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Faculty Mentor: Michael Rasbury
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Self-Produced Pop EP Outcome Report

The goal of my project was to write, record, and produce a Pop EP (a collection of 4-6 songs) for release in January 2025. I wanted to further develop my skills as a producer which include: curating unique sonic palettes, creating impactful mixes, recording live instrumentation, and optimizing my workflow. Over the past 10 months, I not only achieved this but exceeded my expectations, releasing three separate EPs and a total of 10 songs.

My faculty mentor, Michael Rasbury, is in the theater department but has extensive experience in audio production, including sound design for theater and a substantial self-produced discography. We also use the same music production software (Logic Pro), which allowed us to have valuable discussions about specific techniques and ways of optimizing my workflow. During the fall semester, I completed an independent study with Professor Rasbury, where I presented a new demo each week and received feedback. I also learned new recording techniques, such as mid-side guitar miking, as well as mixing and mastering techniques like using a soft clipper.

Originally, my goal was to release just 4–6 songs as part of a single EP. However, in May 2024, I was writing a lot of songs and realized I wanted to release multiple EPs for the project. I knew that finishing and releasing a greater number of songs would help me grow as a producer and artist far more than spending months perfecting the same few tracks. I tend to be extremely perfectionistic when producing music, often obsessing over insignificant details. While attention to detail is important, it can also become detrimental, significantly reducing productivity. Despite releasing more songs than I initially planned, I ensured that quality was never compromised. The production, mixing, and songwriting on these tracks is of higher quality than any of my previous work.

For my first EP, *Talking at the Room*, I wrote and produced all the songs in May 2024. The new equipment I purchased with funds from the Arts Award allowed me to work much faster and make better mixing decisions. Previously, my old computer frequently crashed, forcing me to export sections of songs because it could only handle a limited number of tracks at once. This significantly slowed my workflow and restricted my creative possibilities as a producer.

With the MacBook M3 Pro I acquired through my project proposal, I now have significantly more processing power, allowing me to work with a greater number of audio plugins and recordings at once. Additionally, my new audio interface enabled me to record with two microphones simultaneously, opening up opportunities to experiment with different miking techniques. The Yamaha HS4 monitor speakers also made a major difference, as I had previously only mixed on headphones, which lack crossfeed and have limited bass response. The new

speakers provided a more accurate representation of my mixes, allowing me to make better decisions.

I learned a great deal throughout the process of making this EP—I had never completed so many songs in such a short time, and it taught me how to work more efficiently and make the best use of my time. After finishing these songs, I sent them to Michael Rasbury, who provided valuable feedback and gave me things to consider as I prepared for my independent study in the fall.

For my second EP, *nothing lasts!*, I wrote and recorded the songs during June and July. I believe this EP marks a significant improvement in both production and songwriting. The production feels more original and intricate, with some of my favorite elements being the stereo-panned, overdriven guitar parts on “the 7th of July” and the beeps and bottle-clinking sounds on “scary” that add texture and personality to the drums.

I also experimented with capturing a more raw, organic performance on “gave you what I had”. At the time, I felt that some of my demos were starting to sound inauthentic, as I was relying on production tricks as a crutch rather than using them to enhance my musical abilities. To counter this, I recorded “gave you what I had” in a single take, using just one microphone for both guitar and vocals. The goal was to embrace imperfections, and I’m really happy with how it turned out.

Beyond production, I feel the songwriting and artistic direction of this EP are more unique and personal. I’m especially proud of lyrics like, “I was checking into the hotel with my family, the guy at the front desk said I look 12, but I’m 20.” It feels authentic, reflecting my real experiences, and I don’t often hear these themes explored in modern pop music.

I grew tremendously as a producer and songwriter while working on these two projects, and they prepared me well for my independent study in the fall with Michael Rasbury. For my independent study, I set the ambitious goal of presenting a new demo to him each week. I believed that consistently creating demos and maintaining a high level of creative output was the best way to accelerate my development as a producer.

Over the course of the independent study, I created nine demos and presented them to Professor Rasbury. For a demo to be considered complete, it needed to include the core musical ideas: the instrumental, at least one verse, and a chorus. In addition to presenting my work and receiving feedback, I engaged in valuable discussions and learned new production techniques with Professor Rasbury. We covered technical aspects such as mastering with Ozone 11 to make a song “radio-ready”, as well as broader artistic questions such as how to develop a sound that is unique to me as a producer. One of the most valuable takeaways was realizing how closely mixing and arrangement are connected. A well-balanced arrangement naturally leads to a well-balanced mix. Although this seems obvious, I had fallen into the habit of viewing arrangement and mixing as separate processes when, in reality, they are deeply intertwined. Professor Rasbury has been an incredibly helpful mentor and a great resource. I plan to continue working with him and seeking his advice in the future.

Two of the demos I made during the independent study ended up on my final EP, *Thank God for Elizabeth*. The title is a tribute to Elizabeth, a family friend who generously lets me use her house to record music. I finished the songs in early December, and once again, I believe they are an improvement on my previous work. The cover art was painted by fellow Miller Arts Scholar Helen Sparling. I first saw it during her portfolio presentation and immediately felt it captured the energy of the songs I was working on at the time.

I am especially happy with the song “8th Grade” because it feels the most true to myself and unique in both production and songwriting. Some of my favorite aspects include the chorus, where a soft, delicate falsetto lead vocal is blended with harsh, shouted background vocals to create a distinct vocal timbre. Additionally, I love the syncopated synth bass in the verses, which adds rhythmic interest to a song otherwise driven by a straightforward rock backbeat.

While the primary focus of this project was to improve my abilities as a producer, I also wanted to enhance my songwriting and lyricism. I met with Stephen Hager, a teacher from a class I took called Writing About Music. We reviewed a couple of examples of what I consider excellent lyrics from songwriters like Elliott Smith and Ben Gibbard. From these examples, we identified several common elements shared by lyrics that are authentic and compelling.

Some of these key points included creating specific sensory descriptions, using humor even in sad songs, and the principle of “show, don't tell”—communicating the message of the song indirectly. Additionally, Mr. Hager encouraged me to embrace lyrical ideas that felt a bit risky or quirky, as these were the unique elements I could bring to the table.

A great example of this is in the song “8th Grade,” where I write, “Just like a pumpkin, post-Halloween, craving attention while I rot away slowly.” The song is about rejection, and I think a carved pumpkin left out the day after Halloween is a fitting metaphor—just 12 hours earlier, it was the center of attention, and now it's trash. It's silly and melodramatic, but it's also original and adds personality.

All in all, I believe the project was a success, and I am a significantly more skilled producer and artist compared to where I was a year ago. That being said, I think there are a few things I could have done better or that didn't go exactly as planned according to my original project proposal.

In my original proposal, I emphasized incorporating elements of jazz into my pop songs. I did this with some of my tracks, to varying degrees, such as the demo “I Don't Know Why I Try,” which features a chromatic descending bass line and tritone substitutions in the chord progression. However, for much of the music I wrote, I felt compelled to keep them as more traditional pop songs, and I didn't want to force elements of jazz into them. The focus of the project was audio production, not songwriting, so I didn't see this as a failure, but in the future, I may want to make a more conscious effort to incorporate elements of jazz into my songs.

Additionally, I didn't take jazz guitar lessons with Michael Roesnesky during the fall semester because I felt I was spreading myself too thin and wanted to focus on audio production. However, I did play in a small jazz combo, and I have resumed taking lessons this spring semester, which has been an amazing experience.

Lastly, in terms of advertising the music, I did a good job creating promotional materials and cover art for each of the EPs. However, I didn't anticipate the amount of advertising truly required to get eyes on your music. For this project, I was much more focused on the development of my skills rather than receiving attention for my music, but for future releases, I want to generate more consistent online content to advertise the music and increase visibility.

I am incredibly proud of how this project turned out, and I'm excited to continue developing my audio production and songwriting skills. In the next year, I want to release an album—a challenge that will require the music and themes to be more cohesive. I also want to incorporate more live instrumentation. At UVA, I am in the unique position of being surrounded by talented musicians in the Miller Arts program, the music department, and the greater student body, and I want to collaborate as much as possible.

Thank you to the Miller Arts program for providing the funds for this equipment. I would not have been able to achieve this level of creative output without it, and I am extremely grateful. Making this music was challenging, but also incredibly rewarding and fun, and I'm excited to see where I can take things in the near future.

Final Budget:

Item:	Price(factoring in student discounts)
<u>Macbook Pro M3Pro 14 inch</u>	\$2,326.08
<u>Sonarworks SoundID Reference for Headphones</u>	\$100.00
<u>Yamaha HS5 5 inch Powered Studio Monitor Pair</u>	\$421.18
<u>Izotope Ozone 11 Standard</u>	\$212.93
<u>Focusrite Scarlett 2i2</u>	\$213.99
Total After Tax:	\$3,274.18 (\$274.18 payed out of pocket)

[Spotify and Apple Music](#)

Links to Each EP on Youtube:

[Talking at the Room](#)

[nothing lasts!](#)

[Thank God for Elizabeth](#)

Cover Art:



Talking at the Room



nothing lasts!



Thank God for Elizabeth

Equipment:

