Honors Thesis Proposal

for

Claire: An Indie-Rock Monologue;

Integrating the Independent Music Scene Into American Musical Theatre

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Thesis

Although American Musical Theatre and the Independent Music Scene are two vastly different art forms, they can be combined to create a viable and unique form that appeals to both audiences.

Introduction

The Independent Music Scene (Indie Music) as a style provides a wealth of progressive musical ideas; as a business model it offers many unique methods of creating a sustainable audience base. American Musical Theatre has an already established rich history of adapting styles to fit concurrent trends in popular music while maintaining the story as the core of a show.

Background

The history of American Musical Theatre has its roots in theatre of the ancient Greeks, passes through European theatre in the 18th Century, and finally becomes truly American in the mid-19th Century with Minstrelsy, where it has enjoyed a well established run for over one hundred years; as such, this history is full of lessons learned from the past and through experience as to what works onstage to further the
story through all media – the true accumulation of Richard Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk ("Total art work": combination of music, poetry, movement, and design). The beginnings of American Musical Theatre saw a step-by-step integration of first, music-into-story with Show Boat in 1927, and then dance-into-story with Oklahoma! in 1943. During this time, the songs of Broadway led the front of popular American music in what was called the “Great American Songbook” with composer/lyricists such as Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein, and Cole Porter.

With the advent of rock and roll in the 1950s, the American music industry took control of popular music, and only those who had the dedication to be “theatre-goers” knew the songs of Broadway. In the 1980s, as Broadway continued down its own path, the American music industry, dominated by a select group of major record labels, began to be too controlling for some musical artists to handle – they wanted independence. Some began to break away, but most continued to endure the strict rules, stylistic controls, and profit-taking of the major record labels. With the crash of the American music industry in the 1990s, due largely to the growth of the Internet and illegal music sharing, many musical artists broke away from major record labels, and invented innovative methods to generate their own sustainable audience base: this was the birth of a true Indie Music Scene. Most had to turn to a more intensive schedule on the concert stage, a place American Musical Theatre has lived for over one hundred years.

Problem
Currently, there is a lack of Musical Theatre pieces infused with the Indie style and a lack of Indie albums with an actable Musical Theatre storyline. There are some composers and groups from both worlds whose work has crossed over into the other genre; Indie bands The Mountain Goats with their album Tallahassee and Stars with In Our Bedroom After the War have hinted at a through-line or album concept and Musical Theatre composer/lyricists Joe Iconis and Kerrigan-Lowdermilk have used both independent business techniques and styles in their song cycles. However, the worlds of American Musical Theatre and the Independent Music Scene have only existed in a mutually exclusive fashion.

**Purpose**

This is an experiment to marry two styles: the Indie Music Scene and American Musical Theatre.

**Method**

In order to achieve this, I will research intensively the two fields separately as well as how they have already crossed. Research will also encompass a review of over 200 Indie artists and albums as well as standard repertory of classical and contemporary Musical Theatre. After completing this research, I will create a one-man show that represents aspects of each world, an Indie-Rock Monologue. This musical work will combine the worlds of American Musical Theatre and Indie Music both in style and business approach. Along with a performance of this work, I will create a musical score/libretto and record a studio album; this approach will cover the traditional
performer-audience media of both worlds to prove that American Musical Theatre and the Indie Music Scene pair well together.

**Literature Review**

American Musical Theatre has been well documented and researched in comparison to the Independent Music Scene. The standard text for any musical theatre enthusiast is Stanley Green's *Broadway Musicals: Show by Show*. This book is a compilation of Broadway musicals from 1866 to 2007. The following is provided for each show: title, composer, lyricist, librettist, producers, director, choreographer, cast, songs, information on the original New York run, and a brief description of the plot and show history. With so much information provided to the reader, this book is a valuable spring-board for most anything musical theatre related. For a more broad look at theatre as a whole, Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb's *Living Theatre: History of the Theatre* is a great resource for the main highlights of theatre history from the Greeks to the present day and how American Musical Theatre came to be. Several texts exist for understanding the breakup of a play/musical and how the script corresponds to what is seen on stage. Most notably for this, David Ball’s *Backwards & Forward: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays*, Rosemary Ingham’s *From Page To Stage: How Theatre Designers Make Connections Between Scripts and Images*, and Cal Pritner and Scott E. Walter’s *Introduction to Play Analysis*.

For the creative portion of my thesis, several texts are readily available to assist in musical theatre lyrics, music composition, and audio engineering. Most recently, Stephen Sondheim, one of the most successful American Musical Theatre
composer/lyricists, published *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954 - 1981)* with *Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes*. In this text, Sondheim critically analyzes his lyric writing, gives a guide to avoid mistakes he made, and offers his understanding of a rhyme’s place in a lyric. For music composition, Jane Piper Clendinning and Elizabeth West Marvin’s *The Musician’s Guide to Theory and Analysis* provides a basic understanding of complex music theory concepts. Rikky Rooksby’s *How To Write Songs On Guitar* can also assist at a fundamental level for any guitar related composition issues. In order to engineer a studio album, Michael Talbot-Smith’s *Sound Engineering Explained* presents a straightforward guide to high-level audio engineering concepts.

For the performance of what I will create, Robert Benedetti’s *The Actor At Work* and Charles McGaw, Larry D. Clark, and Kenneth L. Stilson’s *Acting Is Believing* provide a foundation for the acting side of the performance. Most important however is Joe Deer and Rocco Dal Vera’s *Acting in Musical Theatre: A Comprehensive Course*, which provides lessons in applying the above texts to songs, how to understand and act lyrics, and how to explore the music of a song for greater character development.

Compared to American Musical Theatre, there is a scarcity of literature about the Indie Music Scene. While Kerry L. Smith’s *Encyclopedia of Indie Rock* provides an in-depth look into the history and culture of Indie Music, there do not exist other such works to compare facts and opinions. While Matthew Bannister’s *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock* discusses the history, style, and culture of Indie Music, it is not a present-day understanding of how the Independent Music Scene
functions in recent years; it is restricted to the 1980s Indie Scene. Other non Indie-specific books like William Ferris and Mary L. Hart’s *Folk Music and Modern Sound*, Isaac Goldberg’s *Tin Pan Alley: A Chronicle of American Popular Music*, and Amanda Petrusich’s *It Still Moves: Lost Songs, Lost Highways, and the Search for the Next American Music* provide insights into Indie Music’s parents and cousins, but again this is restricted to later years.

In order to understand Indie Music in a modern light, we must turn from strictly printed literature to the vastly expanding world of the Internet, where the majority of all modern Indie Music bands call home. Besides band and Independent label sites and forums, Indie Music is becoming rapidly covered by major news networks such as CNN Entertainment’s Catherine Andrews, whose article “If it’s cool, creative and different, it’s indie” perhaps offers the best understanding of Indie as a style and a business approach as well as the current debates over both of these facets. In order to understand the Independent business approach further, Randy Chertkoq and Jason Feehan’s *The Indie Band Survival Guide: The Complete Manual for the Do-It-Yourself Musician* lays out some now standard Internet based fan-gathering methods used by various Indie bands.
Works Consulted

Andrews, Catherine. “If it’s cool, creative and different, it’s indie.” CNN Entertainment.


