

Alec Benjamin: Driving the Rocky Road to Success

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

For many young artists, getting dropped from a major record label without ever releasing a song would signal the end of their career. Not so for Alec Benjamin. The soon-to-be pop star spent the next 6 months performing anywhere that would let him, from open mics to delis to influencer meet and greets. Although it wasn't glamorous, Benjamin gritted his teeth and kept his focus on the music. Soon enough, he got a second chance with a new label, and his first album took him to heights he had only seen in his dreams. But even as his fame grows, Benjamin keeps his ego in check and his eyes on the part of the music business he truly loves: live performance.

Prepare

Ask students how many of them are familiar with Alec Benjamin's 2018 hit "Let Me Down Slowly." For those who know it, ask how they encountered the song. Though its earliest success was due to TikTok virality, it quickly spread into traditional listening platforms like radio and streaming services. Can students name any other pop hits that got their break on the platform? How do students feel about artists who achieve fame through virality? Do they perceive such artists as hardworking and dedicated, or is it seen as a shortcut? After discussing, assign the article to read.

Key points in the article:

- After getting dropped from Columbia Records, Benjamin found himself at square one again, playing alongside musicians who were just starting out (or even just learning their instrument). To get noticed, he would sometimes play in parking lots down the street from major artists' concerts, hoping someone going to see Shawn Mendes or Troye Sivan would stop and take an interest in his music.
- Benjamin doesn't consider himself a singer/songwriter, preferring instead the term "narrator." He claims that all he really does is tell stories, and therefore the title fits. He pulled himself out of a rut early in his career by building deep personal connections with his fans, and considers it his job to provide context and relatability in their lives. Fittingly, he sees basically no boundary between his personal and professional lives, since the two are so deeply intertwined.
- Benjamin takes this connection with his fans to the extreme by creating group chats with his fans, which is virtually unheard of for a performer of his stature. He values the connection with his fans more than any other part of the music-making process, and says it helps him with his own loneliness. This reflects his mindset left over from the early days of his career, unsure of how to comprehend his own success. He says it "takes some getting used to."

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Terse:** brief and to the point; concise
- **Relatability:** the quality of being easy to understand or feel sympathy for
- **Jarring:** incongruous in a striking or shocking way; clashing
- **Obligated:** the condition of being morally or legally bound to do something
- **Unwavering:** continuing in a strong and steady way; constant, steadfast

Discuss

Listen to the album version of “Let Me Down Slowly” and choose a live version to watch next. Does the arrangement or energy of the song change in a live setting. Benjamin states that he would not want to pursue a music career if live performance was not part of it, stressing the importance of connection with his audience. Do students sense themes of connection and loneliness in his lyrics? Likewise, since he prioritizes live music so heavily, do his songs and studio albums reflect this purpose? Do they sound like they were meant to be played live first and foremost and enjoyed on the radio secondarily? If students had not read the article, would they believe that the artist behind “Let Me Down Slowly” is a live performer above all else?

Q&A

1. Which record label dropped Benjamin before he could release *Narrated For You*?
2. Which famous singer is featured on “Let Me Down Slowly?”
3. How many independent, entry-level shows did Benjamin play after he was dropped from his first record deal?
4. Which record label ended up signing Benjamin after his song was used for an audition for “America’s Got Talent?”
5. Instead of singer/songwriter, what title does Benjamin use to describe himself?

Answers

1. Columbia Records
2. Alessia Cara
3. 170
4. Atlantic records
5. Narrator

Expand

Alec Benjamin's journey to pop stardom was anything but smooth. As students will learn from the article, he went through several phases of his career and traversed many pitfalls of the music industry in the process. For a research/writing assignment, have students choose one of the following prompts:

- Benjamin was dropped from Columbia Records before he could release his fully written and recorded debut album. Write a short report on another artist who was dropped from their record label and compare their career arc to Benjamin's.
- Before signing him to Atlantic Records, Miles Beard gave Benjamin a publishing deal. What are the differences between a publishing deal and a record deal in the modern music industry? What are some advantages and drawbacks of each type of contract?

Call and Response

National Standards: 1-9

Even if they aren't familiar with the concept by name, virtually all modern musicians and listeners have heard and internalized the technique of call and response. It is one of the most foundational elements of musical communication across the world, although our Western understanding of it was largely shaped by the West African musical traditions carried over by victims of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. These musical stylings have seeped into every corner of modern popular music, from pop, to R&B, rock, hip hop, and beyond. Analyzing the many implementations of this musical device across cultures and genres will help students implement it strategically in their own compositions and improvisations.

Prepare

To introduce the concept of call and response, play a video of Harry Belafonte singing “Day-O (The Banana Boat song)” and ask students what musical techniques they recognize in the song. Depending on the level of the class, they will likely recognize the call and response between Belafonte and his backup singers. What effect does this interplay create? Ask students if they can name any other songs or styles of music that use this technique. Do they feature the same type of call and response (lead vocalist sings a line, backup singers sing the same repeated line, lead singer sings a new line, etc), or is the approach different? After examining different styles and their uses of call and response, assign the article to read.

Key points in the article:

- In the most straightforward sense, call and response can be described as the “When I say _____, you say _____” format. It starts when one or more musician(s) make a musical statement, and someone else involved in the performance responds with one of their own. The responders can be other musicians or even members of the audience. Both the call and response can be composed or improvised, depending on the context.
- In some styles, like gospel or salsa, the call will often be improvised by a band leader, such as a preacher or lead singer. These improvised calls are followed by the same response repeated over and over, which can come from the audience, background singers, or both. This allows the caller to use their creativity and energy to elevate the impact of each response, and allows the responders to participate enthusiastically without worrying about improvising.
- In other styles, like Klezmer and New Orleans-style jazz, the singer or lead instrumentalist's composed melody line will serve as the call. The response then comes from another instrumentalist as an improvised burst in between phrases of the melody. In this arrangement, the responder has the opportunity to create spontaneously and elevate the impact of the main melody. Though the aforementioned genres usually rely on

trombone or saxophone for responses in between melody lines, they can be provided by any instrument depending on the musical style.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Fundamental:** forming a necessary base or core; of central importance
- **Infuse:** to fill someone or something with an emotion or quality
- **Dynamic:** characterized by constant change, activity, or progress
- **Ecstatic:** feeling or expressing overwhelming happiness or joyful excitement
- **Dialogue:** a composition of two or more parts, suggestive of a conversation

Discuss

After exploring the three different examples of call and response techniques in the article, conduct a classroom discussion about the differences between each and the effects they create. Each example is presented in the context of a different style of music, but could the techniques be interchangeable between musical styles? For instance, could a gospel “shout” include a Klezmer-style instrumental response to the preacher’s call? Could a New Orleans jazz band arrange the melody of a song as a hocket? Why or why not?

Q&A

1. Which popular musical styles feature call and response?
2. In gospel music, when might a “shout” take place?
3. The modern American experience of call and response is rooted in the musical traditions of which culture?
4. In Klezmer music, which instruments traditionally play responses in between phrases of the melody?
5. Which call and response technique originated in French medieval music?

Answers

1. Soul, R&B, pop, jazz, hip hop (and nearly all other styles of music!)
2. At the end of a sermon
3. Africans brought to America via the Trans-Atlantic slave trade
4. Trombone or saxophone
5. Hockets

Expand

Split students into small groups. For the first part of the assignment, decide on a key and tempo and write them on the board. Have each group compose a two bar melody and write it down (this can be done on staff paper or Noteflight/similar software, or if students have access to computers with recording software like Garageband, they could record the melody using a midi instrument). This melody will serve as the 'call.' Then, have each group trade calls with another group. For the next part of the assignment, groups will compose a response to their new call. Once groups have completed their responses, have them play the completed call and response phrases for the class and discuss why they chose that melody as a response to the call.

How To Play The Wallflowers’ “The Difference”

National Standards: 1-9

Although The Wallflowers’ first album performed poorly enough to get them dropped from Virgin Records, the band came roaring into the spotlight with their 1996 album *Bringing Down the Horse* on Interscope Records. The triple-platinum selling, two-Grammy winning album launched a string of hit singles including “The Difference.” While the tune is straight ahead and simple enough for young ensembles to learn, it contains a number of clever performances that propel this radio-ready jam to new heights. By dissecting and understanding the arrangement, students can create their own version of this late ‘90s hit.

Prepare

Take a classroom poll to see how many are familiar with The Wallflowers’ music (even if they aren’t familiar with “The Difference,” they might know the band’s biggest hit “One Headlight”). For the uninitiated, play the original recorded version of the song and have students note the arrangement and what instruments they hear. Then, play a live version of the song and have students take notes on the differences in each version. Does the band play the arrangement exactly like the record? Are there any additional instruments? Do they play with more or less energy than the original track? Once students are familiar with the track, assign the article to read.

Key points in the article:

- “The Difference” starts off at full tilt. A drum fill leads into the song’s signature riff, propelled largely by the bass guitar (a rare moment in rock and roll for the bassist to shine!). The urgency of the riff is underpinned by the drummer’s choice to hit the snare on every beat, a technique that can make even mid-tempo songs feel driving and aggressive.
- Although the guitars play a very similar figure to the bass on the main riff, the organ strategically occupies its own space in the mix, remaining in the higher frequency range and only joining in unison with the guitars in the last measure for punctuation. When a band has more than 3-4 instruments, it can sound dense and crowded when everyone plays the same line.
- This song follows a classic pop form of intro-verse-prechorus-chorus and repeat. Pay attention to the dynamic shift that occurs in the prechorus. The drummer switches the snare pattern to just beats two and four, making it slightly less driving and allowing the song to breathe for a second before ramping up into the chorus. Without this break, the song could get monotonous for the listener.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Summon:** authoritatively or urgently call on (someone) to be present
- **Economy:** careful management of available resources
- **Soulful:** expressing or appearing to express deep feeling
- **Arpeggios:** the notes of a chord played in succession, either ascending or descending
- **Monotonous:** dull, tedious, and repetitious; lacking in variety and interest

Discuss

For school ensembles and garage bands that want to learn covers, a common challenge is adapting songs to fit your band's lineup. If your 3 piece band wants to play a song recorded with 5 different instruments, what do you do? Likewise, if your 8 piece school ensemble wants to play a simple rock song with only 5 instruments, what do the rest play?

Lead a class discussion about how to solve this dilemma in the context of "The Difference." For small groups, focus on the key elements of the song- what instruments could it absolutely not work without? Could the two guitar parts be condensed into one? If you don't have a keys player, could a guitar simulate the organ part? For larger groups, take a cue from The Wallflowers' organist. By finding an open space in the mix and playing simple parts, he adds another layer to the sound without stepping on anyone's toes. What simple parts could your extra instruments play that would add to the mix without crowding it?

Q&A

1. Jakob Dylan is the son of which legendary songwriter?
2. What is one reason why guitarists tune to Eb?
3. Why does the organ play a higher part rather than joining the guitars and bass on the intro riff?
4. Why does the drummer snare accents to beats two and four in the prechorus?
5. Which key do The Wallflowers perform "The Difference" in during their live performances?

Answers

1. Bob Dylan
2. For a heavier, meatier guitar sound
3. If every instrument plays the same thing, it might come across heavy-handed
4. It gives a slight release to the feel and sets up the chorus to be more exciting
5. D

Expand

With driving rock songs like “The Difference,” tempo can often be a challenge for young musicians, particularly drummers. It can be easy to let the energy of the song push the tempo faster and faster as the song goes on, but if they are too wary of rushing, the song begins to drag and lose energy. Practice with your group to make sure the tempo stays steady throughout the song, instead of speeding up in the loud parts and slowing down in the quiet parts.

For a creative assignment, challenge students to come up with their own arrangement of the song using completely different instruments than the record. Can they recreate the driving feel of the song with piano, congas, and mandolin?

Best Music Schools: All About Admissions

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

For college-bound students of any academic pursuit, the admissions process can seem daunting. For musicians, however, the process takes on a particular intensity. Managing the specific requirements of each program's auditions and applications requires attention to detail and meticulous preparation. Luckily, the nation's leading music programs are here to help students navigate the process with critical insights and advice. From audition preparation to campus visits, these professors and admissions directors have the answers prospective music majors need.

Prepare

Conduct a class discussion about potential career avenues in music that students have considered. These can be anything related to the performance, composition, production, curation, or business of music. Have they considered pursuing a college degree related to these fields? What line of study would help them achieve these goals? Are they familiar with any specific colleges or universities that offer these particular degree programs? Ask if any students have begun their college search. If so, how many schools have they identified as possibilities? If not, how would they go about starting their search? Assign the article for the class to read.

Key points in the article:

- Before starting a search for the right college program, a great deal of self-reflection is necessary. There have never been more avenues of musical study available in higher education, and many of them are highly specialized and career specific. To find the right fit, students need to examine their interests, skill sets, and career aspirations. For aspiring audio engineers, it wouldn't make sense to pursue a performance degree. Likewise, an aspiring oboist will find little benefit from majoring Music Industry Studies.
- Outside of the musical/professional focus of the program, there are many other factors students should consider about potential schools. Do the facilities meet your needs? Is the campus culture compatible with your own preferences? Does the faculty inspire you to learn and grow? Ultimately, a school should feel like home away from home.
- Many of the mistakes that prevent students from gaining acceptance into their desired programs (or at least cause delays and headaches) are entirely avoidable with attention to detail and preparation. By making spreadsheets and keeping track of important details like submission deadlines, the process can be streamlined. Carefully reading each programs unique requirements for applications and auditions is essential. By following the programs instructions and including all necessary materials, prospective students show competency and set themselves up for success.

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Immerse:** involve oneself deeply in a particular activity or interest
- **Compensation:** the money received by an employee from an employer
- **Virtuostic:** displaying exceptional technical skill in music or another artistic pursuit
- **Prowess:** skill or expertise in a particular activity or field
- **Niche:** a specialized segment of the market for a particular kind of product or service

Discuss

After reading the article, ask students about some of the secondary traits they would look for in a music school and college/university in general. What type of environment would be conducive to their learning? Would they prefer a small school or large university? Would they prefer their school be secluded or in a major metropolitan area? What would they look for in a campus culture? What type of students and faculty do they wish to surround themselves with? What qualifications would they look for in the faculty of the program? Discussing these topics in a group setting will help students identify their desired qualities in a music school and expedite their search later on.

Q&A

1. What are the main types of music degrees?
2. Why should students develop a shortlist of schools?
3. Why is it a good idea to arrange a campus visit?
4. What does Oberlin list as the most common pitfall in the application process?
5. How many schools accept the Common App worldwide?

Answers

1. Bachelor of Music, Bachelor of Arts in Music, Music Production/Recording Arts, Musical Theatre
2. It brings much-needed focus to a complex search process
3. To evaluate whether the school's facilities, faculties, and culture meet your needs
4. Failure to read all the details regarding the application process and audition or interview requirements they publish
5. Over 1000

Expand

As an assignment, have students create a practice Shortlist. This should include 5-10 schools that they believe best suit their career goals and skill sets. Once the list is made, students will choose 3 programs from their shortlist, research the audition and application requirements for each, and write a short report on the differences. Which program's academic standards are the highest? Do any of them accept the Common App? Are auditions required, and can they be done online or via

video submission? What are the deadlines for submission to each program? Are there separate applications required for the university and the music department? For additional practice, have students create a practice spreadsheet containing critical information for each of the three programs in their report. This should include deadlines and a checklist of required elements of each program's application/audition. Visually organizing these elements can be challenging, and doing so in a practice setting will help students do so confidently when their college search begins in earnest.