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## Bike Ride: An Audio/Visual Examination of Liminal Spaces as a Ritual for Personal Growth

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BIKE RIDE: AN AUDIO/VISUAL EXAMINATION OF LIMINAL SPACES AS A  
RITUAL FOR PERSONAL GROWTH

by

Myles Kelley

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Jazz Studies)

The Honors College

University of Maine

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Advisory Committee:

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Jack Burt, Professor, Trumpet and Music History

Beth Wiemann, Professor, Composition, Clarinet, Music Theory

## ABSTRACT

On March 6th, 2023, I presented a creative thesis titled “Bike Ride” in Minsky Recital Hall. This experience was the culmination of my work beginning in the spring of 2022, and it featured a set of live small ensemble charts (informed largely by Jazz vocabulary) which I set to a collection of film photographs I took on late night walks through campus. In the production and execution of “Bike Ride”, my goal was to examine the emotional power of liminal spaces as they are defined in both Psychology and Photography. The resulting performance, which was re-exhibited in the Collins Center for the Arts as part of the Student Symposium this spring, is a spiraling journey which represents my cherished time in the curious city of Orono, ME.

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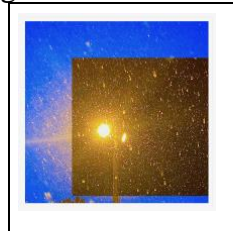
## DISQUISITION

### Context

The concept for my project "Bike Ride" developed during and as a reflection of my time as a student at the University of Maine. When I started as an undergraduate in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic redirected a lot of time which I might have used socializing or playing towards exploring my new home. During this time, I found late night walks to be comforting and exciting, and refused to look at campus maps for fear of spoiling the discovery of a new building or throughway. I averaged 14,000 steps daily in my first month at school, and wore the tread off of my sneakers.

This ritual was always accompanied with music, which I think I subconsciously programmed to "score" my walks. One night, I emerged at the top of the hill at the intersection between Long Rd and Munson Rd just as Brad Mehldau's "The Garden" reached its climax at 4:00. The massive flood lights from Alfond Stadium loomed over me, and I stopped to take a picture of the space so that I could remember the feeling. On another occasion, I captured the street light over the Smith Hall Lot at sunset and again after dark. The contrast of the two photos felt powerful, and I combined them in photoshop. The result was distorted and eerie, and set in motion my study of liminal spaces as an aesthetic:

Figure 1. "LVLGHTS"



I started to pull away from Jazz and group music in 2020 because it wasn't what I was listening to. With less opportunities to play live in the midst of the pandemic, I turned to music production as an outlet. I used the above image as artwork for my EP "LVLGHTS", which is a collection of music, concrete, poetry, and improvisation which I edited to match a concept I had in my head: music which matched vivid dreams I was having during that time. The material was heavily inspired by Slauson Malone's "Crater Speak", love songs by Daniel Johnston, and underground rap from the 2010s like Earl Sweatshirt and Vince Staples. Performing "LVLGHTS" live throughout the summer of 2022 empowered me creatively for the first time in a while.

Around this time, I outgrew my usual campus walks and purchased a bike, which could cover more ground, quicker. I became interested in the paper mill, Old Town history, and Ayers Island lore. I continued exploring how time, photography, and sound could interact to create powerful experiences. My dear friends Ben Flanagan and Reggie Kollman introduced me to the local music scene which I had been missing out on completely. The value of live improvised-music was clear again. At this point I realized that my nightly bike rides had become research for a project which was forming in my head.

### Intentions

The concept for "Bike Ride" is to examine liminal spaces (transitional periods or places) with small ensemble music and film photography. The culminating performance for the project features a live jazz sextet, playing in tandem with a projected set of pictures taken around Marsh Island on my late-night explorations. When a photo is fully

resolute on the screen, the music is static and free, but as the photo dissolves into its successor the band plays compositions which twist and resolve. A light, programmed to emulate the orange hue of a campus streetlight, illuminates the band and is dimmed during the static moments in the piece. Lastly, I cue short music concrete pieces from my laptop at three points in the setlist, to submerge the audience in sounds which are familiar to Orono and Old Town. This performance represents a journey which is personal to my experience in this place, with each photo marking the end of a leg and each leg being scored by a chart.

My intentions in creating this project developed as the details surrounding the performance came into focus. I originally wanted to treat “Bike Ride” as an experimental study, where I would take data on the audience response to the music as a way to gauge my success in inspiring personal growth through the music. However, my committee members helped me realize that this was far beyond the scope of the project I was hoping to complete, and that I was much better off putting on a show which was personally inspiring, under the assumption that some audience members would share my emotional connection with the experience. As I began to understand what my final product was going to look and sound like, I began to work more with the intention of engaging myself, and became less worried about the personal connection any audience might have with the work. The combination of visual and audio stimulus in “Bike Ride” is an attempt to temporarily place the audience in a number of liminal spaces (with static noise, still imagery, and the constant of the streetlight) while connecting the spaces with transitional moments (through-composed music, blurred imagery, and light cues) to create an underlying feeling of motion and, after the last transition, arrival.



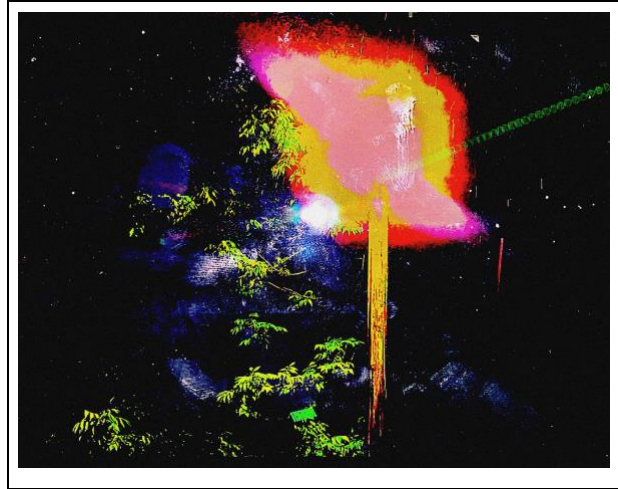
## Methodology

Since August, I composed and notated seven small-ensemble charts. One thing which was constant throughout the process was that I used “demos” to get my ideas out quickly before returning later for charting. For each of these pieces, I recorded a rough draft of the arrangement in Ableton Live using VST instruments and a MIDI keyboard to emulate the sounds which would ultimately be played by real musicians. I find that it is easy to get bogged down by technical issues and music conventions when I am composing in notation software, and so having a first draft recording of the music before I even created the Finale files helped me to generate material faster and more naturally.

When I began working on the visuals for my project, I realized that I was in new territory, as someone who had never really explored photography and who was unfamiliar with live cueing or the technology required for syncing visuals with a live band. I used two disposable cameras to take the pictures which appear in the show, and had the film developed at Walgreens. Many of the pictures I got back were distorted during development or featured RGB noise as a result of the camera getting cold when I was shooting during the winter. I ended up embracing the distortion in a lot of the shots, and purposely added more during their scanning. I used the flash on my phone to get overexposed and compressed JPEGs of the film photos. I imported these into an open source graphic design program called GIMP, where I added the same noise filter and crop dimensions to all of them. I am not trained in graphic design or photo-editing, but I

thought of this process like mixing and mastering an audio file: making distinct adjustments to the parts before treating the whole with final adjustments:

Figure 2. “Bikeride3”



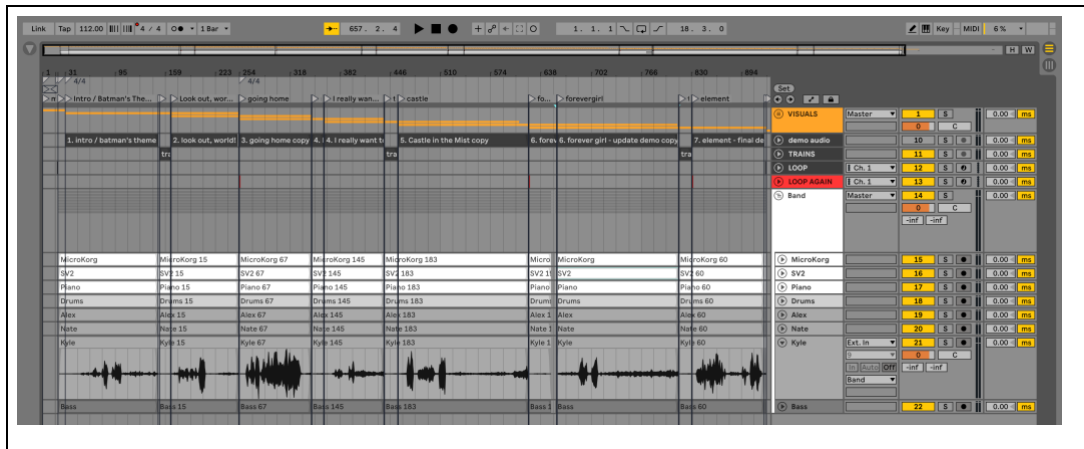
When I decided to compose a series of short electronic pieces to play during “Bike Ride”, it was in an attempt to ground the setting of my presentation in Orono, Maine. Since the ensemble charts which I had completed were all instrumental, and the visuals I had decided on were mostly shots taken at night in lesser known Marsh Island locations, I felt that it was important to tie the performance together with a set of sounds which would unmistakably confirm the local perspective on liminal spaces which I was hoping to get across. I had a collection of recordings on my phone from the train which runs along the edge of the river next to my apartment, and I selected thirty-second portions of these to become the “subject” of three musique concrète compositions I made in Ableton Live in February.

I arranged these pieces with a blanket workflow in the same way that a visual artist might create a “series” of paintings with similar color palette or subject matter. I

knew that I wanted each composition to have a gradual build in intensity, so that they each could serve as a tension-building introduction to the next ensemble-chart in the setlist. I automated the mix on a distortion plugin which effected the high frequencies of the train sounds, and also faded in a sub-bass sound which reached its peak just as the clips ended. Finally, I used white noise and a series of quick cuts to emulate the sound of a CD skipping or a radio signal being disrupted. The disruptions become more pronounced as the audio files progress. I think that these lo-fi aesthetics I added to my field recordings contributed to the feelings of obscurity and disorientation which accompany the liminal spaces in my project.

Being able to cue slow-blend transitions between my images which could line up with the live band was the most difficult part of engineering the visuals for this project. At first, I tried creating the blends in iMovie, and exporting the videos to be cued in Ableton: The same software where we would be recording the band as well as cueing audio files for the music concrete transitions. The problem with this approach was that iMovie wasn't able to produce a true linear blend effect over the five to ten minute spans of time which we would need to span the length of the ensemble charts. To solve this problem, I used a program called "VideoSync" which is an expansion of the coding language "Max SMP" which allows you to use Ableton's built in video window during arrangement view sessions, and which has a built-in blend effect which can be automated:

Figure 3. "bikeride.als"



The final show-file for “Bike Ride” has busses (large track groups) for Visuals as well as for the Band. I used locators which were mapped to midi notes to create “loops” after each song, which meant that when the band played longer than expected or needed more time getting ready to play the next chart, I was able to wait before cueing the visual blend effect. I’m happy with the tech setup I was able to build for our March 6th performance, because it allowed me to get quality recordings from the night, while also playing sounds via aux-out and cueing the visuals after each song.

### Critical Analysis and Literature Review

The first chart in “Bike Ride” is called “Intro / Batman’s Theme”. When I write music for live bands like this I usually have a specific gig or moment in mind. I think that the most exciting performances/albums usually have mysterious and cinematic introductions which start out reserved and build up tension before getting loud and energetic. Some inspirations for this intro style would be the beginning of BADBADNOTGOOD’s “Spotify Live” album, and the theme to Flying Lotus’ album “You’re Dead!”.

The first part of the chart is a solo synth figure which opens up into a Bari-sax solo over some descending changes in the key of B Minor. I wrote the chords in a

through-composed style here, to maintain a contrast between static and dynamic things” in my setlist. After the solo fades out, the energy picks up with big band hits under a melody inspired by “Batman’s Theme” by Danny Elfman. This chart captures the child-like wonder of listening to that soundtrack as a kid, as well as the innocence someone has before they begin a period of change. With the different textures and dynamics it presents, I think of it as an “overture” to the performance.

The next song we hear is “Look out, World!”, which I wrote in a practice room at 1944 hall this August. I experimented with doubling the bass line and the left hand of the piano in this arrangement, which makes the rhythm section sound really “tight” at higher tempos, and which ended up being a common element in the next three pieces I wrote. In the context of the project, “Look out, World!” matches the innocence of the introductory piece with a heightened feeling of confidence and hope for the future. It is comprised of two simple melody figures which repeat like a mantra, and might fall on the “crossing the threshold” line of a hero’s journey graphic.

In “Going Home”, I expanded this idea of doubling by synchronizing the kick, piano, and bass almost exactly in the A section. Since the only other element present at that moment is a solo melody line in the Tenor Sax part, I am hoping that the rigidity of the rhythm section in this style will give the soloist the ability to stretch out. This chart is one of three in my project where I experimented with improvisation as the basis for the composition. For these tunes, I set my phone to record as I fooled around at the piano and developed ideas. Once I had my voice memo, I started the process I described earlier of producing a “demo” in Ableton. I found this approach to be very natural and

straightforward, eliminating potential perfectionism by composing the main melody for the songs in the moment without much careful consideration. "Going Home" captures the liminal space a student encounters traveling home for holidays and weekend breaks. It's a feeling of safety similar to reaching a check-point in a video game.

"I really want to stay at your house" is originally a pop song by Rosa Walton which struck me because of its lyrics about human connection. It is a moment of truth and sadness in the program. It is one of two of my charts which begins with a period of free playing, guided mostly with chord changes. Part of the reason I like this is that the project is meant to be observational as much as a story which I'm telling. Allowing my friends to express themselves here feels like data collection, and I am proud to say that each time we have performed this section, it has been a unique sonic experience. I had hoped that the music and visuals would connect with the musicians like they do with me, and I think leaving pockets for improvisation like these has encouraged that process.

Another important thing to note for this composition is that I chose to score the solo section with synth keys and a hip-hop drum groove in the rhythm section. I include elements of electronic music and music concrete in the space between all of these charts where the projected images are resolute and still, and I think that including some of these more modern elements in the charts avoids any genre-whiplash which might distract the audience from the experience we're sharing.

"Castle in the Mist" is the first official cover arrangement in the "Bike Ride" program. During the 21-22 school year I stumbled across the song on an album called "ICO: Melody In the Mist" on Spotify. I assumed that it was a concept album based on

its vintage production style and cryptic song titles, being unaware that it was a soundtrack for a popular video game from 2002. The original song was produced with fake mandolin sounds and dark synths which I found to be a really cool aesthetic. For this arrangement (the B section in particular), I was inspired by bands like BADBADNOTGOOD and Mammal Hands, who use repeated figures and crescendos to build energy in a similar way that a EDM producer creates a "bass drop". In "Bike Ride", this song represents a cycle of highs and lows, and the difficulty of navigating between periods of certainty and uncertainty.

I have wanted to arrange Christian Scott's "Forever Girl" for a while now. Its dark tonality and lyrics discuss the idea of a "soulmate" in a serious manner which is refreshingly different from pop songs on the same subject. I also really like the groove of the record, as the drummer simulates a drum and bass break in the style of "Amen, Brother". The drum part in my arrangement is more involved than in the rest of my work this semester, which was possible due to a drum vst I used in the demo: Throughout this project, midi editing/program techniques have made it possible to experiment with more complex sounds from instruments I don't proficiently play. The instrumentation for this arrangement includes an electric piano sound which I think softens the sound of the rhythm section and leaves more space for the soloist in the mix. This song fits well right before the end of the setlist because it is high energy but also mysterious sounding.

"Bike Ride" fades to black and concludes its narrative with a chart called "Element". I have been practicing meditation on and off for the last three years as a way

of coping with stress, and noted that meditation guides often talk about the inherent focus that a musician has when they are at their peak performance in the moment. I ended up composing an ode to that sense of focus by writing a pretty conventional jazz chart. The main section of the music is typical as it has an AB form, the melody is played by three saxophones in harmony, and the soloists improvise over those same changes. The drum groove in the A section is called "Bembe", and is something I heard playing at a Jazz club in Portland over the summer. The offset rising bass line in the coda section is something that also appears in "Look out, World!". I like the idea that this song creates feelings of wonder and hope in the same way that the opening chart does, but with a renewed sense of confidence and ability. In this way, the narrative I'm presenting in this approx. forty-five minute set is like a spiral: It arrives back in the same place but at a higher level.

#### Summary of Learning

This project has changed the way that I compose music, and also the way I notate it. At my advisor's suggestion, I have begun taking notes in TextEdit alongside my finale files to organize what I need to get done on the chart and avoid getting distracted while I knock items off the list. This technique allows for a sense of completion on a task which could really go on forever, and it also creates quality control which made the band sound better on the charts. I also got stuck early in the Fall Semester and fell behind when I focussed too much on writing perfect songs and suddenly was unable to write any songs. The idea of generating a bunch of material which could be refined later was really helpful in finishing these songs, and also became helpful as I worked on the visuals for the project.



I also learned a lot about being a band leader during this process. I realized that, once you make the decision to notate your music, your musicians will play true to the written music, so any improvisation or liberties you want them to take with the music need to be clearly communicated during rehearsal or on the page. I also became aware of time efficiency and the importance of using everybody's time well during rehearsal. I ended up scheduling a rhythm section rehearsal in preparation for our April 14th performance, because I realized that the rhythm section was really what needed the time, and I didn't want the saxophone section to have to sit around while we worked out our parts together.

Lastly, I developed my communication skills as a musician during this project. By the second performance of "Bike Ride", I have found a good workflow of email composition and am able to communicate my needs in making creative events happen much more clearly than before. I think that this is an important skill for people in my industry, because of the sheer amount of logistics that go into playing good music, and the huge potential for misunderstanding when you aren't talking to a space-manager or sound-engineer in person. In preparation for our April 14th presentation especially, I began to enjoy coordinating my performances. I'm thankful for the resources and faculty support which the university was able to provide in creating "Bike Ride" and I hope that I can continue to bring this project to new audiences around the state in the future.

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## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Myles T. Kelley was born in Appleton, Maine on May 30, 2002. He graduated from Appleton Village School, Camden Hills Regional High School, and most recently The University of Maine. With a BA in Jazz Studies, Myles plans to move to Portland ME this August to pursue a career as a recording artist.