FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

ANDY THOMPSON

Composition and Songwriting faculty member Andy Thompson has carved a unique role for himself in the industry as an in-demand “demo doctor,” a job that combines equal parts studio musician, technician and tastemaker. Working with established songwriter and former Semisonic frontman Dan Wilson, Thompson takes basic vocal-plus-accompaniment song sketches provided by Wilson and turns them into fully produced mixes, often recording, programming and mixing everything himself. These showcase-ready recordings are then shopped to major-label artists for future album projects. To date, Thompson has helped develop demos for a number of Wilson’s co-writers, including Rachael Yamagata, Gabe Dixon, Natalie Imbruglia and David Cook. Recently this has led to instrumental session work on forthcoming album tracks for two current Wilson collaborators, Pink and Taylor Swift.

Thompson’s work with Wilson is indicative of the current industry realities. Decision makers in the music business expect to hear highly polished and produced demos. Gone are the days of songs being pitched as bare-bones recordings consisting of little more than a vocal with accompaniment. In fact, these days it’s increasingly difficult to distinguish between the quality of the songwriting and a song’s production quality, which is why the “studio magic” that Thompson adds is critical to getting songs placed with established artists. We sat down with Thompson to discuss his active career and get the inside story on his life on both sides of the glass.
Andy Thompson

Dar's trajectory as a songwriter really started to take off in the last seven or eight years, which is when I started working with him. Even back then the stuff he was writing needed demos to give to the various managers and reps for different artists. Dan didn’t have the time to be producing all these demos, which increasingly needed to sound professionally recorded and produced, as opposed to just a simple demo. It started with him sending me guitar and vocal or piano and vocal tracks, and he just said, “Make it sound like a song. Listen to these other artists for an idea of what we’re going for.” He’d give me specific style and artistic direction, and my job was to flesh out the sketch with an arrangement and turn that into something that sounded like a “real record.”

It’s exciting work because you have to work very fast. I usually only have a day or two to turn these around, and there’s a lot of variety with the styles. He works with a lot of different artists so I’m able to put on different hats, musically speaking, and play this or that part or make any number of musical stops with, whether it’s a piano and vocal or guitar and vocal. It’s all about being able to work quickly.

Working on the demos has also been really good training for writing music for advertising, which I do a fair amount of. Ad music usually has compressed timelines as well. It’s all about being able to work quickly.

Thompson frequently plays many of the instruments on his demo productions as well as functioning as the recording and mix engineer.

Self-Produced

Musically, my time is split between studio work and playing live. I sometimes play drums with Dan for his shows. We’ve played South by Southwest and the Sundance Film Festival. I’ve also been working with [acclaimed singer-songwriter and fellow MISM faculty member] Jeremy Messersmith on a new record right now and we’ve been in the studio. I’m working with a couple other artists, too, and those projects should come out sometime this next year. I also started a blog — theDIYRecordist.com — where I write about audio and music production. It’s a very recent development, but there have already been some insightful discussions and I’ve gotten a lot of positive feedback.

When Thompson isn’t in the studio or on stage, you can find him teaching MUS381 Songwriting III and REC150 Sound Capture and Production at McNally Smith. To learn more about Thompson’s songwriting and production work visit www.andywho.com.

Sean McMahon

How long have you been working with Dan Wilson and what’s all involved?

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