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### A Trial-And-Error Study on Trend Analytics for The DIY Musician

Coldplay, Pink Floyd, Queen, Vampire Weekend, and Radiohead. What do all of these, and dozens of other household artist names have in common? It may come as a surprise to many that each of these bands was formed while its members were in college, and went on to see great success beyond their humble beginnings (Kasarsky, Payne). Their stories have served as inspiration and motivation to small, independent artists like ourselves.

But what separates artists like us from reaching the same desired fate of sold-out arenas and worldwide tours? Where is the line drawn between talent and hard work, or between a passion project recorded and produced in the midst of Gen Ed courses and a viral, chart-topping album? Wherein lies the secret that will launch us from the janky, handbuilt recording studio in our dorm rooms, to a sold-out performance at Madison Square Garden? These questions have circled our minds since we began songwriting and producing music together two years ago, and have continued to both plague and inspire us as we work.

From these wonderings we shaped our songs, and from the consequent streams of thought we birthed our Honors project thesis: Although many DIY musicians believe that releasing songs based around the broad subject of love will effectively reach their target demographic, we believe that writing culturally relevant songs aimed at the life struggles of a specific age group will generate a larger amount of streams, and that the diversity of our sound - EDM influences, classic rock and jazz, trap and swung beats - will market itself to our target demographic of kids our age who grew up listening to the same music.

So we began with an EP of eight songs, collaboratively written and recorded in two divergent themes. The first; love and heartbreak. The second; technology and depression as

seen through the lens of Generation Z. We wrote, produced and published the album in-house, recording vocals and instruments and mixing in a makeshift on-campus studio, and then turning to professionals for hire to complete the masters. When this was finished, we uploaded all tracks to Spotify, Apple Music, CD Baby, and any other available platforms. We paid fees for publication, registered the songs under ASCAP or SESAC to ensure collection of our royalties, then extensively tracked and researched our analytics on social media and streaming platforms to decipher which songs were more successful or received the most streams. From there we also sent out paid applications to playlist creators on streaming platforms, reached out to contacts at local and college radio stations, and sent electronic press kits to record labels, music blogs such as DigitalTourBus and Down with Sound.

As we had done before the album even released, we sought input and feedback from music review magazines, established and respected individuals in the songwriting and music streaming fields, radio hosts, and tastemakers. Using that research, we are now reshaping our writing process and content direction, as well as our marketing strategies. Our objective goal is to not only increase our chances of success, financial and otherwise, in our own careers, but to inform and inspire any other college students pursuing a career in music beyond what their universities' programs or facilities may be able to offer them.

In today's fast-paced, algorithm-driven world, it seems that going viral is the only way to ensure success in the music industry. Gone are the days where a starry-eyed young artist could go door to door with copies of their demos on a CD -- in fact, gone are the days of the CD in general. Today, streaming and online sales drive the bulk of musicians' success (Ingham). Every time a song is streamed, downloaded, sampled, broadcast, re-broadcast and performed live, an artist can collect royalties. Thus the importance of driving up online consumption of one's creative material; one Instagram post or TikTok sound goes viral, and within a matter of

hours a single artist can be exposed to millions of people. Yet it's difficult to predict how an audience will react to certain pieces of content, and even more difficult to guarantee that they'll share it with their followers (Connor).

Some artists such as Frank Ocean manage to be exceptions to the rule -- despite his lack of interviews, the fact that he hasn't tweeted since 2013, and rarely, if ever, performs live, he still sits on a weighty 10 million monthly Spotify listeners and the third largest debut album of 2016 behind Drake and Beyonce (Rubinstein). The musical duo Brevin Kim distinguished themselves from hordes of cookie-cutter artists by using social media and online content as extensions of their art, rather than as flashy but ultimately empty marketing strategies. The pair of brothers ensure that their small catalogue of social media posts transports listeners into the right headspace for a listening session and puts the music first to focus on growth in the short term. They prefer to shape their image and releases around the rawness and vulnerability of their music and make their true selves the centerpiece of their online presence. "The most recurring theme from our fans was how much we helped them to get through a tough time, or even saved their lives," says the duo's younger brother Callin. "We never intended to save lives, we're not firefighters, but the things we say are relatable. And we allow people to interpret our stories however they please" (Rubinstein).

But what works for some artists, plummeting them into fame virtually overnight, doesn't always work for others. Therefore, we knew we wanted to explore the type of content that would go viral for us personally. We had already hit many of the necessary marks for engaging an audience: our content is unique and creative, we have active social media presences, and our music takes sonic influences from popular chart-topping artists like Jon Bellion, The Chainsmokers, and Justin Bieber that strike a familiar chord with listeners without losing our originality (Felt).

It also helps that our story is attention-catching -- two exes who stayed in a band together after their breakup to create music that couldn't be made without them. After all, there's a reason why shows like *Nashville* ran for several seasons with variations of the same story, or why the film, *A Star Is Born*, has been remade four times in Hollywood history. Our culture lives and breathes for the timeless story of star-crossed lovers chasing the American Dream of fame and success... factor in some inner turmoil such as drug addictions and mental illness, add a love triangle or two into the dynamic, toss a gorgeous soundtrack in the background, and you've got yourself eight Academy Awards nominations (Mackelden).

As many of these themes -- sex, drugs, and rock n' roll -- are already heavily present in our songwriting, we decided to split the content of the songs in our EP into two relative groups. Half of the songs would address unrequited love, heartbreak, and new relationships. With the added context of our own very public romantic relationship and breakup, these songs draw in a significant amount of listeners for us. After all, part of garnering fame and sex appeal as a public figure is not just being desirable but learning how to balance being simultaneously unattainable and yet *just* within reach of one's admirers.

We also wanted the other half of our songs to focus on issues that felt important and relevant to us as voices of our generation; half of the EP would focus on themes of mental illness as well as Gen Z's wrestle with technology, living in a post-9/11 society, the media-driven numbness we felt regarding the war crisis in Iraq, two economic recessions, and the full-speed-ahead consumption-focused culture that has left us feeling empty and relying on things like substance abuse and Netflix bingeing to substitute the emotions we can no longer bring ourselves to feel. Since 50% of our listeners are part of the Millennial and Gen Z age groups, we feel that they can relate to many, if not all, of the experiences we explore in our music (*Trending & Analytics*).

In terms of sonic decisions, we relied on the allegorical references, unexpected instrumentation, and coming-of-age angst that we are known and recognized for. And for this body of work, we explored more surprising chord progressions, driving swung drums, and odd (sometimes hilarious) vocal samples. We recorded a couple of the songs in the living room of an AirBnB cabin in Chattanooga, TN, driving more than 8 hours each to meet halfway between our homes at the time so that we could record while school was on holiday.

Others were recorded in Professor Clemmons's office on campus after classes and homework. With an eclectic collection of recording equipment bought on Facebook Marketplace and microphones borrowed from local musicians, we set up our studio in a small room filled with books and half-graded papers, laboring long after fellow students and even faculty and staff had gone back to their homes. During most sessions, we would watch the night-shift janitorial staff come and go, as we recorded take after take until each word was perfectly sung. Last-minute song lyric changes were made as we bounced ideas off of each other, and the heavenly hosts harmonizing in each song were comprised of multiple painstakingly-written and sung parts as we collaborated to create more and more pieces of the ever-changing puzzle.

According to CD Baby, before we released the EP, we averaged 199 streams a week on Spotify, but once the new music dropped, we peaked at 6,260 streams per week. On Apple Music, we jumped from 12 streams a week before the release, to 479 a week. This means that while our audience was listening to our older music, they resonated more and consequently interacted more with our newer music. Therefore we calculated that releasing music thematically tailored to our audience's experiences and musical tastes increased our streams by anywhere from 3,000-4,000% on each streaming platform respectively.

When it came to themes, the single *Ghosts & Zombies* led on Apple Music with 555 streams, and *Shut Me Down* followed with 238. On Spotify, *Ghosts & Zombies* once again took

the lead with 17,881 streams, and *Paralyzed* came in second with 1,249. From this, we gathered off the bat that our love-themed songs fared best. More specifically, our audience seems drawn to our darker sounds -- scratchy, emotional vocals, intense techno beats, and heavy bass seem to appeal most to our audience.

Trending and analytics trackers such as CD Baby also provide incredible, if seemingly useless, insight into the patterns and habits of our listeners. For example, we can even track the types of devices our listeners are streaming our music from -- 6,590 people listen from their cell phones, while 766 tuned in from a gaming console, and 84 streamed from a Smart TV. No one listened from a built-in car application.

Throughout the process of writing, recording, producing, and releasing this album, we have learned so much more than just how to track analytics. So much of our creative content and marketing could not have been completed without our friends in other artistic disciplines who helped us with album art, photoshoots, and setting up live gigs and interviews. We collaborated with radio hosts, local tastemakers, unions of DJ's, and many others in the industry who not only gave us incredible feedback but also promoted our music wholeheartedly as if we were extensions of themselves. We discovered that all it took was one well-connected person to hear our music and discover the authenticity and vulnerability of our work, before they passed it along to a colleague with the next amazing opportunity.

They say that hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard, but when talent works hard, one enters a whole new ballpark. Instantaneous fame may be what we see in our social media feeds, but behind the scenes of that one viral post or song may be a plethora of failed albums, posts that barely got any likes, hours of unseen laboring, etc. Though we live in a world of instant gratification, the reality is that most of us will have to strive extensively to reach the level of success and fame that we desire. Therefore, we have to be calculated about the

way we create and promote our content, using social media trending, analytics and algorithms to our advantage rather than allowing them to become pitfalls. And maybe someday, if we're lucky, we'll have something more in common with the likes of Queen and Pink Floyd.

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