

SHP Context Paper

Josiah Wattenbarger

Jazz music and its development is a significant staple in the history of American culture. Despite its decline in prevalence in modern popular culture, jazz remains an influence on music in many ways that often go unappreciated. In an effort to further explore this musical heritage through my Signature Honors Project for the East Carolina University Honors College, I composed an original jazz ballad over the course of my final two semesters at ECU.

The project began in the Fall 2021 semester. I knew I wanted to go with the creative endeavor route as I wanted to explore a topic outside of my area of study and I had done a considerable amount of research already with the Psychology department. I had already been a part of the jazz ensemble at ECU for several semesters and had been a part of the jazz band in high school, so I naturally gravitated towards doing a musical project in Jazz. I approached a familiar face in Dan Davis, the director of ECU Jazz Ensemble B at the time, and asked him to be my mentor. From there we explored my desire for this creative endeavor further and I settled with a goal of writing an original jazz ballad composition.

An important thing to note regarding my project is that while I have had some experience with music in high school and college, I would not have considered myself a very well-practiced musician going into the project. I was always one of the only non-music majors in the jazz ensemble and had limited time to practice and perform on my own time outside of school due to my other studies, so I knew what I was taking on was going to be a challenge. Even of the music experience I had, very little of it was with music composition, so we started the process with lots of learning.

Before ever putting the pen on paper for the composition, I underwent many educational exercises to prepare myself to write. My mentor Dan lead me through this learning, starting with reviewing the basics. I learned about jazz fundamentals such as chord progressions and improvisation, then explored the basics of music composition and I completed some practice composition exercises. We also did style studies where I was assigned songs to listen to that were of the style of piece I was trying to emulate, and we explored what makes that song unique. These style studies would end up being very influential in my understanding of the jazz ballad style. I then learned how to use the notation software Musescore so that I could create easily shareable versions of my compositions. Using the Musescore software, I created a rough draft of my ballad. This education and rough draft composition was the whole focus of the first semester.

Going into the second semester, the focus was to get as much feedback on the rough draft as possible from peers and refine the song, then work on actually producing a recording of it. I encountered a roadblock in the second semester though, as my mentor Dan was resigning from his position at ECU. This was easily overcome though as he set me up with my new mentor Evan Roberson and I got to work on getting the feedback. After receiving the feedback, I finalized my composition and prepared to practice it with the Jazz Ensemble B.

Once we started practicing it though we realized that we did not have the right number of players in order to keep the instrumentation of the piece as is. I made the call to switch from doing a live recording of the piece to producing a recording through music production software as I did not want to sacrifice any feel of the piece in order to make it work live. This change came with more necessary learning, as I had to learn how to use the music production software. Most of it was done in Garageband as it was an easily accessible and easy to learn software, but I

also utilized FL Studio and Audacity programs. Using all of my acquired and refined skills from the semester I produced the recording that is attached to this paper.

This project was presented at the Research and Creative Achievement Week at ECU before the recording was complete, showing off the creative processes that were going into the work in progress. The finalized recording was presented at a listening party in order to celebrate my year-long endeavor. This project is something I take pride in. The composition itself is basic and the quality of the recording is short of industry standards, but I was able to explore the processes that go into making the music that I know and love. This musical heritage of jazz that I have grown closer through this project to is something that I will continue to promote in my everyday life.

Lastly, I would like to thank Dan Davis, Evan Roberson, and ECU Jazz Ensemble B for their mentorship and resources. I thank Jason Dominguez, Terrence Blue, and Seth Winfrey for their feedback throughout the project. I also thank the ECU Honors College for guiding me in developing my Signature Honors Project.