Chapter 8. Cultivating Signal, Noise, and Feeling: Songwriting Practices in Digital Rhetoric Courses

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As a working musician for more than 20 years (and that includes my punk rawk garage days in the 'burbs), I find that songwriting helps me attune to and make sense of pain and emotions—and in some cases, to express the sensations and emotions of another. It's not exactly a new insight among musicians, given that a range of genres and songs evoke felt memories and affective encounters.

In this chapter, I put such an insight to work by arguing for an assignment that teaches and samples songwriting practices in digital rhetoric courses, from introductory to advanced-level sections. Let me be clear: Students aren't required to learn or play an instrument, let alone write a song, but they are required to embody some important practices of a songwriter who composes in a studio. My assignment samples three practices of songwriting: recording, arranging, and "thick listening" (Krukowski, 2017, p. 119) to signal and noise. The assignment is based on a first-year composition course in which students had written researched arguments. After paring their essays down to 500 words, students then recorded vocal tracks, arranged Creative Commons sounds and musical samples, and thought critically about emotions that surfaced in their recordings. My framework for the assignment is based on Damon Krukowski's ideas in his 2017 book *The New Analog*.

This sonic assignment meets the goals of many first-year composition and rhetoric courses that encourage students to expand their digital media literacies while reflecting on rhetorical appeals (ethos, logos, pathos, kairos). When I first delivered this assignment, it was a variation on University of Cincinnati's FYC assignment Recasting for a Public Audience, which asks students to remediate an argument and "explore different genres as possibilities for your writing" (Malek et al., 2017, p. 54). For this assignment, my position was, and still is, that songwriting practices—including arranging tonal signals to represent moods and emotions, and dwelling in ambient noises that stem from recording materials and environments—enrich digital compositions and cultivate feelings through and outside composers. Put differently, students are encouraged to think about the layers of emotion embedded in a sonic composition that integrates voices, songs, and sounds.

Recording, arranging, and thick listening to sonic compositions are common practices among songwriters when they work with engineers and producers, ac-

cording to Krukowski. In *The New Analog*, Krukowski (2017) examined digital recording devices and formats that have at once sped up and diminished production quality, replaying analog recording productions circa 1965 and those with his band Galaxie 500. "Signal" and "noise" bookended his arguments. As defined by audiophiles like Krukowski, thick listening goes beyond signal—the final, seemingly polished composition—and seeks out the noise—ambient sounds from a room, singer hesitations, band outtakes, vocal miscues, conversations entangled with tracks. "When we listen to noise [via analog productions]," Krukowski wrote, "we listen to the space around us and to the distance between us" (2017, p. 197). In rhetorical contexts, we often think of this stuff as context rather than "noise." Noise is a useful metaphor for context, though, as Krukowski went on to note that noise also includes liner notes and materials (e.g., acknowledgments, background stories, cover images, and advertisements) that are omitted, in part, by digital distribution and formats. Without noise, a song loses depth and feeling, Krukowski posited. Inspired by his claim, my assignment, based on a songwriter's theory, asks students to do some recording, arranging and thick listening with signal, noise, and feeling.

Beyond *The New Analog*, my songwriting assignment indeed implicates rhetoric and composition's loud history of studying and practicing songwriting and music. While some scholars have analyzed songwriting and musical rhetorics (Alexander, 2015; Ceraso, 2014; Hawk, 2010; Rickert, 2013; VanKooten, 2016) as a means of inflecting rhetorical theory and enriching it, others have drawn on musical approaches to frame research agendas and composition pedagogies (Banks, 2010; Palmeri, 2012; Rice, 2003; Sirc, 2005; Stedman, 2013). After reading (and listening to) these scholars' arguments, I imagined an assignment for my students in hopes of joining this scholarly super-group. I wanted to call more attention to songwriting as a viable sonic art in digital rhetoric courses, even first-year composition sections, such as mine, that have privileged digital composing with music. Rickert's and VanKooten's works were particularly insightful in terms of recognizing sensations and emotions that accompany musical composing, whether Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham's takes at Headley Grange (Rickert, 2015) or Brian Eno's Microsoft Windows startup music (Rickert, 2015). Rickert and VanKooten have banded with scholars who value the *chora*, or a space in which "we compose and feel out meanings from diverse materials, patterns, emotions, bodies, and memories" (VanKooten, 2016, chora section). I was *moved* by VanKooten's choric composing practices that layered a video montage with samples of a choir singing Brahms's *Requiem*. In other words, recent meditations on the chora were useful to me because they unflattened rhetorical activity, especially that of the sonic variety. Paying attention to the chora means composing and feeling out the dynamic surround of a text, or what Krukowski (2017) called the space, the noise. It means if we ask a student to record their voice for an audio essay, then we also need to ask her to consider the context that intentionally and unintentionally accompanies it.

In the assignment section, you will notice I integrate songwriting and musical thinking through in-class activities and the major assignment, an audio essay that stems from a larger researched argument. You will also notice that I use Krukowski's terms in my own audio reflection essay as well as my response letter template to students. While it might seem like a familiar multimodal project contingent on podcasting, I argue that its turn to a musical framework is unique. By and large, I hope the songwriting practices this assignment encourages give ways to exciting projects by students. I'm sounding out what I hope is a significant contribution to digital rhetoric scholarship because it responds to the field's melodic interests and explores pedagogical possibilities that draw on songwriting theory and praxis.

Accessibility Interlude

The assignment I present below embraces two accessibility practices in relation to sonic composing. First, by composing 500-word essays based on longer researched arguments, students are in fact composing transcripts for their future audio essays. The transcript, that is, precedes the sonic composition rather than serving as an add-on. This transcript priority means that students who are hard of hearing might work with a partner to distill one or both of their researched arguments and compose transcripts.

Second, this assignment is achievable with open-access and free software for PC and Apple devices. Take note that I asked students to compose with the open-access recording software Audacity or the baked-in Apple recording program GarageBand. Students should be able to compose audio essays without spending a penny. If students lack a personal computer that can install and handle such software, they might again work with a partner. Instructors might also introduce students to on-campus media resources well before the assignment begins.

Assignments and Schedule

Recasting for a Public Audience: The Signal, Noise, and Feeling of Your Research (20% of course grade)

Assignment Overview and Purpose

A recast involves taking an object and remodeling or reconstructing it. For this assignment, you'll take the essence of your research argument essay on digital devices and writing and "recast" it into an audio essay, complete with music and sounds. The goals of this project are to share your work with more people than your instructor and to be aware of the various decisions that you need to make when working with different audiences, genres, and media. Another goal is to think about songwriting practices and ways in which sound composing—from recording your voice and others, to mixing and writing music—affects your research argument essay.

Resources You'll Need

1. Your research argument
2. Voice recorder (preferably on your phone): In class, we covered Apple's Voice Memo application and free recorders from Android Marketplace.
3. Computer, plus and music or podcasting software:
    a. PC and Mac users, try Audacity (link available on blog).
    b. Mac users, try Garageband (link available on blog).
4. Alternatively, you might use a music/podcast-recording app on your phone (GarageBand, Spreaker, etc.).

Instructions for Producing an Audio Essay [The Simple Version, with More Steps to be Discussed in Class]

1. Revise your research argument into a 500-word piece. This is basically your transcript for the production.
2. Are you interested in working with a classmate on this assignment? You can do that! If so, let me know. You'll need to decide whose argument you will recast. Or perhaps you'd like to mix the two arguments?
3. Re-record yourself (or your collaborator) speaking a 500-word argument, as if you are imitating a transcript from storytelling podcasts such as Lore or Snap Judgment. You might want to record it in sections, or 100 words at a time.
4. Save the files and get it ready for sound-editing software.
5. Load your voice recording files into the editing software and piece it together.
6. Include with your voice recording various sounds and music, either with sounds and music you create, or those you sample with fair use permissions.
7. When ready, export and upload to Dropbox.

Submitting a Rationale

Write a two- to three-page rationale where you have the opportunity to reflect on the choices that went into your recast and discuss the ways your argument has grown or changed in light of those choices. In the rationale, you'll discuss the form (medium or genre) of your project (i.e., the audio essay), the audience your recast project is directed toward, and the technical and rhetorical choices you made in creating your recast.

Sample Lesson Plan

Below, I provide a sample lesson plan in which students search for and incorporate music and other sounds for their projects.

Lesson Subject: Music's Role in Digital Composing

Related Learning Outcomes

- Recognize that different writing situations call for different strategies.
- Understand the complexity of different kinds of arguments/issues.

Instructional Materials

- Laptop and charger
- Sound for music
- Extra sheets of paper
- Phone and charger
- Class website

Pre-meeting Materials/Student Assignments for Class (Homework)

- Through GarageBand, Audacity, or another app, assemble a complete recording of your 500-word argument.
- Finish reading passages from Damon Krukowski's *The New Analog.*
- Check out the range of free music and sounds available at Freesound.org.

Lesson Outline/Activities

Lesson Themes—Music Workshopping, Voice Polishing

1. Short writing quiz related to Krukowski's *The New Analog*
   ◦ Name one example of an analog technology and one example of a digital technology.
   ◦ True or False: Digital media has ruined music.
   ◦ What does Krukowski mean when he discusses "thick listening"?
   ◦ How does Krukowski differentiate signal and noise? Think about what he discusses when he mentions "surface noise"?
2. Discuss answers with class.
3. For follow-up discussion:
   ◦ What sources and kinds of "noise" then would be appropriate in your podcast? How could you incorporate that into your drafted podcast?
   ◦ Some thoughts for you: In a sense, it is ok that your voice recording may not be the most polished. Perhaps we need to embrace the hiss of digital media; we need to hear those ambient sounds, like firetrucks and construction cranes you hear outside your dorm room. Ambient sounds root us in time and place.
4. Turn to Freesound.org for potential noises worthwhile. Noise is sound, usually ambient sound.

   For the next few minutes, I'd like for you to investigate some musical sounds and background noises that might work for your audio essay. We'll come back as a group and discuss these. Use Freesound, but also feel welcome to make and record your own music and sounds if you wish.

   You'll most likely use the same drag-and-drop method as you did with your voice recordings.

5.   Students work with sounds and music.

6.   Students work with Creative Commons music.

7.   Let's listen back to the *Snap Judgment* segment "Brain in a Box" (Washington, 2017) and recount the number of music and noise tracks that go with the story.

Some notes we made as a class on *Snap Judgment*:

Music: 1) Hip-hop instrumental beat, R&B; 2) Blues; 3) Ambient, electronic; 4) Mysterious, sci-fi, almost atonal; 5) Lush jazz vibes; 6) Astro-soul?; 7) Video game-related, techno

Sounds and sound effects: 1) Chime; 2) Angelic sound; 3) Zip-zap; 4) Kid sounds; 5) Computer sounds; 6) Crashing sounds; 7) Computer dying

Homework

Using Freesound.org or another service, pick a range of musical tracks you are thinking about including along with your voice recording. Send along three musical files you are thinking about, with a brief discussion of each (one to two sentences). You can email me links or upload them to Dropbox.

Audio Essay Response Template

> . . . noise is as communicative as signal.
>
> *– Damon Krukowski,* The New Analog

Here, I provide a template for how I respond to students' drafts of their audio essays.

Dear [Student],

Here are my comments on your audio essay draft. I have grouped my comments by three categories discussed in Damon Krukowski's book *The New Analog*. Keep these in mind as you work on your revisions before the final podcast episode is due [insert date]. I look forward to seeing you in next class to talk about any pressing comments and concerns you have!

Signal: "If the voice on a phone is intended to communicate words, why not narrow the definition of signal to just the words in order to improve the accuracy of their transmission?" (Krukowski, p. 75).

[Insert comments based on reading excerpt above.]

Noise: "We might call it thick listening, alert to the depth of the many layers [and noises] in multitrack recording. [Reviewers] listen through the surface noise of the LP, through the hiss of the master tape, through the layers of the music itself all the way back to the room in which it was played" (Krukowski, p. 119).

[Insert comments based on reading excerpt above.]

Feeling: "Digital signal processing places the speaker always in the same non-space: neither near nor far, neither intimate nor distant. The resulting flatness not only isolates the voice but removes affect. The data is intelligible, but the

voice that is produced it can only be heard, never felt" (Krukowski, p. 84).
[Insert comments based on reading excerpt above.]

Sample Student Projects

In these sample audio essays, you will hear works by two students: Martha Reifenberg and Trinity.[1] The songwriting practices of recording, arranging, and thick listening to signal and noise show up across the texts. In their rationales regarding their audio essays, Martha and Trinity make sense of these practices and the feelings they evoke. Please see the students' references list for all music and sounds included in their audio essays.

1. In the first example, Martha discusses the impact of social media on literature. Her rationale includes a discussion of her musical choice that runs counter to the revolutionary nature of social media.
2. In the second example, Trinity discusses a hot-button issue—texting while driving. Her rationale concerns her use of stats and the idea that "dark classical music adds a sense of eeriness to the podcast and thus strengths [sic] my message."

Reflection

[The ambient sounds of a band warming up in a club. All the music samples that follow are performed by the band Sweet and the Sweet Sweets.]

Rich Shivener: Hi, this is Rich Shivener, and you're listening to my audio reflection for my chapter on songwriting and emotions.[2] I'm recording this from my basement at home, and the music you hear is from my band.

I demonstrate teaching and sampling songwriting practices in digital rhetoric courses, from introductory to advanced-level sections. My assignment covers three practices of songwriting: recording, arranging, and "thick listening," or a technique that embraces signal and noise. The assignment is based on a first-year composition course in which students had written researched arguments on digital writing and devices. After editing their arguments down to 500 words, they produced audio essays; they recorded vocal tracks, arranged Creative Commons sounds and musical samples, and made sense of ambient noises that found their way into their recordings. Episodes from podcasts such as *Lore* and *Snap Judgment* were useful examples of telling stories, generating atmospheres, and

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1. Two student examples (audio files and descriptive transcripts) can be found on the book's companion website.
2. The audio version of Rich Shivener's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

integrating music. Along with my interest in podcasts, my assignment is based on Damon Krukowski's theories in his 2017 book *The New Analog*.

[Live band music fades up for a moment before getting quieter again.]

My assignment is also based on my 20 years as a working musician. I find that songwriting helps me attune to and make sense of pain and emotions—and in some cases, to represent the sensations and emotions of others. That's not exactly a new insight among musicians, given that a range of genres and visceral songs reflect felt memories and affective encounters. I feel the affectivity of songwriting is thickened when musicians, as the saying goes, "play to the space," or embrace the environmental surround of a recording.

[A doo-wop song plays.]

The environmental surround is noise; it might be a room's natural reverb, its hums and creaks, its occupants who aren't involved in the recording session. Thomas Rickert (2013) brought up such an idea in his book *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*. With signal and noise, with ambience, feeling is thickened in varying ways.

[A rock'n'roll song plays.]

Signal, noise, and feeling are three ideas I want students thinking about as they record, arrange, and listen to their audio essays. You can hear students' audio essays in another section of this chapter. For the rest of this reflection, I'd like to make three points about the assignment, looking back on a recent version of the assignment and toward future possibilities.

Let's Start with Point One: Songwriting.

Here's the strange part of this assignment.

[Another rock song plays.]

It doesn't require students to write songs.

You heard that right. It doesn't require students to write songs. So is it a song-writing assignment?

Yes, because the assignment embraces songwriting practices. As I mentioned earlier, those practices are recording vocal tracks, arranging sounds and music, and doing some thick listening. Now, those techniques are also found in podcasting. However, as the title of this chapter suggests, I'm trying to cultivate songwriting, whether in theory or praxis. Damon Krukowski's ideas struck me as a good, introductory framework for students in a first-year composition course themed on digital writing and rhetoric. In other words, I thought a songwriter's theories of signal, noise, and feeling would be a useful framework for students who have little experience producing audio essays, let alone songs. After reading about

recording techniques and sampling songwriting practices for an audio essay, they seemed to be in a better position to think about ways in which music and noise amplify the emotional appeals of a written or spoken text.

And This Brings Me to Point Two: Responding to the Students.

[Another rock song plays in the background.]

In this chapter, you will notice that I don't have a rubric. Instead, I have included a response sheet based on signal, noise, and feeling. From experience, I can say with certainty that musicians and bandmates rarely grade each other; however, they talk through ideas, critique each other, encourage each other, and collaborate often in recording sessions. As a means to reflecting songwriting approaches, then, I opted to complete responses rather than complete a rubric. If students didn't complete in-class activities, produce drafts, and present a version of their audio essays to the class during finals week, their grade suffered. As I explained to students, missing out on process work is like missing a recording session, a time to dwell on and try out ideas.

[A faster rocking, soulful song plays with some fake horns.]

You'll have to take my word for it that nearly all students in my recent course completed all facets of the assignment, producing interesting audio essays. I think the sample audio essays you'll hear reflect that.

As a rhetoric and composition teacher, you might wish to integrate a rubric into my sample response sheet, especially if your institution requires it. You might translate the term "signal" to a term like "clarity"; you might change "noise" to "background sounds"; and you might change "feeling" to "emotional appeals."

And Last but Not Least Point Three: More Songwriting?

[the ambient sounds of a band warming up in a club]

I want to come back to my first point in this audio reflection. Beyond first-year courses, more advanced digital composition courses might lend themselves to more intense songwriting practices—including writing songs. In an upcoming semester, I'm teaching a more craft-oriented course on producing digital texts. One idea is to have students work with a prefabricated vocal track, perhaps one from a podcast producer willing to submit it. Students might have more time to focus on writing musical passages and ambient sounds designed to surround a vocal track. We might focus more on the extent to which Garage-Band and other programs help producers compose songs with samples and the like. There might be interesting collaborations between students whose musical literacies and resources vary. Even failed experiments with songwriting might happen.

Another idea is to reverse-engineer a song—from its distribution and back to the room and resources on which it was recorded.

[a sample of a quiet auto-tuned voice singing without words, composed by Rich]

We might need something simple and approachable. I keep thinking about B.o.B.'s (BobbyRaySimmons, 2008) "Auto Tune-----Spoof (Funny)" video on YouTube. In the song, he goes meta by using the auto-tune technique of musical recording programs as a basis for satirizing the technique. We see the musician's recording space, his vocal mics, and the auto-tune technique in question. The YouTube page, for which the song was created, has the song lyrics. Asking students to recompose the auto-tune song might surround discussions of programs and platforms that have helped aspiring songwriters compose and distribute content to public audiences. Public composition and distribution are indeed loud themes in the field of rhetoric and composition. Songwriting practices play out those themes.

So, in Closing . . .

I hope songwriting gives way to exciting projects by students. I'm sounding out what I hope is a significant contribution to digital rhetoric scholarship because it responds to the field's melodic interests and explores pedagogical possibilities that draw on songwriting theory and praxis. It might serve well as an introduction to more robust assignments about devices and materials, music and its genres, and materials and tones that cultivate emotions.

[Live, upbeat, bluesy rock band fades up for a few seconds before fading out.]

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