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Detours in Music - Podcast

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Visual and Performing Arts
James Madison University

by Laura Fairbanks Ruple

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Accepted by the faculty of the School of Music, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the School of Music via WebEx on March 27, 2020.

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Acknowledgements

My sincerest thanks go to my advisor, Prof. Casey Cangelosi for his enthusiasm and commitment to my project and its success. I would also like to thank the members of my committee: Dr. Andy Connell, Dr. Eric Guinivan, and Dr. Jeanette Zyko, for following along in the progress of the capstone. I am so grateful to everyone who was interviewed for the podcast and to everyone who listened. I could not have done it without you!

Abstract

The podcast, *Detours in Music*, aims to inspire, spark interest, and educate its audience of all ages and music levels about a life in music. Each episode includes an interview with someone involved in music at the professional level. The interviews focus on the person's story and the paths and detours their lives have taken them on, leading them to where they are today. The project has been well received, with episodes downloaded on four continents, and a consistent following of listeners. The podcast is intended to help its listeners connect with music faculty members at JMU, gain new perspectives on career paths, and to reflect on life's unexpected detours. For example, nearly all people interviewed had either an entirely different major when they entered college or were double majoring with something else and music. The reflective essay describes the process of creating the podcast, and the evolution it has had so far.

Reflective Essay

Embarking on a long-term project can oftentimes seem daunting and overwhelming. The James Madison University (JMU) Honors College Capstone is one such project. Throughout my four years of college, I have come to learn a lot about myself as a student. This includes learning how I study most effectively, how I best manage my time, and what projects motivate me the most. When brainstorming my capstone topic, I reflected back on WRTC 103, a general education writing course I took during my freshman year at JMU. It was in this class where I found a project type that truly motivated me. In place of a written final essay, we had a long term (8-week) research project that culminated in a 20-minute podcast. The research and writing requirements were the same as a typical assignment but were enhanced by us aurally dictating our findings. I devoted my heart and soul to my topic (Race Inequality in the United States Criminal Justice System) and maintained work on it day by day. With this past project in mind, I latched onto the idea of creating a podcast for my Honors Capstone.

I connected with the JMU School of Music faculty member who would be a perfect Capstone Advisor for such a project: Casey Cangelosi. At JMU, Cangelosi is an Assistant Professor of Percussion as well as creator and host of the internationally recognized percussion podcast, @percussion. Cangelosi was willing to be a part of my project and was excited to help me sort through the ideas I had for creating my own podcast. I also reached out to three JMU Music faculty members to make up my capstone committee: Dr. Andy Connell, Professor of Ethnomusicology, Dr. Eric Guinivan, Associate Professor of Composition, and Dr. Jeanette Zyko, head of Undergraduate Admissions, and Assistant Professor of Oboe.

In the beginning of my first semester working on my capstone, I started listening to the podcast, *Double Reed Dish – a podcast for oboists, bassoonists and the people who love them*,

hosted by Galit Kaunitz and Jacqui Wilson. This podcast is widely popular in the double reed community (oboists and bassoonists) that I am a part of. Their episodes alternate weekly between an interview with an oboist and an interview with a bassoonist. The guests are always well-known performers or pedagogues with years of experience. *Double Reed Dish* is a huge asset to musicians in the double reed community, as well as young musicians looking for a resource to learn about their field. This podcast has given me a lot of inspiration as to how I wanted to plan my episodes and who I wanted my audience to be.

I have always loved getting to know people and hearing stories about their life. The discussion style used by *Double Reed Dish* gave me the idea to interview Professors within the JMU School of Music. These are people who I have been surrounded by at JMU, yet I have not scratched the surface of getting to know how they got to where they are today. As my graduation from JMU came closer into view, I decided to apply and audition to graduate schools. In music performance, you typically look for a school that has an applied faculty member that you would love to study with, and a program where you would be able to fulfill your performance and academic pursuits. Perhaps the most important factor in a music education is the relationship with the teacher, and it is recommended that students take prospective lessons with teachers before deciding to apply and audition at each school. Again, I turned to *Double Reed Dish* where I was able to listen to an hour-long interview with each of the teachers I was to take trial lessons with. This was an incredible resource available to me, and it helped me get to know each Professor, understand their expectations of students, and imagine how I would work with them—all before meeting them in person. This got me thinking of how I could create a podcast to be used as a tool for the JMU School of Music. I could interview a faculty member in each area (14 areas), and they could be made available to download on the JMU School of Music website. This

would give prospective JMU Music students deeper insight on the different degree programs, ensembles, instrumental concentrations, and faculty members.

Instead of naming my podcast something specific to JMU, I initially decided on *A Life in Music*, which later became *Detours in Music*. I worked with Cangelosi to create my project proposal, which required more detailed planning and forward thinking than a typical creative project would need. This resulted in various adjustments to the project since the proposal. For example, I initially thought that the episodes would need to have more segments than just the interview. Although I may revisit this idea in the future, this is one area that I differed from my project proposal where I had outlined other segments of the podcast episodes.

In the second semester of the project, I was to conduct interviews and publish them online. Before doing so, I decided I wanted a jingle to help cultivate the podcast brand, and style. With the help of one of my committee members, Dr. Eric Guinivan, Professor of Composition, I was able to send out a call for composers. I asked the student composers for a 30 second composition based off of the word “detours”. With three composers immediately interested, I had the final podcast music within a few weeks. After working with a JMU graphic design major to design a logo, creating an account on a podcast hosting site, and purchasing audio recording equipment, I was almost ready to begin my podcasting journey.

In that semester, I interviewed five faculty members and then just had the audio files sitting on my computer for weeks before doing anything with them. During this time, I decided to bite the bullet and record an intro episode. I no longer think this episode aids in the listening or understanding of the podcast, but at the time I felt that I had to explain what my goals were and what was going to happen. Once I completed the intro episode, I felt much more confident and excited for people to hear these conversations I had had with incredible artists. I published the

next five episodes quickly after and was glad that I had met my goal number of episodes.

Originally, I was not thinking of continuing the project and that would be it for the *Detours in Music* podcast.

All it took for me to fall completely in love with the podcast was to have an audience. Seeing the listener statistics on my podcast hosting site or hearing someone say they enjoyed listening to it gave me such a sense of accomplishment. One of these occasions was at an audition day for the JMU School of Music this past January. An auditioning family came up to the Interim Director of the School of Music and said they listened to my podcast on their way to JMU from D.C. that morning. This made me so happy! I wanted to know how they found the podcast and what they thought about it. After this encounter, I started focusing more on how to market the podcast by creating an Instagram, YouTube channel, and posting about it on my personal website and Facebook page. The podcast is now also available on the JMU School of Music website under the “Our People” tab. I take so much pride in each episode and am able to enjoy the editing and uploading.

Since those initial five episodes, I have tried to interview every faculty member I can. Each one of them has a unique and incredible journey that I want to be able to share to the podcast listeners. The podcast currently has 20 episodes: one introductory episode and 19 interviews with JMU faculty members. I have interviewed faculty members across the whole JMU music community, including Provost and head of Academic Affairs, Dr. Heather Coltman. When thinking of potential guests, Dr. Coltman came to mind immediately because she received all of her degrees in piano performance. Later in her career, however, she made the detour into full time administration. Stories like Dr. Coltman can connect to audience members who are considering taking a career detour or want to remain open to their diverse interests.

After graduation, I plan to create a second season of the podcast focusing on freelancers or faculty musicians outside of JMU. This would help diversify the podcast audience and push me to seek out musicians that I do not know as well. This project has turned out to be more successful than I could have imagined. *Detours in Music* has been downloaded in four continents and has had over 300 downloads since it became public. Reaching an audience across the globe, as well as within my local community, has been extremely gratifying.

My life has been fulfilled and enhanced by this hobby, and I love that it can grow and evolve with me. I would encourage musicians of all levels to listen to it as well as anyone who is looking to gain perspective about what a life in music can look like. Although the episode layout has changed since my project proposal, the podcast goals have always been to educate, spark interest, and inspire. These are the things that have not changed throughout this process and will continue to be at the heart of the *Detours in Music* podcast.