes almost immediately.

Over the next month I developed a first draft of the script and ran them by it. They had a lot of suggestions to offer, which I was more than glad to incorporate into the final version. As part of their culminating experience, they said, they would be travelling to London to record a piece with the London symphonic orchestra, and they wanted me to include footage from that in the episode. While I was initially concerned about the rights to this footage and how I'd go about acquiring it working on a shoestring budget, they assured me

that they owned all the rights to it and they'd help me acquire it without any extra costs.

And so we locked the script, and I proceeded to draft a shoot schedule, comprising rehearsals, studio sessions, jams, etc – starting December, 2013. Owing to our tight schedules the show would basically be shot over the next four to five months – depending entirely on the artistes' availability. The first month was dedicated entirely to jams and rehearsal sessions where Niko and Joao would meet in each others' houses and school to jam and compose an original song for the episode. The next two months would be spent in the studio recording the song, tweaking it, mixing and mastering, and adding final touches. And the last month was designated for the interview, random shots around the city, school, their houses, clubs, bars, pubs, live music venues, etc.

During the December break everything seemed to be on track. When we met in January, however, the new semester had just begun, and their schedules were more packed than last semester. We tried to schedule two sessions in January, but they fell through. Then I went to France for the MIDEM conference, and again no work happened for another week. When I came back and arranged a meeting with Joao and Niko, it was obvious that setting time apart for the show wasn't as easy as it'd seemed earlier, especially with lurking deadlines, project submissions and a fast-approaching midterm week. Even so we decided to plod through, and with some minor tweaks in the production sheet, scheduled a shoot that week.

The first shoot was a studio session with Joao where he was scoring background music for a Russian short film. The second one, too, featured Joao, this time recording percussion samples on the film scoring stage as part of a school project. The footage, undoubtedly, was very useful and I was very excited that work had finally begun. But when I went back home and reviewed the shots it dawned on me that the first session had happened almost four months after we first talked about it. Within the next couple of days I decided that it would be hard to make this happen, for no other reason than the fact that our schedules were very dissimilar, we hardly ever hung out together as often as we had in the early months of school, and deny it as we may, there just wasn't that personal connect. Even if we did go through, the show wouldn't be as interesting as I'd intended it to be.

And so I wrote Joao and Niko an email explaining the problem, and asked to meet them personally to discuss the issue. We met the next day, and they seemed to

know exactly what I was talking about. Graciously they backed out of the show and I found myself closer than ever to the deadline without any artistes to feature. My grand Gantt timeline with its super idealistic schedule stared me in the face as a bad joke I'd made at my expense.

It was March already. I'd taken the social media course, as part of which I was managing social media for the A69s and Kareem. Throughout the month I found myself hanging out with them more than I ever had... Kareem and I

even made a trip to Barcelona to see the band live. Somewhere down the line Kareem said that he'd be willing to feature on the episode if I wanted. But Kareem was a DJ, and my initial vision comprised live musicians. That's when he suggested bringing Carl on board. He said that he would mix tunes on the turntable while Carl played live drums. Besides, they were collaborating on a song for his EP anyway. At the time it seemed like a good idea, but I wanted to confirm with Carl before I made anything final.

The following week I spoke to Carl on my way back home from a ball meeting at the Westin Hotel. I told him about the show, and asked if he'd be willing to feature in the pilot opposite Kareem. Immediately he said yes, and invited me to the Chinese restaurant across from school to talk more about it. I explained the entire concept to him, he gave me some good suggestions, and by the end of the day I had two talented artistes – and good friends – willing to feature on the pilot. I came back home, deleted the Gantt chart, the old shoot schedules, scripts, footage, everything, and started over anew.

Surprisingly, the writing now seemed so much easier and had a natural flow to it. As I wrote on, I realised that I'd made the right choice by asking Kareem and Carl to do this. It might be a couple of months delayed, but the project would turn out according to my expectations.

## **Results**

Kareem, Carl and I began shooting mid-April. The first session was a rehearsal jam, which I used as a promo for my music video class that

semester. Within a week the school broke for Spring break, and again there was a bit of a lag. But in the first week of May we made up for all the time we'd lost, packing in a studio session, jam and rehearsal. Fortunately, the school had just acquired a bunch of professional Canon cameras, lenses, lights, lapel microphones, tripods, light stands and other shooting equipment, which I put to very good use.

I wasn't ever really worried about overshooting my budget as my student filmmaking experience had taught me that one camera is all you need to shoot absolutely anything. But for professional quality recordings that I wanted to show to people I would definitely need all the other equipment too. Over that week I checked out all that equipment no less than five times, filming at every opportunity I got. Carl and Kareem went to London over the summer break, and again we didn't shoot for about four weeks. But when they got back we immediately hit the studio and recorded a session. That weekend both Carl and Kareem were playing at the Loco Club, and that's when I got a huge portion of the footage I used on the final episode.

Finally, all that remained were the interviews. Just a couple of days before June 15<sup>th</sup> I got Carl and Kareem in the studios once more, and recorded their interviews within a couple of hours. Now all that I needed to do was put together all the footage, make a first edit and sync it with some nice music. Around June 20<sup>th</sup> I sat down to do the first edit, and had a rough cut ready by midnight. I did some basic sound editing, levelling, colour correction and transitions, and it looked pretty good. However, I still wasn't very happy as I



couldn't find a good ending to the pilot. I tried out a bunch of combinations but nothing seemed to work. Finally, I decided to ask for help from Jon Forsyth, my video production professor from last semester.

Jon, ever the helpful person, agreed immediately to watch the pilot and give me his suggestions. We booked out a studio, watched the whole episode, and he gave me some very valuable suggestions in terms of shot selection, edits, colour schemes, music and a bunch of other specifics. I went home that evening, incorporated all the changes, and to my surprise the end product actually looked a lot better than earlier. That edit took 12 more hours, and became the pilot episode of the show.

When I watch it now, I feel a certain sense of accomplishment knowing that I handled all the stages of production entirely by myself. It instils confidence in me to know that I could do this for a living, on my own, without any outside help. However, I have a strong background in television production – especially in the music industry – and I have developed a fine taste for good audiovisual content. I would go so far as to say that I'm quite pleased with the final output, but some aspects of the final product would've turned out a lot differently with help from experts in certain areas.

I am a creative producer, whose responsibility it is to ensure that the content is engaging and in tune with the channel's target audience. However, a producer rarely edits or handles camera or lights himself, all of which I had to do for this show. Maybe with an editor or a light man or sound engineer the

pilot would look a lot more refined. However, the idea of the pilot is to give a potential investor an idea of what it is that I have in mind with regards to this show, and in those terms, I think I've done a fairly good job.

## **Next Steps**

As I mentioned earlier, I'm going to continue working on the show either as an external consultant or creative producer employed with a channel. My goal is to keep discovering independent acts from India and around the globe, pair similar genres and styles, and create opportunities for budding talent to come together and create music that independent markets across the world will take notice of.

One of my dreams is to take the show to London or New York. A lot of the independent music that I listen to currently comes from these cities, and I've already envisioned collaborations between specific Indian and international musicians that I think would yield very good results. Moreover, through the show Indian talent gets recognition abroad and international talent here in India, and thus both markets open up to each other more than ever. With the Indian live music industry growing faster than ever I believe now would be a good time to introduce the show to the market and increase the inflow of foreign talent. At the same time it would bolster the domestic careers of Indian musicians to have international gigs to their credit.

And finally, I hope to make the ATWIID portal a hub for indie music connoisseurs to discuss their favourite acts, have conversations about the

scene, interact with artistes themselves, and discover new talent. Also, all original music created on the show will be up for download here, which opens up monetisation opportunities for featured musicians. ATWIID will pay all its featured musicians, and attempt to bring an end to the practice of inviting bands to perform for free in the futile hopes of getting some 'exposure' in their initial years.

### **Contribution To The Profession/ Discipline**

In terms of video content that features independent music and emerging musicians, a lot has been done prior to this show. Moreover, considering the fact that the show is sponsor-backed, the business model isn't a first of its kind either. However, what's unique about ATWIID is the fact that it brings Indian independent talent overseas and pits them right alongside the best indie talent in the world. From what I've noticed about the Indian indie market – living in Europe over the past one year – a lot of youngsters seem to be aware of the fact that India has a fast-emerging indie music scene. However, very few really listen to the music and even fewer actually follow Indian artistes. This show will leverage the social media reach of its featured artistes, and fans of one artiste will discover the work of the other artiste featured on the episode. Thus, someone watching the episode for, say, UK-based act Little People will discover the music of Indian artiste Your Chin if they collaborate on a song. Moreover, through innovative product placements and brand integrations more advertising opportunities will open up, which means more revenue for the show. For instance, just in the first episode Kareem is seen DJ-ing on a Numark turntable, wearing an Adidas t-

shirt and drinking Amstel beer, and Carl is seen using a pair of Vic Firth drum sticks.

With the world converging on the Internet and all music coming together on one platform, I think now is the right time to take this music abroad and present it to the world in the way that they would like to see it – from the perspective of the indie musicians they admire. Potentially, if the show's syndication to other territories throws up favourable results the show's rights could be acquired by another country who could then have a local version of the show, featuring their artistes alongside other international indie talent.

Additionally, very few documentary-style shows currently are shot with two crews. While this might increase production expenses, it significantly lowers the pressure on one crew, thus contributing to lesser stress and a better final product.

### **Impact On Professional Development**

Working on this show over the past few months has taught me many things. First and foremost, the importance of only bringing together artistes who are comfortable working with each other. Carl and Kareem were extremely at ease in each others' company, and this showed off in their professional and personal chemistry, which translated into good content on screen. With artistes who aren't in similar mental zones it is difficult to get a vibe going, which is very evident on screen. Also, both times that I planned the shoot I put off the interviews for last, which

in the end I realised I shouldn't have. Not that it affected the final episode in any way, but just doing the interviews first would've saved me a lot of time in deciding what other content to shoot with the artistes. A very commonly used editing style involves showing images or footage relevant to what is being spoken about in the background, and while I employed this style to good effect, having an interview script to go by while shooting other parts would've significantly helped.

Professional content creators rely on shoot schedules all the time, in order to save money and time. However, most of the times they make provision for unforeseen obstacles, and manage to get the desired end result without much damage. In my case, I was aware of all the potential difficulties I might face in achieving my end goal, but I wasn't as thoroughly prepared as I thought I was to easily overcome these difficulties. At the back of my mind I always knew that Joao and Niko might back out any time if the shoot schedules hinder their school work. While they didn't back out, the plan with them fell through anyway, and I didn't have a backup for almost a couple of weeks after that. It would've been prudent to have options figured out beforehand, and this is something I wish to ensure happens when the show's being produced for television.

Working with artistes is always a bittersweet experience. Almost all musicians are highly sensitive people and, more often than not, very self conscious. One might think that dealing with musicians is akin to dealing with actors in the sense that you direct them in a way that you think works for the show and

they follow. However, both Carl and Kareem had very intelligent suggestions to offer in terms of content, and I made it a point never to dictate ideas.

Instead, we had open meetings where I pitched my ideas, they told me how they could add to it, and we moved forward with each other's help. Often times I didn't agree with something that either of them had to say, but since they seemed most comfortable doing it their way, I went ahead with it anyway.

Sticking to schedules is another big part of shooting a show, and while it almost never happens that a shoot is delayed because of a crewmember, it is almost just as certain that at some point, an artiste will cause some snags in keeping up with time. I tried my best to schedule all shoots in accordance with Kareem and Carl's calendars, but on some occasions something unanticipated came up and they had to cancel a shoot. Other times there were insignificant delays, but thankfully, nothing too grave.

Overall, to a certain extent it was disappointing that I couldn't gather a crew for this – perhaps if I'd conceptualised the show early enough and run it by some of my classmates who were interested in pursuing a career in music video production – I could've had people help with cameras, lights and sound. However, seeing as how I managed to put together an entire show without much outside help has really instilled a newfound confidence in me, and I have now begun to trust my abilities as a creative producer for music television.

I sincerely hope the show is liked by everyone, and this experience helps me professionally and personally in the future.

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