Visually Sound: An Exploration of Design + Music

Department of Art and Design
College of Liberal Arts
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Fine Arts

By

Justin Rodriguez

December 2009

© 2009 Justin Rodriguez
Abstract

A documentation of my senior project that is comprised of a series of works exploring the relationship of design and music. The work is compiled into a book titled Visually Sound: An Exploration of Design + Music. The four separate compositions are inspired by four different songs, which are “Wake Up” by Arcade Fire, “Chicago Zoo” by The Cool Kids, “Reptilia” by The Strokes, and “Sleepyhead” by Passion Pit. Within the book, included are the title of the song, name of the artist, lyrics to each song, and commentary on my ideas behind each of the four designs.

This report contains my research, process, results and personal discoveries. My documentation includes visual research in the form of digital mood boards, inspirational work from other designers, magazines, and books. It also includes research of digital designing techniques for Adobe programs via magazine and video tutorials.

The book consists of 25 page layout and one CD label design printed on Neenah 100% Recycled Bright White Smooth Finish 130 lb. Double Thick Cover and 80 lb. text paper.
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction (4)
  Statement of the Problem (5)
  Purpose or Objectivity of the Study (5)
  Limitations of the study (5)
  Glossary of terms (6)

Chapter 2: Review of Research (7)
  Examples of My Visual Research (8–12)

Chapter 3: Procedures and results (13)
  Symbol/Logo for Visually Sound (13–15)
  Experimental Type Piece (16–18)
  Composition 1: Wake Up (18–21)
  Composition 2: Chicago Zoo (22–27)
  Composition 3: Reptilia (28–32)
  Composition 4: Sleepyhead (33–38)
  The Final Product (39–46)

Chapter 4: Summary and Recommendations (47)

Bibliography (48)
Chapter 1: Introduction

Music is a phenomenon that moves the soul through composed sound created by instruments, vocals, or a combination of the two. In essence, music can only be heard, not seen. The lack of this visual element is sometimes fulfilled with art and design; fashion and music videos are some examples of how we often see music represented visually. Music also tends to be a very personal experience and a form of self-expression that is unique to every listener.

Art and design are also forms of self-expression that incite unique emotional responses. It is interesting how music, art, and design evoke personal responses and work seamlessly together when combined.

My senior project explores the connection between music and visual representation. I believe that every sound and every song can be represented visually with the elements of design: color, line, shape, and form, to name a few, as well as typography and illustration. I chose four songs that I personally connect with to visually convey through design and illustration.

I relied on my subconscious and intuition to guide me through this exploration because the experiences one receives from music are subjective. My ultimate goal was to visually represent music that I personally identify with, revealing my unique emotional responses and thus, demonstrate my personal style of design.

I feel that it is important to show potential clients your own personal style and what makes you unique as a designer. Personal work is a great practice in staying creative and a great way to experiment with new techniques.
This project was also given specified requirements to fulfill. These included a symbol/logo design, an experimental typographic piece, a pattern design, and a multiple-page designed piece of at least 16 pages. To fulfill these requirements, I made the symbol/logo portion as the title/cover design of my book, the experimental typographic piece is a spread within my book, the pattern is one of my compositions for one of the songs, and the whole book is put together in a book format totaling 25 designed pages (This includes the front and back cover and insides of the cover).

**Statement of the Problem:**

Music can be heard but not seen. I wanted to explore this challenge by finding out a way to represent music through design and illustration that could capture the same tone and feeling of each song.

**Purpose or Objective of the Study:**

To visually represent music that I identify with as a means to express my personal style and myself as a designer. I wanted to explore how intuition plays an essential role in discovering one's own personal style and how it reveals each person’s unique experience to music.

**Limitations of The Study:**

The project is to be completed in a ten-week period, and because of this, I limited the scope of the work to 4 compositions, a multiple page layout, and a CD label design.
Glossary of Terms:

- **Photoshop**: A photo manipulating and digital designing program.
- **Photoshopped**: To have an image digitally manipulated using tools and techniques in Adobe Photoshop.
- **Vectorize**: To create a computer illustrated image in Adobe Illustrator that is created with Bezier curves that allow the illustration to be scalable at any size.
- **Counters**: Space enclosed by the strokes of a letterform.
- **Clone Stamp**: A tool in Photoshop that allows copying an area with the paint of a brush.
- **Spot Healing Brush**: A brush tool in Photoshop that allows easy color correction by averaging the pixels touched by the brush.
- **Illustrator**: A vector-based digital design program that allows the creation of scalable illustrations at any size without losing quality in resolution.
- **Overlaid**: To lay one image on top of another in Photoshop to enhance the image or give it another effect. Can either use a blending mode in Photoshop or manually lay an image over another and decrease the opacity of the image on top to make transparent.
Chapter 2: Research

The research involved in this project came from gathering visual research online, reading through magazine articles and tutorials from Computer Arts magazines as well as blogs. This visual research provided me with a sort of mood board that set the aesthetic directions of my compositions. Each composition is different so visual research for each piece has its own source.

The audiences this project is directed to are prospective design companies I would like to work with or potential clients. I started out studying the work of various design agencies that I admire as a way to get a feel for the direction I wanted my pieces to go. There was not very much research into the actual music for I created my designs based off of intuition and how I visualized the songs in my mind. This process would free me from any preconceived notions of how these songs are supposed to be interpreted.

I was inspired by the work of various design companies that I discovered through my collection of Computer Arts magazines. Inspiration for each piece varied and corresponded to different design companies with separate distinctive styles.

The main designers/companies I drew inspiration from were Vasava, Non-Format, 123Klan, Spaceknuckle/Josh Vanover, Delicious Design League, Chuck Anderson, 33rpm, Soemone and iLovedust. Here are some examples of the visual research I drew from these designers/companies:
Examples of my visual research (Chapter 2: Research)

Chuck Anderson of NOPATTERN
Examples of my visual research (Chapter 2: Research)

Non-Format
Examples of my visual research (Chapter 2: Research)
Examples of my visual research (Chapter 2: Research)

Delicious Design League
The inspiration drawn from these sources aided in my exploration of the relationship of design and music because the work by these people tend to be vibrant, fashion forward, innovative, frequently implementing the use of shape as a design element, and their work simply speaks music to me. This may be because these designers/companies tend to produce work for the music industry and their work reflects that look of music.
Chapter 3: Procedures and Results

This section describes my design process from initial sketching, refinement, variations in design compositions, to the final end result.

Symbol/Logo mark:

The symbol design portion of my senior project involved the creation of my book’s title. I wanted to create a title that conveyed the message and objective of uniting music and image. I came up with Visually Sound. The title plays off of my idea of creating visuals that correlate to music in a conceptually sound way.

When creating the title design, I wanted it to be very organic using abstract shapes. A scene inspired me from the movie *Ratatouille* where the rats were eating food and trying to imagine the tastes in their mind. Swirls of color and abstract organic shapes filled their minds. My first direction for this logo mimicked that idea of trying to visualize sound with organic shapes and colors.
My final design for the title later changed direction visually, however the concept remained the same as the original plan. I ended up using more geometric shapes rather than organic ones because I ended up creating my own typeface out of manipulating Helvetica Ultra light by filling in its counters with geometric based shapes. I wasn’t satisfied with how the organic shapes I created earlier spelled out Visually Sound. I ended up liking a more ordered approach to spelling out the title with my typography. The idea of using organic swirl-like shapes from my first design was applied in a new way with this direction. I found stock photos of ink in water, which also resemble smoke and I liked the ambiguousness of it. I wanted to use those photos to create swirls of colored smoke to represent swirls of sound. The colors chosen for the smoke derived from the colors chosen within the spreads of the book: cyan, red, yellow, purple, and green. The colors chosen all derived from each individual composition. This application of colored smoke as a design element on the book cover tied together the overall book design to the spreads inside as well as the individual compositions.
Experimental Type Piece:

For my experimental type piece, I wanted to create a typographic image out of tangible objects. The phrase is “Shape Music” and I created the typography out of origami letters for “shape” and used a headphone cord to spell out “music.”

I bought some colored cardstock paper to experiment with origami and I found out how to make some type out of origami letters online from the site “Origami Club.” I wanted to create a playful typographic message that communicated the idea or message of my book and I came up with “Shape Music.” This piece will be the main graphic of my introduction page for the book.

I decided to make “Shape” using origami techniques with the multi-colored paper I purchased. I had to add some drawn texture and darkness to the negative shapes that composed the paper constructed letters to give them enough contrast to recognize their letterforms.

For the word “music,” I decided to visually represent it by spelling it out with a headphone cord. I had to use tape to shape the cord into the cursive letters. The headphones are plugged into an iPod, which has the book cover of Visually Sound Photoshopped in the screen.

To finish off the piece, I had to do some editing in Photoshop. I cleaned up the image by using the clone stamp tool, the spot healing brush, and the patch tool to remove unwanted debris and scratch marks from the paper backdrop. I also used these same tools to remove the tape that held the headphone cord in the shape of the letterforms. I enhanced the color of the image by brightening the headphone cord, darkening
certain parts of the word “shape” to make it more readable, and overlaid a
duplicate image of the photograph over the original while using the blend-
ing layer effect “overlay” to enhance the color of the image
Wake Up by Arcade Fire:

For this song I decided to represent the song with a pattern design that would match the sound of the song. This song was a good choice to apply the pattern design requirement because the song has an explosive quality to it in the chorus. I saw this quality as being represented with an explosive radial pattern. The pattern was created out of imagery mentioned in the song. The colors mimicked the tone of the song and gradually changed according to the tempo. The song shifts from being very melancholy in the beginning to very cheerful in the end.

I did the entire illustration freehand in Illustrator without first drawing in pencil. My technique for creating the radial pattern involved using the brush tool in Illustrator. Around this time, a friend of mine taught me how to create custom patterns by creating an object, copying it and pasting it into a
new pattern brush. Once you create a new pattern brush you can apply the pattern to any stoke. I decided to try out this new technique for my piece, and I created bushes out of the imagery from the song: lightning bolts, torn up hearts, clouds, and rain. I then applied these custom brushes to a concentric circle design.

Once I had the design elements laid out, I messed around with color adjustments. The song is about the loss of innocence and hardship through life and mentions imagery of hearts that are colder, that are filled with nothing and torn are up. I wanted the color of the piece to shift in tone as the song does. The song starts out melancholy in the beginning so I had the center of the image start out with a dark heart and had the overall piece shift from dark grays, maroons, and eventually white along the edges because the end of the song is very cheerful and upbeat. For a finishing touch I overlaid a rusted image texture to give the piece a distressed effect because in the song there is a line that goes, “We're just a million little gods causing rainstorms turning everything to rust.” I wanted to add that distressed texture to reference the theme of hardship in the song.
Inspirational Work from Vasa-va. I liked the symmetrical repetition of shapes. This inspired how I wanted to create my pattern design for my project.
Rusted image I overlaid on the finished piece to add some distress and relate to the lyric about “a million little gods causing rainstorms turning every good thing to rust.”
Chicago Zoo by The Cool Kids

The song Chicago Zoo is a rap song filled with imagery about animals and humans switching roles in a nightmarish world. I felt that illustration would be the best way to capture the song visually because of the interesting and impossible imagery present in this song.

My process for creating these creatures involved researching images on Google of these animals as a reference as well as images of people to model these animals after. I tried to recreate most of the animals mentioned in the song, which I found to be very time consuming. I would do a few practice drawings of each animal until I got a feel for how I wanted one to look. Then, I would trace over the drawing in ink and tracing paper to get a clean version to scan. Once the drawing is scanned, I would color it in Photoshop. I found a tutorial in the Computer Arts Projects issue 124: “The Art of Typography” that demonstrated an efficient way to go about coloring in line art in Photoshop. The tutorial was “Develop a themed pictorial font” by Ana Benaroya and it taught how to create your own hand drawn typeface. What was helpful for me was that it demonstrated how to color in line art efficiently by speeding up the coloring process through creating actions.

Once I had all of my characters created, I collaged them together and made them appear as graffiti on a concrete wall. I overlaid an image of a concrete wall with a low opacity to create the illusion that my illustrations were painted on the wall by giving them the texture of the concrete. I also added graffiti paint drips and splatters to add to the illusion. Turning my illustrations into graffiti inspired imagery helped communicate a hip-hop vibe for the piece.
WELCOME

to

CHI-TOWN

ZOO
Reptilia by The Strokes:

Reptilia is a song of one of my favorite bands The Strokes. This was a song that I used to jam with my friends when we had a band in high school. It was for this reason in particular that I chose to work with this song. I felt I could convey the song with shape and pattern in a unique and accurate way because I know how the instruments are played in the song. I wanted to focus on using shapes in a way that reflected the nature of the instruments and the characteristics of the sounds. For example, the guitar is played in a quick repetitive down stroke motion so I represented that with diagonal dashed lines and triangles. I was inspired by guitar tablature and wanted to organize my shapes in a way that was abstractly similar to it. You can see this representation of guitar tablature in the way I designed the guitar riffs and solo of the song represented by squares and hexagons.

Aside from capturing the sounds with shape, I represented the content of the song with an illustration of a woman. At first I used photographs that I found in a GQ article, but I didn’t realize at the time that I did not have permission to use those photographs. Doing a hand drawing worked out nicely instead because it shows my ability to draw realistically and the color of the pencil lead worked well with the overall color scheme. The song seems to be about a man pursuing an unfamiliar woman. I simply used the image of a woman to represent the song in a general manner because I did not the imagery to compete with my representation of the instruments. My drawing is modeled after an image of the actress Camilla Belle. I felt that her look and her dark hair and black dress seemed to match the dark sound of the song. The black and white nature of the drawing also complimented
my overall color scheme of blacks, whites, and grays to represent a dark
tone and red to represent the energy within the song.

For a finishing touch, I added distressed effects to the shapes within
the piece. I felt that the smoothness of the plain vector shapes contrasted
too much against the pencil drawing. Adding the texture helped blend the
pieces together. I also wanted to add a distressed look because one of the
memorable lines of the song is “The room is on fire and she’s fixing her
hair.” I wanted to touch on that line in a subtle way by adding a distressed
look to the overall image. To help me create convincing distressed effects,
I downloaded a tutorial titled “Distressed Effects in Photoshop” from the
Computer Arts website.

_Inspirational work from Spaceknuckle/Josh Vanover_
Photographs I was not able to use:

This was the previous version of the composition I had before I found out that I was not going to be able to use them.
Sleepyhead by Passion Pit:

Sleepyhead is a song from a band called Passion Pit. Their music tends to be high energy, electronic-based and fun. I chose to work with this song because it is one of my favorites on their album and I felt that the instrumentals in the song had a lot of potential for interesting visuals and title of the song itself provided a basis for an abstract and dream-like representation.

To visually represent this song, I wanted to capture its high energy and tempo using vibrant colors, light inspired imagery as well as imagery from the lyrics. I came up with the idea to use tangible materials to create this piece after being inspired by the work of Julien Vallée and others who design using paper construction and photography. I wanted to create a dream-like scene using origami techniques combined with a Mini Munny toy I bought and painted.

The process for creating this piece first started out with the creation of the character “Sleepyhead.” I bought a Mini Munny from Urban Outfitters, sketched a few images of how I wanted the character to look like, and then painted it using acrylic paints. I then learned how to make origami furniture from a website by the name of Origami Club. It was a very helpful site that provided step by step animated tutorials. I created a bed and a desk using this website. The third piece of origami I learned to create was a modular star that I learned how to make from a video on YouTube.

After having all my pieces created, it was ready to shoot them in the studio. I had a friend who is a photographer take the photos for me and I just directed the photo shoot. I had him photograph the pieces with a product shot set up. We only had one modular origami star set up in the piece,
but we made it appear as if there were more by photographing the start with various perspectives and spinning it. I then just Photoshopped the star and duplicate it. I used a lighting effects technique by creating a lens flare and manipulated it until it resembled lights in motion. This technique was learned from a Computer Arts tutorial by Justin Maller called “Expressive Lighting Effects.”

Work by artists like Soemone, who pay close attention to detail in Photoshopped works, also influenced the way this piece ended up coming out.

*Sleepyhead inspiration and process:*
The Final Result
The Final Product:

I came up with the idea to design the book in the shape of a CD case after being inspired by looking at one of my CD cases that was paper-based packaging rather than a plastic CD case. I wanted to push the theme of music and thought that having this format would really tie the whole project together. One of the main reasons for this choice of binding was that I wanted to include a CD with the songs in it that went along with the book. To go with the CD case shaped book I decided to do an accordion fold for the pages because it reminded me of a CD booklet. I discovered later however, that according folding is more difficult than I thought. I had some issues with craftsmanship because somehow the pages do not lay perfectly straight on top of one another. I might consider another form of binding in a future version of this book.
The Final Product
INTRODUCTION

Music is a phenomenon that moves the soul through composed sound created by instruments, vocals, or a combination of the two. In essence, music can only be felt, not seen. The lack of this visual element is fulfilled with art and design. Fashion and music videos are some examples of how we often see music represented visually. Music also tends to be a very personal, experience and form of self-expression that is unique to every listener.

Art and design are also forms of self-expression that incite unique emotional responses. It is interesting how music, art, and design evoke personal responses and work seamlessly together when combined.

In this book, I want to explore the connection between music and visual representation. I believe that every sound and every song can be represented visually with the elements of design: color, line, shape, and form. To name a few, as well as typography and illustration. I have chosen four songs that I personally connect with to visually convey through design and illustration. Because the experiences one receives from music are subjective, I relied on my subconscious and intuition to guide me through this exploration. My ultimate goal is to visually represent music that I personally identify with, revealing my unique emotional responses and thus, demonstrating my personal style of design. I invite you to take a look at the way I these sounds.
Sisters' Wake up
my heart will ache
someone told me not to cry
But now that I'm older
my heart's cold
and I can see that's a lie.

Children wake up
And pour into us
before they even know who or where.

If the children don't grow up,
our bodies just grow bigger but our dreams get tinier.

We're just a million little pills causing one atom
where every good thing is lost.

I guess we'll just have to adjust.

With my lights on;
let's get going,
I can see where we go;

It's better to look at the sky.

---

Artists: Arcade Fire

**MY VISUAL INTERPRETATION**

The song Wake Up by Arcade Fire
is one that really touches my emotions
when listening to it. The song is one that
anyone can relate to, discussing the issues
of losing innocence and becoming a flawed
in the progression of life. There is such an
epoch quality in the way that the chorus
explodes and how the song ranges from
being melancholy in the beginning to
uplifting at the end. In this piece, my focus
was on capturing the range of emotion and
epoch quality of the chorus. To do this,
I took a more abstract approach by taking
inspiration from the song and designing a
radial pattern. I wondered the elements
in the pattern in a way that captured the spirit
of song and the band overall. The radial
pattern effectively conveys the explosive
guitar riffs I wanted to represent in the chorus.
It also allowed me to create a shifting color
trend from dark in the center to light in
the outer edges, similar to how the song
shifts from melancholy in the beginning to
cheerful at the end of the song.
WELCOME TO CHI-TOWN ZOO

Artist: The Cool Kids

The president's a snake. Really, really, the president's a snake. And his mistress is a chick with some feathers and a tail. I was scratching but the picture looked familiar so I met. I've had a job since I don't think it's dollars. President and animals get that in common. I love the way they sound and it's a shame. It's the roof where it's easy to get there. It's the roof where it's easy to get there. It's the roof where it's easy to get there. It's the roof where it's easy to get there.

The song Chicago Zoo by The Cool Kids is about a nighttime world where animals have resembled human characteristics and are taking over human life. The song starts off by how people are often associated with particular animals. For example, “Your barrier is your dog, a phony is a snake, a cap is a rod and a lady is a duck.”

I chose to work on this song because there was a great deal of imagery provided by the descriptions of those animals and also because The Cool Kids are from my hometown of Chicago. I saw this piece as an opportunity to represent the song through illustration. I tried to illustrate the characters in a style that reflected a hip-hop vibe as well as my own personal style of illustration.
TRACK THREE / REPTILIA
Artist: The Strokes

He seemed unimpressed by the way you came in
"Tell it as a story
I know you're not boring"
I was afraid that you would not exist
"You sound so sleepy
Just like this, now close me"
I said please don't show me down
If I'm going too fast
You're in a strange part of our town
Yeah, the right's not over
You're not trying hard enough
Our lives are changing faster
You can see the real
The real is over
I'm now virtual
You're no longer laughing
I'm not hearing you enough

Now every time that I look at myself
I don't know who's this world's for you
The room's on the other side of the house
"You sound so angry
Just like this, now close me"
I said please don't show me down
If I'm going too fast
You're in a strange part of our town
Yeah, the right's not over
You're not trying hard enough
Our lives are changing faster
You can see the real
The real is over
I'm now virtual
You're no longer laughing
I'm not hearing you enough

Raptoria is a song of one of my favorite bands The Strokes. This was a song that I used to jam with my friends when we had a band in high school. It was for this reason in particular that I chose to work with this song. I felt I could convey the song with shape and pattern in a unique and accurately because I know how the instruments are played in the song. I wanted to focus on using shapes in a way that reflected the nature of the instruments and the characteristics of the sounds. For example, the guitar is played in a quick repetitive downstroke motion so I represented that with diagonal vertical lines and triangles. I was inspired by guitar tablature and wanted to organize my shapes in a way that was abstractly similar to it. You can see the representation of guitar tablature in the way I designed the guitar riffs and solo of the song represented by squares and hexagons.

Aside from capturing the sounds with shape, I represented the content of the song with an illustration of a woman. The song seems to be about a man pursuing an unfamiliar woman. I simply used the image of a woman to represent the song in a general manner because I did not have the proper imagery to convey my representation of the instruments. My drawing is modeled after an image of the actress Camila Belle. I felt that her look and her dark hair and black dress seemed to match the dark sound of the song. The black and white nature of the drawing also complemented my overall color scheme of blacks, whites, and grays to represent a dark tone and did not represent the energy within the song.
TRACK FOUR / SLEEPYHEAD

Artist: Passion Pit

And everything is going to the beat
And everything is going to the beat
And everything is going to
And you say it was like fire around the bone
Burning solid burning this the burning one
Like stars burning backs right through the dark
Picking feet like saltwater into my eyes
You were one inch from the edge of this bed
I dragged you back a sleepyhead

They couldn’t think of something to say the day you burst
With all their lines and all their might and all their debt
They gazed your bedroom like some thoughts

MY VISUAL INTERPRETATION

Sleepyhead is a song from a band called Passion Pit. Their music tends to be high-energy, electronic-based and fun. I chose to work with this song because it is one of my favorites on their album and I felt that the instruments in the song had a lot of potential for interesting visuals and titles of the song itself provided a basis for an abstract and dream-like representation.

To visually represent this song, I wanted to capture its high energy and tempo using vibrant colors, light inspired imagery as well as imagery from the lyrics. I came up with the idea to use tangible materials to create this piece after being inspired by the work of Julian Velev and others who design using paper construction and photography. I wanted to create a dream-like scene using origami techniques combined with a Mini Mummy toy I bought and painted.
Chapter 4: Summary and Recommendations

In summary, Visually Sound has turned out to have been an interesting and fun design experiment as well as a great portfolio piece. There is definitely more I want to do with the project, but what I have accomplished within these 10 weeks is something I can be proud of. I liked the way my pieces have come out, however, there is always room for refinement. By doing this project I have added work to my portfolio that demonstrates my various skills as a designer. The project shows my illustrative abilities in both cartoon based drawing in Chicago Zoo and realistic portrait drawing as seen in my Reptilia piece. It shows uniqueness in creativity in my piece for Sleepyhead by combining a variety of media to create the composition as well as work with photography. Overall, the different pieces show my knowledge of skills in working with Adobe digital designing programs because each piece is unique and uses different techniques to accomplish them.

This project has really allowed me to explore my personal design aesthetic and create work that interests me. By doing this, I believe it reveals my personal style of design because each of the designs I created were based off of my own intuition and what I imagined the music to be in my mind.

I would like to further study this project and expand it by adding at least four more songs to the book. I am also considering changing the format of the book to a larger size because the CD case size doesn’t seem to do the intricate and detailed compositions justice at such a small size. I am thinking of making the book the size of a record sleeve rather than the size of a CD case for the future version of this project.
**Bibliography**

Benaroya, Ana. “Develop A Themed Pictorial Font.” *Computer Arts Projects*  
June 2009: 100+. Print.

www.computerarts.co.uk. 6 April 2007

Maller, Justin. “Expressive Lighting Effects.” *Computer Arts*  
March 2008: 100+. Print.


Tadashimori. “Modular Star origami Intructions.” *YouTube*.  

“The Book of Inspiration Vol. 01.” *Computer Arts*.  
2009: 100+. Print.