

Sandy Jones
ID# 0873087
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I've always believed in the concept of "the more you plan something out, the less likely things are to go to plan." In other words, expect the unexpected. I now know this more than ever. However, an unexpected path doesn't necessarily bring you in the wrong direction, just a different one. And if we're smart and resourceful, we can use this concept to our advantage.

I started my Culminating Experience project at Berklee College of Music's Valencia campus at the beginning of 2020, which now seems like at least a lifetime ago. Instead of collaborating with an outside project or rescoring a scene from Hollywood, I decided to cut my own video to write music to in order to better represent my voice. I had been gathering clips for months and recording unique or interesting sounds that had to do with my CE as well as having multiple DAW sessions full of melodic and harmonic ideas. I spent a lot of time during the coronavirus quarantine lockdown working on this, and I felt very emotionally connected to it.

However, as life has it, my brand new computer died about two weeks before my CE was due, and everything on it was lost. I had backups of all my finished projects, but because of my—in hindsight, laughable—backup system, I didn't keep any backups of projects I'm currently working on but haven't finished yet. I typically don't spend more than a day on a project so if I were to lose my work in progress, I usually wouldn't lose more than a day of work. My CE is the only project I've worked on in recent memory that has spanned so many months, and it never occurred to me that I was never backing it up anywhere. It's funny how when things go wrong these problems all of a sudden become so clear and obvious, even though they're right in front of you the whole time. So after waiting a week to get the necessary part to get my laptop fixed I had one week left to start and finish my CE from scratch.

The first task was getting all the software reinstalled, and I had trouble with the licenses of a few of my orchestral sample libraries so I didn't have access to my usual setup. I also lost all of my presets and templates so the process very much felt like it was being built from nothing. I actually ended up buying a new string library and an accordion library for this project and they both instantly became my new favorites so there's some good news.

I pulled too many 20-hour days in a row to re-edit the video, re-score the film, re-produce the mockup, and mix/master it in time for the deadline, but after sitting on my hands for weeks I was eager, and needless to say motivated, to get it done. And in most ways I think my CE turned out better than what it would have if this fiasco never happened. It forced me to make quick and confident decisions, and to stick to them. I mostly just followed my gut instinct and tried not to question it and I'm proud of the way that my music inevitably wound up sounding a lot like me. I'm also grateful that I was able to pull this together and not completely lose my mind from

stress and anxiety. Would I do it again? I sure hope not. Twice was enough. But between my backup system and my session organization and my decision making process, I've learned so much more from this project than if I were to score just another scene in my film scoring program. And I don't think I'll ever forget these lessons either, because this all happened during such a pivotal moment of my life both inside and outside of Berklee.



Choosing a topic and video for my CE wasn't something that came naturally to me, which is unusual. Typically as soon as a prompt is given, several concepts pop into my head immediately. But in this case the idea that this piece of music will represent me, and be my calling card for employment, weighed heavily on my mind. I thought maybe working on an animated short film could be great because I'm a lifelong fan of the medium, particularly stop-motion. I also thought of working on a short documentary because I have experience with these in the past and I've enjoyed working on them. While I would enjoy the journey and end results of these projects, they ultimately didn't express the way I feel my musical voice does.

It wasn't until a siesta coffee conversation with my good friend Lucia, who is also in the program, that my final idea formed. She suggested I compose for a skateboarding video, or something of that nature, after seeing me commute to class on a skateboard every day. We also got to talking about seasons and weather and how a lot of people in the skating community (myself included) change their style from skateboarding to snowboarding to surfing depending on the climate. In my head, this began creating a narrative that was very simple, yet could take me to a lot of places.

Being a member of the skating/snowboarding/surfing community, I've seen many, many video edits of fellow "boarders" showing off their tricks and styles. The format is pretty formulaic. There are lots of fast cuts between tricks, sometimes multiple shots of the same trick from different angles, and they are typically meticulously synced to a pop music track. Here is where I can contribute something fresh and novel—a more cinematic cue that follows the emotions of the scenes, typically led by the weather and/or the location. I wanted to have some sync points as well for style, but not to overuse them and make the whole thing feel like the video was edited to the music and not the other way around. However, traditionally these videos are hyper-synced to the specific song they're edited too, and it's incredibly rare that the music is added after the cut. So in many ways I was approaching this project from a very different and unique perspective.

The other element I was almost sure I had to have was a hybrid score. Throughout my entire composing career, when I make something acoustic I crave an electronic element and when I make electronic music I crave something acoustic. So I naturally gravitate towards hybrid

scores of both orchestra and electronic production. I particularly like my synths to sound like elements of an orchestra and my orchestra to sound like a synthesizer. But in this case, I wanted to also feature a rock band. I grew up in garage bands and played professionally around New



England, where I'm from, as well as venues around the world so I have a lot of experience arranging for guitars and drums and instruments like that. Rock music is also an integral part of skateboarding culture, and I saw it as a necessary requirement for this cue. There's a pretty common troupe in rock music to have a big orchestra accompany an epic song a la Guns N' Roses or The Beatles but I wanted to switch it around,

so that there's an epic orchestra accompanied by a rock band. With all that glued together by electronic music production, I feel like I could really make a great piece of music that sounds like me.

My next problem was with finding the video to score. As far as I could tell there were no adequate videos I could find on the internet that gave the narrative structure I had pictured. I surfed YouTube and Reddit for hours, hoping to find a fellow creative person to collaborate with, but came up empty. However, having some experience with amateur video editing, I decided to take a whack at making a video myself, using clips from the internet. There's no shortage of stellar footage of these types of activities and it was actually quite difficult to narrow it down to just three minutes of clips, while also having some sort of narrative arch. The more I edited, the more I could start to hear music line up to the footage in my head, and the story began to form.

My original idea was to have the video go through the four seasons, starting with winter and snowboarding/skiing and transitioning through each season and its associated boarding activities, eventually circling back around to winter to show the annual cycle. This was tremendously difficult to condense into three minutes without feeling rushed and missing the point. As a compromise, I ended up just going from winter through summer, telling a more linear story. This was a bit of a blessing in disguise because I've come to realize that the cycle of weather in the seasons feels a lot more linear than cyclical. Perhaps this is due to growing up in New England, an area where the transition from cold to warm is long and gradual but going from summer temperatures to winter happens almost overnight.

This also gave me a chance to better segment the video into individual sports. Starting with snowboarding in the winter, moving to skateboarding in the spring, and ending with surfing in the summer. I think this segmentation gave the video more overall structure to follow, almost like a typical three-act story. And while the plot doesn't resemble that of a three-act structure whatsoever, it's still effective.

I would love to know what it feels like to watch a montage of board sports like this when you don't participate in any of them. Do non-skaters get anything out of watching a skater

besides seeing a wooden board with wheels flip around? I like to think that I watch and analyze skate footage the same way a musician listens and analyzes a song for subtext and a deeper meaning, and it's hard to imagine what music sounds like to a non-musician.

I started composing the score by taking several steps back and thinking about the big picture. What does each segment mean? More importantly, what does each section *feel* like? Let's start with the beginning and snowboarding. From my experiences, snowboarding feels like it's just you against an impossibly big mountain. Not so much in an adversarial sense, but rather as a partner you must respect and learn to work with in order to get to where you need to be. These feelings can range from feeling very small, in the physical sense (yet also the metaphysical), to being on top of the world. There's a nice progression between those two extremes that I believed could be very well explored sonically. For musical inspiration, I was listening to a lot of Niel Diamond at this time, as well as most times—particularly his 1972 live album *Hot August Night*, because it had such a larger-than-life feeling to it. The opening to the album starts with an adventurous orchestral prelude that leads into the heart-thumping, ground-shaking *Crunchy Granola Suite*. I felt that the way it builds from a single instrument to such a huge climax was exactly what I needed in my piece.

The next section was skateboarding, and it was all over the place—literally. I had amassed an arsenal of footage of everything from goofing around in the rain to synchronized choreography and dancing to philosophical commentary. I honestly had no idea what to do with all of this amazing footage, narratively speaking. It reminded me of flipping through TV channels and just catching glimpses of random scenes. But then I thought; how can I use this to my advantage? In a moment of free association, I reminisced back to my childhood and how when I used to flip through TV channels (back when flipping through TV channels was a thing), I would listen to the music and always try to change the channel on the beat. And sometimes the next channel would come in on the beat and it lined up. I got a big kick out of this as a youngster and I thought it was cool and it made me feel like a radio DJ (back when radio DJs were a thing). But it dawned on me, what if I recreated that sensation in my cue? I could go from scene to scene, each having its own character and feel, but keep a common thread throughout to tie it all together and make it feel intentional.

The last act, summer surfing, was by far the easiest to score. Perhaps just because if there are two words I could use to describe myself it would be 1.) summer and 2.) surfing. But the emotion and mood of surfing is just such a *sound* to me. When I sat down to write it, it was almost completely improvised. I think it's about catching a wave, and riding something that is bigger than yourself. And the music did just that.

Once I had the general picture of the piece, I went further into detail. Back at the beginning, I had to find my soloist to kick everything off. My first instinct was to use the contrabass, because earlier in the year I wrote a piece that revolved around a contrabass solo that turned out amazing, and as a bass player I could certainly identify with the instrument. But I

ended up moving it to the cello because during the second half of this section the rest of the orchestra comes in quite strong and the bass would have gotten lost in all of that. A cello solo is also a pretty classy way to start anything, in my humble opinion. Melodically speaking, there's a major shift from a phrygian-dominant vibe at the beginning, to a pretty simple major/mixolydian direction. I used a C#/Db as a pivot note between A phrygian dominant and Gb major, which took a bit of musical yoga. I wasn't completely sold on it at first but it ended up becoming one of my favorite parts of the whole piece.

The second half of the intro section follows the emotional rollercoaster of approaching a big jump on a snowboard or skis. It speeds up in tempo, gradually adding lines and sections of the orchestra until it climaxes right after liftoff. I added a lot of sound design and synthesizers at this point to introduce the piece as hybrid, and when they show up later in the piece it feels more natural.

What comes next was a bit of a puzzle for me. My gut instinct was for the cello solo to absolutely go off and start shredding Eddie Van Halen style to give that feeling of awesomeness that comes with being airborne like that. But the more I was writing it, the more I thought—when I'm in the air I don't hear melody. I don't hear major or minor or modes or anything like that. If anything it just feels like rhythm. Like a Keith Moon drum solo. So that's exactly what I put there. As soon as the skier takes off in the video, hanging in the air for close to ten seconds, a fierce and restless drum solo rips off. And as the landing comes closer and closer, I slowly build up more and more processing and audio warping to make it feel like everything is *almost* about to fall apart. And right before it does, there's a hard cut to the next section, which is infinitely more solid rhythmically and melodically/harmonically. I think this is a great musical representation of what it feels like to get that much air. It starts off exciting, then feels like everything is about to go terribly wrong, but finally lines up perfectly in a wave of satisfaction.

Moving forward is where it really became fun from a composing perspective. I had already chopped the section into smaller bits, or "channels" to surf through. And using the orchestra to change timbres and styles so suddenly was really captivating and inspirational.

The first "channel" we arrive on is actually snowboarding still, but edited to look more like skateboarding, to tie the two together. Here is also where we are introduced to the melodic motif that more or less drives most of the piece. It's a really simple diatonic melody that I feel like I've had stuck in my head for years. It's at a perfect walking tempo so it's one of those things that just keeps coming back during monotonous daily activities. For the longest time I was convinced I stole it from somewhere because it feels so familiar to me but throughout my years I've never heard it outside of my head so I'm using this project as an opportunity to officially claim this melody as my own. Maybe some day, as film composers are known to do, a different composer will steal it from me, and I think I would be okay with that.

tumbleweed which then fades off into the sunset. To me it has a restless wanderer vibe, where one is perpetually in motion simply because they can't stay still. Anyways this moment seemed a little too profound for my silly skateboarding movie but I liked the sentiment so I ended up keeping it in but scoring it as this huge, gargantuan, over-the-top prophetic statement as a comedic beat and I thought it gave that channel a nice character, ending with a grin like that.

The transition into the next scene is a lot smoother than the others, because the image transitions from a desert sun to a different location with a desert sun (starting in California and going to Morocco). I liked the idea of having these skateboarders sweating under the same sun in different deserts, linking them together in a way that's not just skating. However I really wanted the feel to be different so the harmony shifts, but more noticeably, the meter goes to a 5/8 (and then many other X/8 time signatures). After a brief absence at the end of the last scene, the rock band comes back in and really dominates this section, this time with a Wurliizer electric keyboard leading the way. The orchestra's main purpose here is to accompany the ending build up into the next section, and they're mostly mirroring the keyboard line. There's just something about that Wurli line that I couldn't let take a back seat.

And this brings us into the section that I'm most excited to record live with an orchestra in London. The video is a small compilation of a phenomenal up and coming French skater named Anthony Thine who combines his background in hip-hop dancing with surf-style longboard skateboarding. He does lots of dance moves that would be difficult on land, yet he does them flawlessly on a 1.5 meter long rolling plank of wood that he's simultaneously



throwing into the air and catching with both his hands and his feet. His style is off the charts and I just had to have the music attempt to live up to that. Not unlike most music I write, I started from the bottom and worked my way up. It was tempting to let the double basses take the lead here, being a bass player myself, but the pizz sound was too jazzy and the arco sound wasn't the articulation I wanted at all. Next in line was naturally the tuba, and this fit perfectly. I ended up doubling it with a Fender electric bass that has the same punchy "plop" I needed for this funky staccato bass line. The rest of the brass

section found their homes easily. I went through some old Parliament-Funkadelic albums to get inspired. I've heard several respectable musicians say how the horn parts on George Clinton records are some of the best ever recorded, and I have to agree. So I threw in some Clinton-esque

lines for the trumpets and trombones but the balance was a little too marching-band-y for what I had in mind. I knew it needed more in terms of instrumentation so I took a weird risk and gave yet another countermelody to the honky double reed instruments, thinking their “honk” would be a fun combination with the brass’s “honk” and they ended up adding a lot of warmth to the brass, which tend to be a lot brighter. The drum part gave the whole thing motion but there was still *one more* thing missing, and I couldn’t figure out what. Usually when this happens instead of writing for an instrument I’ll sample something that has that je-ne-sais-quois I’m looking for. In this case it was Mungo Jerry’s 1970 hit classic “In The Summertime.” I EQ’d out most of the bass frequencies and was left with a surprisingly loose rhythm section full of percussion, a tiny bit of piano, people blowing into jugs, and vocal shouts of “huh,” “oh,” and “ow”. This cacophony of 1970s weird funky sounds was exactly what the piece needed to feel more authentic, especially in a mockup. In addition to Mungo Jerry there are a few fun transition bars where I sampled and layered Freddie Mercury’s voice multiple times to build up these strange chords, like Bohemian Rhapsody but funky.

The last big moment of the second act is one of my favorite pieces of skateboarding footage ever. Sergio Yuppie, a downhill skater from Brazil and a legend in his own right, has had a signature move for years that is simply jaw dropping. Going downhill at blazing speeds, he wears bulletproof knee pads and a rock hard helmet that lets him glide along the road while skidding or drifting his skateboard. His signature is to attach an empty can to his helmet and as he slides down a hill he’ll smash his head into the ground as sparks go flying everywhere. You truly have to see it to believe it. He’s been performing this trick since the 90s and I’ve never once seen anyone else even attempt to try it.



The mood was difficult to capture for this exact moment. My first thought was gnarly rock and roll, almost heavy metal. But that music highlighted the pain of the sport without the sense of triumph that one feels for doing something so amazing. So I re-scored this one part as a triumphant brass lead with a driving string rhythm, and I liked that feeling so much more—as a skater it felt more authentic.

The last skateboarding “channel” functions as a transition into the final act of surfing, which is much more laid back than the previous act. I used a heavy combination of sound design and synthesizers to mark this transition. One of the more prominent elements is an electric guitar that I ran through my tape loop and gargled it all up, giving a very ambient, wishy-washy vibe.

The final act starts with a point-of-view shot of a skater carrying his surfboard to the beach down a bike path at sunrise. I imagined the music at this point is like what he’s listening to

in his earpods on Spotify. Being something one would listen to while skating down a bike path, the acoustic guitar comes back in with an intricate percussion ensemble supporting it.

The orchestra re-enters with a solo between the strings and horns, which is a reliable instrumentation for a simple melody. The melody slowly builds and splits into more independent lines throughout the last act, as if it caught a wave. The main melodic motif also returns here, albeit modestly, as one of the many layers. The brass section is playing it at about half speed in counterpoint. Another fun piece of sound design I used at the very end was from an isolated vocal track of Sia singing “Chandelier.” I sampled that iconic note at the chorus and processed it with granular synthesis to create a very human sounding synth patch to end the piece on a high note, literally.

I also got a chance here to reuse my new best friend, the accordion. One thing I wasn’t aware with this instrument is just how massive its range is. The low end can compete with a bass and the high end with a flute. So I used that massive low end, and the pumping of the air at such low frequencies creates a beautiful effect that fits the emotion on screen perfectly. Accompanying that low end is the upper register of the accordion mirroring the most prominent string melody. The woodwinds at this point are doing fast arpeggios that I tried to make sound like a cross between John Williams and a synthesizer arpeggiator, so the reed-y quality of the accordion fills that empty space just magnificently. I’m starting to wonder why more orchestras don’t regularly use an accordion, because I feel the combination is unmatched.

Lastly, the video ends with a shot of someone swimming at sunset as they take a deep breath before suddenly plunging into the dark water. To capture this sensation I had the last chord of the orchestra take one last deep breath in a swell before being suddenly, and artificially, cut off.

The video closes with a shot from underneath the water looking at the orange sunset in a very psychedelic manor. So instead of the orchestra playing us out I found it more fitting to just

have sound design and end the video on a meditative note, in true surfer fashion. For this I took one of my tape loops from earlier in the project, fed it back into the tape recorder, and slowed it down again. Then I brought that sound into my DAW and processed it again with more granular synthesis. I have to say that tape



loops are perfect for granular processing because the grains are so dense. But here I used it in a subtle way to quietly and peacefully drift the audience out of the performance in a state of tranquility.

Looking back at my now finished project, I'm really proud of the way it came out, especially all things considered. When thinking back to what my original idea was before writing any music, which was a skate edit with a cinematic narrative that moves with the weather and environment, telling the condensed yearlong story of board sports in three minutes, I feel like I nailed it. I may not have nailed every technical aspect or written the next Harry Potter theme, but if I'm being my own director, I think I accomplished the task almost exactly how I set out to and there's a lot of value in that. Granted, I'm probably a biased director to my own work but with that said it's rare that I'm this proud of a finished product of mine.

But most importantly I love how this music came out sounding like *me*. It's not straightforward or by-the-books but it's not too experimental and out-there. It's a hybrid score with lots of custom sound design but also traditional orchestration techniques. It's fun and eclectic but beneath the surface there's a lot of layers to it. This is exactly the kind of music I want to be working on and making in my future career. And if this culminating experience at my master's degree program at Berklee is about connecting me to my future career, I'm incredibly excited that this is the first step I'm taking.