

Benjamin Spizuco

Senior Thesis Final Proposal

IMM 498

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TITLE

The title of my senior thesis is “The Damp Socks Ensemble: A Collaborative Album”. The second part is more important than the first, but it feels more right to put the goofy joke first because it’s actually a name and not a descriptor.

NAME

My name is Benjamin Spizuco. I don’t really know what else would go here.

SUMMARY

This is a mostly-remote collaborative album with other musicians I know. Since I usually write songs on my own, I thought a good way to push myself a bit harder would be to involve others in that process, taking some of my control out of the equation. I realize this is a weird thing for a thesis to revolve around, so allow me to explain further.

The gist of most thesis projects is to put something together that embodies the creator as an individual. This put me in a weird spot because I’ve already done it. I spent winter 2020 recording an album called *Atlantic Witchcraft*, a tour-de-force that forced me to approach music production with a slightly more professional setup than I’d ever used, resulting in the finishing of 50 songs and scrapping of 34. The final album featured 25 songs, clocking in at 78 minutes in

length. I had to cut songs I loved to keep the album somewhat balanced: a five-and-a-half minute song with four chords and a simple yet repetitive beat felt too basic and long compared to more complex yet shorter songs, for instance. I usually get tired of my own songs after a few months. *AW* came out in April and, almost 8 months later, I'm still proud of it. The point is, I've already made my grand personal statement, and it was only the *first* album I released this year.

So what makes The Damp Socks Ensemble so intriguing as a thesis? Why, for a project whose general intent is to showcase the individual, am I choosing to do the exact opposite? Well, for one, I am nothing if not difficult. I wasn't going to be straightforward about this anyway. I've made it clear this class that the obvious path is not the path I like taking, if I even realize it's there. Additionally, I think that it's all too easy to place more emphasis on an individual in the fields discussed in IMM rather than the larger team. It's a large part of why Elon Musk is the subject of massive hero worship where the Tesla employees who actually build the cars, rockets, flamethrowers, and whatever other crap they put out, get left in the dust. I will note that this sentiment isn't the most present in IMM, at least amongst the students, but the sentiment in general still seems to exist.

I don't have a problem showing myself off, but senior thesis is supposed to be somewhat challenging, and just making another solo album would not only be very easy, it would also be done much earlier than March or April, leaving me with lots of time and little to do. If my senior thesis must take the whole year, I'm going to spend the whole year on it. With all of this in mind, my sort of challenge is to *not* do it myself.

The light irony of saying that this thesis will be challenging because I'm working with other people is that, in 2020, I've spent loads of time making music with other people. In January, I started a band with my equally-musical twin, Dan, called D.B. Mini Cooper, where we

sit down and make unlistenable noise because we felt like it. In February, I started IMMovation specifically to facilitate collaboration between students in the major, and also myself because I wanted to collaborate and it seemed like it would be less selfish if other people were doing it too. In April, when it became clear that concerts were not happening again for a very long time, I asked the people I would have wanted to perform with me if they wanted to play on the next Hello Whirled album. One said yes. One said yes, recorded half their parts, then dropped and was replaced. One said no at the time but eventually was in a position to say yes. As of November 28, 2020, it is four songs shy of completion.

This is rather long for a summary. I'll be honest, I don't know how long the other sections are going to be, and while I've uttered a lot of words already, I felt they needed to be said.

GRAPHIC IMAGE



This is a strange image to include. Allow me to break down every piece of it.

“The Damp Socks Ensemble: Special December Presentation” is what I will be presenting on December 11. It will not be the final album. My projection is that it will include three songs. Since I don't know where else to break them down, I'll do it here.

Belted Kingfisher is me and Mistee Brancheck, who plays drums for Hello Whirled and executed a legendary senior thesis back in May. We recorded “**Means A Lot**” for IMMovation 2, but we also agreed that it made sense for my thesis. For the record, it was her idea to start a full-blown side project when we recorded this. Expect an album in January. Anyway, Mistee recorded bass and drums first, then sent the mix to me. I added guitar and vocals to finish the song. It didn’t take terribly long for me to record my parts, but then again, it also wasn’t the only song Mistee sent me to finish. I think she sent me five, and I picked the third one because it was the shortest.

D.B. Mini Cooper, as mentioned earlier, is me and Rowan student Dan Spizuco. The song we recorded, “**Spines Like Us**”, will likely be the only non-remote collaboration on the entire album. I got a blue-line error for writing “spines” there instead of “spies” in that phrase. This speaks to how weird Dan and I when we make music. We take our mostly completely different influences and spend most of our time shouting at each other because we have *very* different approaches to music as a whole. Nonetheless, we came up with something. We limited our instrumental range to a single instrument: a Yamaha PS-400 I ordered online a while ago that arrived in much better condition than I anticipated, and sounding loads better than I anticipated. The sounds aren’t exactly accurate to their label but it’s better this way. Anyway, we effectively went back and forth with the writing process. I picked a drum beat and let it play for two and a half minutes. Dan wrote some weird jazz chords to go over it. One of them, a G# minor chord with an A bass note, was the single most difficult part of the recording, since I kept singing a Bb (B flat) over that chord and Dan wasn’t thrilled with my decision to use that note over that chord. Since the song had three repetitions of Dan’s great big chord progression, we decided the song should have three verses and three choruses. I wrote the first and third, Dan wrote the second.

We sang our respective lyrics, except for the last section which Dan and I both sang. I can't believe this section is called "Graphic Image".

Capamder is me and John Carone, keyboardist of Ornamental and bassist of Format War, as well as solo act Jules On Expo. We listen to a lot of the same bands, namely Stereolab and Wire. When we started talking about recording a song together, the immediate agreement was that it should be in the post-punk style, a popular underground genre popular in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s, a few of whose bands have since amassed colossal followings (more on that soon). A few days after we drew this conclusion, I sent John a bass part I'd recorded. It sounded kind of like the stylings of Peter Hook from Joy Division and New Order, two incredibly popular bands I actually don't like very much. He loved it and we built the song off that. I recorded a basic drum track built off a simple kick-snare beat, with frequent changes in the hi-hat. It felt right to keep it simple. I sent the tracks off to renowned bassist and keyboardist John Carone, who sent it back with some incredible guitars, an instrument I'd never heard him play. At this point it became clear we were basically writing "Age of Consent" by New Order, a song I don't hate but there's at least 8000 songs better than it. The plan from there was for us to split the vocals: I would tackle the first verse and chorus, and he would tackle the second verse and chorus. As of right now, I wrote my lyrics and recorded my vocals, but John has not. As of right now, **"End Is Near"** isn't done. I'd like it to be. The current Reaper project was screenshotted to make this graphic image.

The "perhaps more" comment is not because my paused collaborations are suddenly coming to life again, or that I started a new collaboration with someone else who asked a while back, but because a collaboration fell into my lap. Someone I knew back in 2015 posted a request for collabs on his Instagram story. Naturally I said yes. I haven't worked on the track

much so far, but the instrumental he was working on was pretty far along before I got it. My hope is that it might take so little time to finish that it could be track 3 or 4 on this album.

I will not be elaborating on the collaborations that have not been finished.

HISTORY OF THE FIELD

To try to explain the history of music collaboration would be its own thesis. History is long. A lot has happened. Music has existed for so long that to try to explain how collaboration has factored into it that I don't even really know where to start. I also don't really want to write this section. I don't know if this is what you intended, but since each song on The Damp Socks Ensemble is being done with one other person, I felt the best course of action would be to break down some of history's most important songwriting duos. I would have included a works cited section for some of history's most important songwriting duos, but I know enough that I feel like I can talk about to not warrant reading other articles.

John Lennon and Paul McCartney wrote tons of songs in the early-mid 1960s. You may have heard of their band, The Beatles. John wrote a lot of lyrics, and Paul wrote a lot of music. This obviously wasn't a permanent situation, especially as John and Paul developed their own identities and stopped writing all of their songs together, but a lot of their early hits were written collaboratively.

Laetitia Sadier and Tim Gane were a force of nature known to some as Stereolab. Their eclectic blend of basically every genre of music that existed before 1991 has allowed their music to feel retro and timeless at once. Their partnership, in a music sense, was extremely rigid. Tim wrote all of the music and retained full control of all of Stereolab's music, leaving Laetitia with no musical input. She's stated in interviews that she only wrote the lyrics at all because Tim

wasn't good at it. For the record, Stereolab hasn't released new music since 2010, which even then was a collection of outtakes from their 2008 album, *Chemical Chords*.

A more harmonious relationship can be seen between Graham Lewis and Colin Newman of Wire. The majority of the group's first album, *Pink Flag*, was written by Colin using Graham's lyrics. Now, when I say harmonious, I mean that it's more the case now than it was then. The duo wrote using the *Pink Flag* method considerably less on their next two albums, *Chairs Missing* and *154*, and their criminally underrated 80s albums don't include songwriting credits, although it is mentioned in their biography, *Read and Burn*, that the array of songwriting combinations between the band's members continued rather than sticking to the *PF* method, specifically as Bruce Gilbert wrote more lyrics. Most of the band's songs from 2008 onwards tend to stick to the *PF* method.

LEADERS IN THE FIELD

The great thing about music is that there's a lot of it. One of the benefits that comes with this is that people have found many different ways to approach music, and has resulted in a multitude of genres and subgenres. It's also a large part of why I don't love the idea of music performance having "leaders in the field", because someone considered by many to be a leader may not be someone who makes music the way I do, and so they would not be a leader to me. I will attempt to describe a few musicians who I look up to, and hope that you will agree with my decision to call them "leaders" regardless of how much influence they currently have.

I'll start with the obvious one: Robert Pollard. Most people don't know him. Most of the people who do know that his band, Guided By Voices, made a few poorly-recorded but expertly-crafted albums of off-kilter indie rock in the mid-1990s, including the

continually-celebrated *Bee Thousand*. I happen to also know that he has had way more bands than Guided By Voices that existed after the mid-1990s. In my personal ranking of 94 of his albums released since 1987, his most celebrated album ranks #54, directly above a fan-club-only Guided By Voices album released in 1996, and directly below a remotely-recorded collaborative album with one-time Guided By Voices bassist Chris Slusarenko in 2006. He may be the best example of what I'm trying to accomplish here, but also not. Many of his projects, including Circus Devils, Mars Classroom, Keene Brothers, and Lifeguards, start with other musicians he knows sending him instrumentals, for which Bob writes lyrics and records vocals for. He has no musical input on these projects. Others, like Boston Spaceships, some of his solo albums, and the current iteration of Guided By Voices, start with him sending musicians demos for them to flesh out and send back to him. These days, Guided By Voices albums are recorded in Dayton, Ohio, New York City, Nashville, Tennessee, and Montclair, New Jersey. That's pretty remote, I'd say. The reason I'm hesitant to say that my primary songwriting influence is also the primary influence for this project is that Bob's remote collaborations are fairly binary. There's a lot more back-and-forth in The Damp Socks Ensemble.

Perhaps a more fitting example would be Damon Albarn, from Blur, Gorillaz, and loads else. Gorillaz tends to be a fairly collaborative project already, but 2020 kicked it up a notch. *Song Machine Season One*, the new Gorillaz album, was recorded as a series of singles, each with a different guest (or guests). The first five singles were recorded with Damon in his London studio, or wherever else he went to record the songs, but the point is that the collaborations were recorded in person. Footage of these sessions were even used in videos for "Momentary Bliss", "Desole", and "PAC-MAN". Once lockdown happened, however, the singles had to be finished remotely. Also, what was meant to just be a new song every month from a hugely popular

cartoon band had become an album. Anyway, Damon's remote collaborative process has more back-and-forth to it than Bob's. I can't speak for every song recorded this way, since he hasn't talked about the recording of every single song (I think), but for "Strange Timez", he sent a beat and synth line, quite skeletal in nature, to Robert Smith of The Cure. The song was sent back to Damon almost finished. This more closely resembles the method I've been using.

This isn't going to be a great example but I think it would be wrong not to mention Deerhoof. In May, they dropped their first album in three years, *Future Teenage Cave Artists*. The album before it, *Mountain Moves*, featured many collaborators who recorded their parts remotely, so in theory it would be more fitting to discuss that album instead, but I've already talked about albums recorded like that. *FTCA* did not feature any guests. Instead, drummer Greg Saunier recorded a series of drum tracks in Photo Booth with his laptop's built-in microphone, and sent the tracks to the rest of the band. Each band member recorded parts without knowing what the others were doing. Greg, who also produced the album, received the parts and stitched them together to make new songs. For instance, as revealed in a guitar tutorial released by the band, most of "Damaged Eyes" was written by guitarist John Dieterich, but the last minute was written by guitarist Ed Rodriguez. Initially, I had written that I didn't know when singer Satomi Mitsuzaki recorded her vocals, but I thought to ask Greg Saunier on Twitter and he responded. He said that most of the vocals were recorded after the instrumentals were stitched, but most of the lyrics were written before. He added that both the vocals and music changed constantly until the album was declared "done". You can read his tweet here <https://twitter.com/deerhoof/status/1332796009412521987> so I can prove that I asked one of my favorite musicians for help with a paper and he said he'd like to read it when it's done.

INDUSTRY EVENTS OR GROUPS

Screw it, Reddit counts. I wouldn't consider myself necessarily active in these communities, but I subscribe to /r/musicproduction and /r/WeAreTheMusicMakers, which are both subreddits for musicians. I'd say they're great groups to be involved with, but in there I tend to be more of an observer than an active participant. It's a possible drawback of consciously making an effort to not sound too good. I don't like making music that sounds professional. I wish it sounded better, but I don't feel like it sounding like it cost thousands of dollars will be more fulfilling than doing what I do now, not least because most of my favorite bands and musicians also don't make the most polished music ever.

Industry events for something like this...do those even exist? The closest thing I could think of would be a concert, but that's not really an industry event. Watching two people make music together is a hard thing to have a conference about. YouTube videos aren't events, at least not usually, so while I could cite Rob Scallon and Andrew Huang making an album in a day, that doesn't seem right. Maybe that's the way it should be. The music industry has been a toxic force since its inception. Labels and distributors get paid more than musicians and producers. There's a growing petition demanding that Spotify pay their artists one cent per stream, which is still abysmal but it's better than the current pay rate. Maybe it's just better that, for a directly creative task, there isn't an event that tries to connect it to the music industry. You don't need to be in the industry to do it.

PROTOTYPE

The software I've been using is Reaper, and I've used a PreSonus AudioBox with it, alongside a microphone and various guitars. The hardware is a Dell XPS 15. What my guests use is up to them, so I don't even really know what they're using. I've decided that this is irrelevant, even though it definitely isn't.

Social media groundwork is an interesting thing to bring up. Most of my communications have been through Instagram messaging, as it were. Not every collaborator has been involved with that, but many are. Instagram Stories has a function where you can add something of a "suggestion box" in a post, so people can tap it and respond. This has made it easy to find people who want to work with me. This is important because, as much as I'd like to choose anyone I want, it's a more pleasant experience when that feeling is reciprocated. I copied that straight out of the separate prototype paper, because I didn't want to write it out again.

This project doesn't really have a budget. The products I've used for this were mostly not free, but none were purchased specifically for this project, so I don't know that I'd say there's a budget at all.

The timeline is also fluid. The concrete dates are for the whole album to be done in April, and for "End Is Near" by Capamder to be done by December 11, because that song rules and I want to present it. In between, I don't have anything set in stone.