

India Thieriot
Music Honors Thesis Project
3/22/21

“What Happened While I Dreamt”

“What Happened While I Dreamt” is a collection of songs at the intersection of pop music and sound art. An element of each song—whether it be lyrics, a chord progression, or an element of production inspiration— was composed in or inspired by an altered state of consciousness. Each song went through almost 5 stages of development, based on changing taste throughout the two semesters of working on it as well as helpful feedback from my advisor, Kristina Warren. The project was very much an autoethnographic body of work, in that my own habits and process of songwriting were more of a focal point than the end result. Throughout the process I continually urged myself not to consider commercial desirability as a factor in sonic decision-making which allowed for more experimentation and freedom.

Composing an album in different altered states of consciousness was my original goal for this project. Before starting, I had a very rigid notion of what an altered state of consciousness consisted of. I believed there was one single feeling which I needed to achieve in order to be successful in my mission to reach that altered state and see what sort of creativity it could draw out in my music. However, I quickly realized that being in an altered state of consciousness is such a subjective, immeasurable state and that there was no one sensation I should be trying to aspire to. As the year progressed, I also found that pandemic conditions greatly affected my mental state, with respect to energy, attention, learning, and social interaction. As a result, I made an active effort to pay attention to the moments where I was experiencing feelings and sensations that deviated from what I considered to be my regular, conscious state. I experienced altered states through meditation where I felt a heightened sense of awareness afterwards, as well

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as moments of exhaustion and even lucid dreaming. I drew inspiration in a myriad of ways from each of these little moments. In some instances, I would write down a thought that came to me while falling asleep and try to recreate the feeling sonically or lyrically. There was no rigid structure to how I implemented these different sources of inspiration, as part of my goal for this project was to abandon the constricting songwriting process which I have used for my entire songwriting career, and rather let each song come to be in an organic way. Although the album is the measurable outcome of this project, the autoethnographic aspects of my work this year were extremely illuminating, and I hope to continue including this kind of self-reflective research in my music in the future.

Track 1 - "What Happened While I Dreamt"

The first 28 seconds of the song consists of a recording I did of the rain falling on the glass roof of my friend's house in the fall. A synth comes in at 28 seconds but the recording continues and captures my friend saying "goodnight." Including the "goodnight" rather than just the sounds of the environment was meant to launch the listener into a sort of dream (or nightmare)-scape. My vocals come in shortly after and the main vocal line explains the aftermath of a nightmare I experienced, meanwhile the chorused background vocals are meant to detail the dream itself. I chose to layer the vocals and make the lyrics somewhat indistinguishable to emphasize the jumbled feeling of waking up in the middle of a nightmare. Around 1:20, I sonically recreated the nightmare feeling itself rather than the first half of the song's mere recounting of it. At this point, the synth quality becomes darker and I reintroduced the sample of my friend saying "goodnight" but distorted her voice and panned each repetition from right to

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left to convey a sense of disorientation. At 1:51, the echoed vocals and reintroduction of the original sample are meant to replicate the half-asleep feeling of coming out of the nightmare but still not being fully awake.

Track 2 - "Across my Mind"

This track was completed over the course of the whole year in different parts. To subvert my typical songwriting process, I decided to create the instrumental for this track long before the lyrics came in. I recorded two different guitar parts first and added a synth. I decided to just have the instrumental as a base that I could return to when I felt inspired. Over the course of the year, I had a running list of notes on my phone where I would write down small little thoughts (even if they were not necessarily fully fleshed out and sometimes did not make sense). Particularly, I would write down these thoughts during moments when I was not in my regular conscious state—many of the thoughts I wrote down while waking up in the middle of the night or was half asleep or falling asleep. At around 1:50, there are two lines that are hard panned right and left because these were thoughts that I did not want to be completely discernible to the listener so having some distance created a sense of privacy with certain lyrics. In the future, I hope to further explore the relationships between privacy and safety, memory, and perception of reality as it pertains to my lyrical expression. At 2:20, I decided to improvise the last few lines as a way of wrapping up the collection of thoughts which I had gathered. Improvisation has never been a tool I've utilized in my songwriting, as my lyrics are normally written with a specific storyline and audience in mind. Forgoing any sort of desire for audience approval allowed me to speak my

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thoughts in a far more fluid and less rigid manner than I am used to—an approach to lyrical production which I plan on exploring more in future projects.

Track 3 - “Paranoia Breaking”

This track was based around a field recording I did on a plane. I was feeling paranoid during the plane ride and was listening to music with noise cancelling headphones. The sound of the pilot came through the headphones faintly and I thought it was part of the song I was listening to, which contributed to the sense of paranoia, as I had not remembered this as being part of the song. I then took off my headphones and realized the captain was speaking and decided to capture it. I considered the ethics of recording the pilot's voice without his knowledge, and ultimately concluded that the heavy processing (which culminates in percussive instrumental treatment of this sample) justifies the recording. The whole track is meant to encapsulate the feeling of paranoia. I used a sample of the pilot's voice for the two-part percussion section. After the actual recording of the captain speaking plays, I distorted the sample and repeated it many times to replicate the feeling of unease and craziness at the peak of my paranoid state. Following this peak is a moment of come-down accompanied by a siren, meant to replicate the sound of the siren I heard as a child when I was on a plane that caught on fire—an incident to which I can trace my plane-ride paranoia back to. The slow sustained chord and reintroduction of percussion was my way of bringing me back to reality sonically.

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Track 4 - "India Point Park"

This track is the sonic embodiment of one cold morning at India Point Park. I listened to a guided meditation while sitting on the rocks and afterwards remained sitting there, observing visual surroundings and making note of the feelings each observation conjured in me. I wrote down all my observations in a notebook and recorded some of those notes. I then improvised the sung part of the vocals based on the spoken word track I had just laid down. Next, I recreated the different sensations I experienced at the park through the slow sweeping synth paired with the small twinkling dry bells. This was a new method of songwriting for me, as my inspiration usually derives from past experiences rather than a deliberate collection of observations used for the purpose of lyrical material. I often encounter writer's block when I am simply writing based on past experiences but having a fresh set of material to write about through these observations is something I plan on keeping in my long-term tool kit.

Track 5 - "Swimming"

This track is a product of a moment when I was dancing with a few of my high school friends. I got so lost in the music that it felt like I was swimming through it. I tried to describe the feeling after and swimming was the only verb that could adequately describe the experience — it felt like I was surrounded by the music on all sides and fully immersed in the beat. I wanted to recreate this feeling through both the lyrics and the strong, driven percussion of this track. Embodied cognition research increasingly demonstrates the wisdom of the body, and in the

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context of this largely sound art album, I still wanted to foreground this through a dance track about dancing.

Track 6 - "Doing It For Ourselves"

_____ "Doing It For Ourselves" is the track I feel most embodies the feeling which I was trying to capture for the album, in that everytime I listen to it and close my eyes, I forget where I am and transcend into an empty plane where can visualize and place every detail of the instrumentation for the song. I do feel as though my state of consciousness is altered when I listen to it. The vocals at the beginning of the song are from a voice memo which I recorded one night while half asleep. I hadn't even remembered that I recorded it until days later when I discovered it on my phone. I thought this voice memo was a perfect sonic representation of being in an altered state of consciousness so I decided to base the track around the recording as the foundation. The subsequent instrumental layering was intuitive in its construction; every time I added an element, I closed my eyes and listened for fit, accepting or rejecting layers based on whether they evoked the tone and feeling I was seeking to convey.