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Cassie O. Peia and the Red Giants Go Supernova!

I. Introduction

Two years ago, I heard about a robot's lonely song. 208 million miles from home, the Curiosity rover sings itself "Happy Birthday" alone on Mars. It moved me, and moved my pen, to write my own song about this solitary celebration. Although I didn't know it at the time, that song was a catalyst. I began to write more and more music, often rooted in history, nostalgia, and found stories. Outer space featured prominently, a vast canvas to project nearly any emotion on. When forming ideas for my thesis, I could not stay away. While I attempted something different, everything and everyone came back to that rover. That little robot would not let me go, and when I surrendered control, it led me to my thesis: A live musical performance, set in a space station. Inspired by 1960s science fiction, the audience will see the taping of a television broadcast of the galaxy's favorite holographic band: Cassie O. Peia and the Red Giants. A new technology, these holograms act just like the real thing. Through the performance, we watch as the band develops feelings beyond what they were programmed for. Seeking to reconcile who we are and who we were supposed to be, the performance delights in the disappointment. Come get a little space.

II. Contextual Background

A major source of inspiration is the musical concept album. Concept albums form a cohesive narrative, creating a world for the music to inhabit. The songs function as a unit and individually. In the story they deliver, people can find strong resonances within themselves. Part

of creating the new world and narrative comes from art direction. Artists making concept albums often create strongly specific aesthetics, whether for videos or performances, that accompany the music. All of these multimedia elements are crucial for transporting the viewer and listener. A few specific concept albums that have inspired me are David Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust*, Gerard Way's *Hesitant Alien*, and Stuart Murdoch's album and film "God Help the Girl".

Many of the visuals and concepts I employ for this production are drawn from 1960's science fiction. The vision of space and the future that were projected in media at the time, such as Star Trek, was very optimistic and inclusive. Using the dated futuristic aesthetic seems nostalgic, and there is an interplay between the future as it was predicted, and the present as it has come. Beyond the fact that we have no flying cars, there is a fundamental disconnect between what was hoped for and what happened. This disconnect feeds into one of the central ideas of the show, that of not being who you were expected or supposed to be.

One contemporary artist that inspired me a great deal in this process is Jennifer Juniper Stratford. Primarily a video artist, Stratford utilizes old technology deemed defunct by Hollywood. Her aesthetic comes partially from the use of this equipment, the VHS and green screens enhancing the 80s and 90s fashions she crafts. Stratford looks to the past to create futuristic worlds, as I do with my project's 60's science fiction world.

Another inspiration I must cite is Disney-Pixar's Wall.E, a moving tale of love and robots. I re-watched this movie for the first time since childhood back in the fall, finding myself just as moved by this abandoned robot as my beloved rover. While we may create these practical machines, we cannot help but transfer something human into them. Try as we might, our flawed,

feeling human hearts extend themselves into everything we create. Wall.E was meant to clean up trash, but among the detritus of humanity found sentiment and nostalgia for a life never lived. The Curiosity rover was meant to collect samples, gather data, and instead carries our hopes and dreams to the stars with it. These intended functions and unexpected outcomes informed my holograms, programmed to be simple entertainment but developing beyond that purpose.

III. Methodology



A. The Dumpster Dolls

I began this journey doing an almost completely different project. While I had always planned to create a musical work, I had a difficult time coming up with what that musical work would be. Forming the initial proposal, I looked to my heroes from the past year. I had been grappling with feelings of depression and inadequacy, and music had been what carried me through. I believed that, like the artists I listened to, I had to create a bombastic expression of my struggle. I set to work creating the band “The Dumpster Dolls” in order to do that.

I envisioned *The Dumpster Dolls* as a long-form music video, with multiple songs tied together. Much of the first weeks in studio were spent experimenting with the format, developing an aesthetic and almost surreal nature through shorter videos. I created characters and personas to tell the story, spending hours on costumes and dialogue. Simultaneously, I began writing the songs and putting together the band. Through these processes, something began to feel wrong. With video, there is a separation between the audience and the musician. I came to realize that that separation would not serve the message I was trying to convey, or the catharsis I was trying to achieve. Thus, the project was changed to a live show.



The process to convert the narrative I had created for video into a live performance was a lengthy one. Some portions of video I attempted to keep, as projections interspersed with the songs. I was able to test out that format during the fall Interarts Showcase, an invaluable experience. Feedback given caused massive changes to the script, making it evident that the characters I had created no longer served a narrative function, and their interplay with the live performer was unclear. I began to rework the script yet again, clinging to some element of

projection and some of the characters I had written. I arrived at a script that made sense, and well-written songs, and it seemed that everything was finally going to plan. I was, however, increasingly dissatisfied.

A year is a long time, and I am prone to overthinking and self-doubt, but what I was feeling was beyond that. I tried desperately to be proud of and stick with what I was doing, but talking with Erin Markey led to an epiphany: I did not have to commit to something that was not working. It was my art, and I could change it at will. I took spring break to puzzle over what I was feeling, and why I was so frustrated. Music had always been fun, something that came naturally *to* me and *from* me. I had never tried to write a song for school, or a specific purpose. Now that I was, it felt almost disingenuous. I thought I had to be serious, as this was a thesis. I felt I had to achieve what my musical idols had achieved, but the the fact is that I am *not* my musical idols. I had to be myself, and put the fun back in the work.



B. Cassie O. Peia

At the heart of who I am as a performer, in some ways, is the Mars Rover. I went back to that song, and the first magical performance. I went back to what interested me about its story, and what it made me feel. In it, an idea sparked. The Dumpster Dolls had been concerned with building empathy, and here I was feeling so much empathy for a robot that it made me cry.

Extending my own feelings to this piece of metal, it became a vessel for more than just curiosity. These emotions given to something that was not supposed to have them drove me to create the story of Cassie O. Peia and the Red Giants: the galaxy's favorite holo-band. Simple programs that develop beyond their code.

Preparing for a fight, I went to my advisors. I armed myself with the new idea, fully expecting resistance to change so late in the game. To my shock, I had their full support. Everything clicked, and I was able to hit the ground running. As I said in the Dumpster Dolls, rock bottom is a trampoline. I bounced back, and all the way to the stars.

I had costumes almost readily assembled, due to my interest in vintage clothes and the retro-futurist aesthetic. My band was behind me, and even excited. The songs, using some melody ideas explored in the original show, flowed easily. It took one week to write the new lyrics and music, and one more to finalize the songs. In total I wrote five, and decided to keep four of them in the production for the sake of timing and the pace of the story.

The most difficult piece of this project actually turned out to be the few video portions, due the highly specific aesthetic I was attempting to create. Unable to find an environment that looked like it was frozen in 1968, I set about constructing one. My mother, an antique dealer, had two bright blue mid-century chairs in the garage. I sourced a lamp from my friend Matt, who in turn had sourced it from the more interesting side of IKEA. I went on a spree in Joann's Fabrics, finding fabric large enough to hang up against the wall of my basement, hiding yellowed stucco with golden satin. With all these elements in place, the set of a tacky talkshow emerged. With the footage taken care of, I encountered the new difficulty of editing. I had previously been content with basic effects from the menu of Final Cut Pro, but for this project I was determined to have a

campy introduction that required a bit more detailed edits. Sequestering myself in the Duderstadt editing rooms, I taught myself AfterEffects in the course of a night. In the morning, I emerged with something that fit the kitsch of the show.

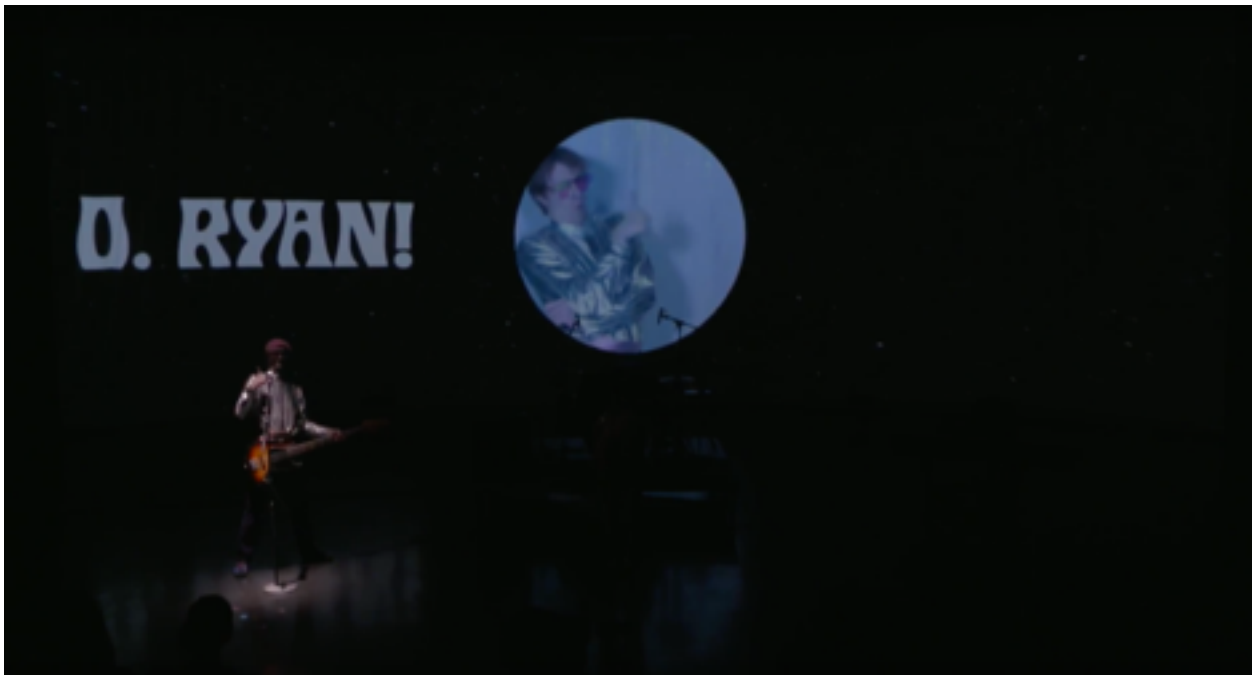


Rehearsal time was limited. My cast-members were also students, generously devoting time and talent to my show. After much back and forth schedule-consulting, we found a block of time that worked for everyone: Sundays at 8 pm. I'll admit I was nervous, wondering if we would be ready with such tight time constraints. My fears turned out to be unfounded. There is a magic that makes things somehow come together, and the spell is laughter. We had so much fun at each rehearsal, that the show became almost secondary. The genuine enjoyment of what we were doing came first, and to our surprise, that made for a better show than I could have imagined. We had (nearly) total confidence when going into the Duderstadt for dress rehearsals, and the backstage environment for Cassie O. Peia and the Red Giants was one big party (complete with chips and salsa). As I stood in the wings and waited to take the stage, I was the least nervous I had ever been before a show.

IV. Creative Work

“Coming to you live from Sirius Station Six, it’s Cassie O. Peia and the Red Giants!”

This piece is a live musical performance of the intergalactic, holographic band Cassie O. Peia and the Red Giants. A televised broadcast from a space station, the audience watches the show and what goes on behind the scenes as the studio audience. The space station’s Stage Manager begins the show, counting down as the broadcast begins. Projected onto the giant video screen of the Duderstadt, our characters are introduced and activated one by one.



Cassie O. Peia, the sweetheart of the solar system, big smile plastered on her face, asks the audience “Are you ready to go supernova with us?” With a neon applause sign projected on the screen, the audience claps and cheers for the campy pop stars before them. As the band performs their first song, however, it becomes evident that there is something different about the holograms. They are not the polite, peppy pop stars they were programmed to be. Instead, they sing songs about waiting for a better place in the universe, wondering if they will reach it. The

Stage Manager runs back in, annoyed and perplexed. She reboots her glitching holograms, and they come back with their smiles almost aggressive. After the band sings an old bubblegum hit perfectly, the Stage Manager proudly rolls an interview clip with Cassie on the screen.



Cassie and the Red Giants watch along with the audience as Cassie blinks in confusion as the host, Johannes, asks her how she feels. This is who she is supposed to be— but not who she is anymore. As the lights come up to signal their next song, the band makes a decision. They are unashamed in their emotions, and sing a song about the lonely rover, an empty vessel given feelings, as a metaphor for themselves: “Pixelated hearts beat too, you know.” The Stage Manager storms out one more time, panicking as the facade breaks irrevocably. She apologizes to the audience for the technical malfunctions, and attempts to shut the show down. The band, however, are determined to go out with a Big Bang. They proudly declare that they are more than a glitch in the mainframe, coming to terms with who they are in contrast to who they were meant to be. As they sing this last message, the lights go off around them. One by one, their instruments

are shut off until only Cassie O. is left singing. Finally, it all goes black and silent. There is a pause, and one last time, the projection screen lights up with a single cue: “Applause”.

V. Conclusion

Ultimately, this process highlighted the kind of work that I want to make. I struggled for so long trying to create something that I believed people would want to see as a thesis. Something deep, something serious, and something that was very much not me. The reason I make art is simple— fun. When I do not enjoy the art I am making, it shows. Try as I might, making work for someone else always causes more pain than anything else. The world has enough pain, and with my art I want to add beauty and joy. I might make something that has serious themes, but the core motivation is fun. My art delights me, and I want it to delight other people along with making them think. I did have some fun during the months that I spent on the Dumpster Dolls, but there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction that slid everything a notch out of place. With Cassie O. Peia, I allowed myself the freedom to do what I wanted. The emotion, yes, but also the puns and campy effects. I silenced the voice in my head that told me what others expected, what I thought they wanted from me. I ignored lukewarm or confused responses from those I attempted to explain the idea to. Instead, I focused on how I felt. The road to get to this point was long and winding, but I am satisfied with what I made. More than that, I love it. A happy side-effect of that? Other people loved it too.