

Berklee College of Music

Unplanned

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
1. Introduction	1
2. Review of the State of the Art	1
3. Description	4
4. Innovative Aspects	6
5. New Skills Acquired	6
6. Challenges	7
7. Future Ramifications	7
8. Conclusion	8
9. Bibliography	8

Abstract

This project aims to produce four music tracks and videos through the production of a Visual extended play (EP), Unplanned. The goal is to merge forms of Indian folk and fusion music with electronic music and explore the dynamics of the relationship between music and video. The current Indian Electronic music scene and sound design methods were studied along with several film-making techniques. Tools like Digital Single Lens Reflex (DSLR) cameras and softwares like Ableton Live, Adobe After Effects, Adobe Premiere Pro and Adobe Photoshop were used to produce the videos. The challenge was to produce compelling music videos with limited resources at hand and to create an interesting fusion sound. This project aims to showcase the sound design and video production skills to the music and film industry at large and hopefully, inspire future sound designers and video producers alike.

Keywords: EP, video, sound design, film music, Indian music, animation, film-making

1. Introduction

Initially, the original idea for this culminating experience project was to produce a ten minute animated, live-action narrative musical comedy. However, the time constraints along with the amount of work required to be done single-handedly did not bring this idea to fruition. The next step was to do something which would utilize the strengths of sound and moving pictures together in a compelling way. Thus, the final idea for a four track visual extended play (EP), *Unplanned*, was born.

The music is a combination of Indian folk and classical music, electronic dance music, orchestral music and world music in general. As for the videos, the idea was to include comedy and animation in some capacity. The goal of this project was to showcase the seamless fusion of other genres with sound-design based electronic dance music and also to entertain the viewer with the respective music videos.

At first, the topics of the music videos were unclear. But as the project progressed, concepts and themes which were appealing were worked upon. The project lasted from September 2018 to May 2019. The process was a learning experience as previously unexplored concepts and techniques in animation, sound design and comedy were explored.

2. Review of the State of the Art

The sensibilities of film, animation, Indian film music and electronic music were the core influences on this project. This project involves a fusion of Indian, electronic, orchestral and world music in general. Indian film composer A.R.Rahman can be cited as one of the prominent influences on this project when it comes to the approach of fusing a variety of musical styles in an Indian context. Up until the late 1980s, traditional Indian film music was predominantly based on Indian folk and classical music. However, since the early 1990s, Rahman was instrumental in bringing in a new sound which gave fusion a new twist. His

approach to music can be defined as “not just drawing in on Indian classical music, but also bringing R&B and hip hop coming in from America, house music coming in from Europe and creating an incredible fusion.”¹ Indian music was no longer only limited to its traditional and local sound. Also, other Indian film composers such as the duo Vishal-Shekhar, the trio Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy were responsible for propelling the shift in the Indian film music sound brought on by Rahman with their own unique styles. As for the core electronic dance music inspirations for this project artists like Deadmau5, Juno Reactor, Skrillex and Nine Inch Nails have pushed the limits of electronic music in their own ways with a variety of exclusive sound design and composition techniques. Starting out in the early 1990s, Nine Inch Nails gave a new meaning to “industrial rock ” as time progressed². Juno Reactor was responsible for fusing tribal sounds with dance music in the 1990s³. Deadmau5 brought on a new sound when it came to electronic dance music around 2007⁴. His four on the floor beats with heavy basslines set the stage for other artists like Skrillex, who started out as an electronic dance music producer but eventually pushed the limits by bringing in a variety of influences like Reggae, Dub etc and new sound synthesis techniques to his music.⁵

One of the visual inspirations for this project are abstract works done by animators between 1930 to 1950 which integrated music with visuals innovatively. Initially an

¹ Ulara Nagakawa, “India’s Mozart Hits LA,” *The Diplomat*, February 01, 2010, <https://thediplomat.com/2010/02/indias-mozart-hits-la/>.

² Michael Azerrad, “New Faces:Nine Inch Nails,” *Rolling Stone*, February 22, 1990, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/new-faces-nine-inch-nails-99546/>.

³ Scott Thill, “The Future isn’t worth it:A short Q&A with Juno Reactor,” *Wired*, May 6, 2008, <https://www.wired.com/2008/05/the-future-isnt/>.

⁴ John Dugan, “Deadmau5|Interview,” *TimeOut*, September 1, 2008, <https://www.timeout.com/chicago/clubs/deadmau5-interview>.

⁵ Your EDM Staff, “Skrillex on Genres:’There is room for everything’ ,” *YourEDM*, April 23, 2014, <https://www.youredm.com/2014/04/23/skrillex-genres-theres-room-everything/>.

engineering diploma holder from Frankfurt, Oskar Fischinger would later move on to produce short experimental animated films at Paramount Pictures in United States of America which would later go on to be known as the flagship titles for the term “visual music.”⁶ A few years later, Scottish-Canadian animator Norman McLaren who had studied design would go on to produce short animated films which later would give him the title of a pioneer in drawn-on-film animation, visual music and graphical sound to name a few.⁷

On the other hand, the sensibilities of Indian motion pictures are also visible in this project. Choreography in Indian films has taken it’s own unique course. Initially based on complicated traditional dance forms like *Bharatnatyam*, *Kathak* etc, modern Indian films sometimes feature dance steps which are simple and often merge humor with dance.

Comedy in general can be termed as the other influence on this project. The feature film *This is Spinal Tap* (1984)⁸ was one of the first films to fall under the genre called mockumentary, a documentary about fictional characters. The idea of creating fictional characters which spoofed stereotypes associated with a certain culture was further explored in films like *Borat* (2007)⁹.

⁶ *Wikipedia*, s.v, “Oskar Fischinger,” last modified 24 June, 2019, 20:34, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oskar_Fischinger.

⁷ *Wikipedia*, s.v, “Norman McLaren,” last modified 26 June, 2019, 05:28, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_McLaren.

⁸ *This is Spinal Tap*, directed by Rob Reiner (1984; Embassy Pictures, MGM Home Video, 2009) DVD.

⁹ *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, directed by Larry Charles (2007; Dune Entertainment, 20th Century Fox Home Video, 2007) DVD.

3. Description

This visual EP consists of four music videos with original music titled:

1. Valencia
2. Chaos Theory
3. “MEXPIREETNAL!?”
4. Insect Politics

All the videos were filmed with Canon Digital Single Lens Reflex (DSLR) cameras with 18-55 millimeter (mm) and 250 millimeter (mm) lenses, Velbon and Manfrotto tripods. The post-production work was carried out in softwares like Adobe After Effects, Adobe Premiere Pro and Adobe Photoshop as they provided the tools needed for fulfilling the vision of the project. The music was composed, produced, mixed and mastered in Ableton Live. The choice of this digital audio workstation was dictated by the software’s flexibility and easy user interface as opposed to other workstations such as Avid Pro Tools, which is more suited for studio recordings.

The first music video titled “Valencia” captures the city of Valencia, Spain in all its colors. The idea for this track originated during the execution of one of the assignments for the video class at Berklee College of Music, Valencia, Spain. On the other hand, an electronic music assignment was also underway as the video project took shape. The bridge between the two assignments was the notion of composing a piece of music for the small but vibrant city of Spain. Popular landmarks such as Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia, Valencia Cathedral, Turia Park etc were shot extensively to represent the city and its people. The music was a combination of minimal electronic dance music and orchestral music along with traces of Indian folk music instruments such as *Tabla*. It was produced with Ableton Live’s extensive

libraries of virtual instruments like soft synths, pads, bass, drum kits and orchestral instruments with basic audio plugins such as delay, reverb, beat-repeat etc.

The second music video titled “Chaos Theory” was initially going to be a parody of the stereotypical noisy modern day electronic dance music videos featuring an over-the-top fictional character, a German disk jockey (DJ) called Fla-Tu-Lans (a wordplay on “flatulence”) . However, time and workload constraints led to the development of another idea about utilizing the methodologies of “visual music” and “graphical sound” with modern day bass heavy electronic dance music. The filming involved capturing common spots in Valencia such as buildings, staircases, graffiti etc. Hand-drawn animation and keyframe animation were used to sync the digital elements with the music. The music utilized samples from Indian folk and classical music pieces. The track also utilized previously unexplored bassline synthesis techniques in Ableton Live’s Wavetable.

The idea for the third track titled ““MEXPIREETNAL!?””, a parody on experimental film, originated while filming abstract nature shots around Valencia, Spain. A humorous dance step by the author was filmed and was abruptly inserted between a relatively serious sequence of experimental shots..The emphasis was placed on editing too as the video required precise cuts at precise points. As for the music, a popular folk music form from the state of Gujarat, India called Garba¹⁰ was fused with electronic music as the idea was to reflect the theme in the music as well.

The fourth and the final video titled “Insect Politics” came into fruition after contemplating with the idea of someone from composer’s Beethoven’s era making electronic music. The music for this track needed to be as complicated as possible. So, a lot of sound

¹⁰ *Wikipedia*, s.v, “Garba,” last modified on 29 June, 2019, 17:19, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garba_\(dance\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garba_(dance)).

design was accomplished in Xfer's Serum plugin in order to create an all-together new sonic palette. As for the video, a fictional nameless person from the classical music era was portrayed by the author of this project himself. In the video, the character declares that he wants to pursue electronic music instead of classical music as a career. Later, he struggles to handle the variety of electronic dance music equipment. The mostly static video was partially given a silent film era treatment for the initial portions of the classical era.

4. Innovative Aspects

The sound-design methods used in this project are relatively new and innovative to the sound design experience the author of this project has had until now. The track "Insect Politics" features close to 50 layers of different sounds combined to produce an all-together new sound per each bar of the song. So, every 3 second sound was made with heavy processing through sound synthesis, hocket technique implementation (a technique which involves layering sounds to form a composite sound) and sound design in general. Also, the two realistic sounding sounds of a machine gun and a swarm of bees were created from scratch using just the Xfer Serum plugin.

5. New Skills Acquired

One of the most important technical takeaways from this project was learning new sound-design and music production methodologies. These will help the author to adopt a fresh approach towards sound design and music production for Indian fusion music as he plans to release this style of music in the future. Also, the operations of the Digital Single Lens Reflex (DSLR) camera were studied and understood in detail along with color correction methods. All these skills will help the author tell stories more effectively in the near future as he plans to work in the field of video production too.

On the other hand, this project proved to be instrumental in making the author more confident in expressing himself as an artist. The music videos “MEXPIREETNAL!?” and “Insect Politics” challenged the author to step out of his comfort zone as expressing himself in front of the camera through dance was an unexplored territory. Lastly, this process channeled the attitude of being open to new ideas and the roads less taken. In general, this project will help the author to be open-minded and be technically well-equipped while producing music and videos in the future.

6. Challenges : Expected and Unexpected

One of the major expected challenges of this project was to produce compelling music videos with limited resources at hand. The solution came across in the form of coming up with simple concepts and execution methods. As for the unexpected challenges, bringing in humor into the videos “MEXPREENTAL!?” and “Insect Politics” proved to be a lot tougher than it seemed to be. However, both the videos got their much needed doses of humor through multiple takes and trial and error methods.

Lastly, designing two realistic sounds of a machine gun and a bee swarm with the help of just a soft synth was challenging. Again, the solution was to go by the trial and error method, the only difference being that this time the end result was clear. Another aspect which helped to solve this challenge was to understand the concepts of synthesis in detail.

7. Future Ramifications

The future plans for this project involve a substantial amount of work on the branding of this visual extended play (EP). Deliverables include album artwork and brand identity strategies. In addition to this, this EP will also be sent to electronic music record labels like Enig’matik records, Gravitas Recordings etc. Lastly, portions of this project will be used to secure work in the field of video production, music production and sound design.

8. Conclusion

Unplanned, as the name suggests, is a visual extended play (EP) which was made without any set blueprint. It is the collective expression of the author using sounds and moving pictures to purely express his views on the concepts which appeal to him. Having a variety of influences ranging from Indian film music to experimental electronic dance music to abstract animated films, this project aims to present original music with a compelling visual counterpart. The end result is an assorted collection of music videos which are entertaining to watch.

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