the long road

An Honors Thesis

by

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"the long road" is a recording project that is divided into two sections. The first section is the compact disc itself on which the recording process was physically worked through from the beginning to the end. The second section is a written accompaniment to the first section, which provides a description of the events that occurred in producing the compact disc. The two parts work together to both describe and provide an example of what can be accomplished through the recording process.
An old cliche says that music soothes the savage beast, and to a certain extent I know that to be true. Among other things, listening to music can relieve stress, make someone smile when they are blue, and even put a crying baby to sleep, and it was during a discussion on the power of music that this project first came to me. Unfortunately for me, this discussion was during the first semester of my junior year and the fruit of it was filed away in my memory for later use...only to be forgotten. Forgotten about until a day this past summer when it came rushing back to me like a wave on the ocean.

When the idea for this thesis came back to me, I was thinking about my prospects for this project and beginning to become very stressed over my limited options, and whenever I’m stressed, I always play the same CD – *Ten* by Pearl Jam. After hearing the first few songs, I once again began to think to myself, “Hey, now that doesn’t seem like it would be too hard...why don’t I record a CD for my thesis?” So, as you can see, that is exactly what I did. However, it was not necessarily as easy as it sounds.

After my experiences this semester, I have a whole new appreciation for the artists and producers in this world. I had no idea how much time and how many decisions went into recording just one song, much less a whole album. And since I do not play an instrument, the first decision I had to make was to find an artist willing to work with me on this project, and Kenny Smith was my natural choice.

Kenny, or Ken Ryan as he prefers to be known musically, is both a driven and talented artist and performer, which is one of the reasons I was drawn to him. To succeed in the music business an artist has to give it all of their effort, and Kenny was willing to
do that from day one. So with his effort, talent, and enthusiasm involved, this project started on a good note.

Once Ken and I agreed to work together, we had to set about the task of selecting the sound that we wanted to portray on his demo. We had to choose songs that fit the sound he wanted to have, and more importantly the sound that record companies want to have for their artists. Luckily for us both, the more traditional sound of rock and roll has begun to make a comeback in today’s marketplace. The days of dark, angry, hard rap/rock are on their way out as the Creeds and Nickelbacks of the world return to popularity - meaning that Kenny’s style of writing and performing are on the up-swing and we needed to select songs that showcased those abilities. After some discussion and listening to what Ken had been working on at the time, we decided to work on a series of six songs, including the four that appear on this disc (“Fool,” ”Open Up,” “Never Know,” and “Awakening”), all of which are solid, three-minute, radio-friendly, rock songs that are well-written and very catchy. While the other two songs were well-written, they lacked the drawing power that the other songs possessed.

In the early days of recording, artists had almost no choice but to go to a studio to record their songs, but that is not true today. Through developments in technology, almost anyone can record in the comfort of their own home, which is what we did for this project. This was not our original decision, though. In the beginning, we had decided to record some of the music in Muncie at a studio in the Ball Communications building and then record the rest at a friend’s state-of-the-art home studio in Louisville, Kentucky: financially this was not to be. We did record some of the music in Muncie, but the majority of the music was recorded in Ken’s basement on a digital 8-track recorder we
rented from a local music shop. Fortunately for us, his basement has good acoustics and the sound does not differ greatly from what someone would be able to achieve in a recording studio.

After the raw (unmixed) music was recorded, we set about the task of mixing it into what is on the disc. This began with Kenny and I sitting down, listening to the raw tracks, and planning out how we wanted the final product to sound, essentially mapping out everything before we started. This made the process much simpler because knowing what the artists wants going in, the producer doesn’t have to fool with a million other possibilities. Mixing is definitely not an exact science. It is all about the feel of the music. If the artist wants the guitars to be more pronounced in a certain part of the song, the producer turns them up during that part. It is as simple as that. So having a plan before we started made everything much easier and quicker on both of us. To complete the mixes we used an 8-track version of Pro Tools, a scaled-down, shareware version of the premier audio software, which we downloaded from the Digidesign website. When the final mixes were created, we thought it was best to burn them onto blank compact disc writables (CDR’s). While popular culture would refer to this project as a demo tape, tapes are not as popular as they once were. Couple that with the time and money saving aspects of compact disks, no other logical choice presented for mass copying and distribution.

The final aspect of the project was the packaging, which is filled with small symbolism. We chose the title *the long road* because the path to being an artist is long and winding, beginning not only with this project but with the hours of work and practice that began when Ken was young and decided to pick up a guitar. So to symbolize this
journey, the cover of the disc is a long and winding road and the pictures on the inside are places where he has spent time over his youth (house, church, etc.). We also chose to shoot the pictures in black and white for a specific reason. Black and white photography has a certain artistic aspect to it, and that’s what we want for Ken. His music is his art and we want it to be well-received and respected. We also chose not to include a picture of Ken himself because we did not want to take the chance of him being typecast by his looks. His music should be heard without any preconceived notions of what he looks like. It is the only way we think that it will get a fair opinion.

The next and final step is to place the discs in the mail, after which decisions are out of our hands. It is a scary thought to think that all of our hard work’s possible success rests on the shoulders of someone we’ve never met, but no matter the outcome Ken and I are happy with the product. It relieves our stress and makes us smile when we’re blue, just like music should.
Great many thanks should go to Stan Sollars for being my advisor on this project, but for more importantly introducing me to it in the first place. Thank you Stan for all of your help and teaching along the way. I really appreciate it.

Thanks are also due to my parents. Without their inspiration and drive I definitely would not have completed this project. Thank you both.

I also need to thank the two Ken's. First I want to thank Kenny Smith. Kenny, I want to thank you for being a willing part of this project, and for giving your effort to it. Without you, obviously there would be no project. Second, thank you Ken Presley for all of your last minute help. While you may think that it was not much, it meant a lot to the end-result of this project and I really appreciate all you did. Thank you both.