Recent McNally Smith grad Dan Comerchero (2012) is well on his way in the music industry, though his current path could hardly have been predicted when he first arrived at the College in 2006 to study drums. Initially enrolled in the A.A.S. in Performance degree program, Comerchero had plans of becoming a professional drummer. "I had to play music, it was going to be what I was all about professionally," he recalls. But after seeing a fellow classmate working in Logic Pro recording software, Comerchero began creating and producing music of his own on his laptop. From that point forward his determination and fascination with music and technology have led him to successes he couldn’t have imagined, due in large part to his time at McNally Smith and his transfer into the B.S. Music Producer degree program.

By John Krogh
Today, 24-year-old Comerchero is deeply involved in the development of his Mac and iOS app, Quiztones, now at version 1.1 and 1.7 respectively, and is working on a new printable staff paper web-app with an EQ in Pro Tools. At the time I was quizzing us by boosting certain frequencies of an audio loop, and you guess the altered frequency. You get four answer choices and you can load your own reference tracks or use the built-in audio loops and test tones. The idea came to me when I was in one of my Mix Lab classes with McNally Smith Faculty member Joe Mabbott. He turned the computer screen around and began quizzing us by boosting certain frequencies with an EQ in Pro Tools. At the time I was working on a printable staff paper web-app called StaffNotes using Adobe Flash. I was working with a cheap overseas developer, and I thought it wouldn’t be too complicated to create an automated quiz app that you could use to train yourself at home. I spec’ed it for the cost with the developer and it was reasonable. I originally wanted to release it as an iPhone app, but I was working at Apple at the time and they don’t allow employees to release their own iPhone apps. So rather than wait until I could release it for iPhone, I decided to make it an online tool first.

I built the original online version of Quiztones about two years ago. Six months later I was taking a marketing class at McNally, and we had to get into groups and choose some sort of project to work on together. Most students’ projects were hypothetical products or bands, but one of my classmates suggested that we market Quiztones. I had left Apple a few months earlier and I was already getting the itch to release Quiztones for iPhone, so we asked our teacher, Charles Gehr, if we could use Quiztones for our project and he was totally cool with it. We developed a complete marketing plan and I started searching for an iOS developer.

JK: How did you connect with Audiofile Engineering to develop and distribute Quiztones?

DC: I originally started in the A.A.S. Percussion Performance program, which is two years, and when I came to McNally all I wanted to do was play and teach drums professionally. I loved being in the percussion program, but I eventually started getting more into music production and technology, so I switched to an A.A.S in Music Production. I eventually transferred to the B.S. Music Producer degree, which has a required internship, and when it came time for me to find one, I was able to connect with Audiofile by working with Sarah Williamson in Career Services. I remember thinking, this could be great — I’m building an iPhone app, they make audio apps, they’re all musicians, this is a perfect fit.

Sarah put me in touch with Matthew Foust, co-founder of Audiofile. We set up an interview, and during the interview I showed him the Quiztones app I was working on. Within a few minutes, he suggested we partner on it and have Audiofile develop and distribute it. When we first started working on it together, they took a look at the code and realized that much of it would likely need to be rewired. I was previously working with that overseas developer and with what I could afford, the code that was being developed wasn’t very solid. So the guys at Audiofile took it, cleaned it up, and that became our version 1.0. Since then, Quiztones has undergone major revisions to become a far better app than I ever could’ve built on my own, with opportunities to take it in directions I never thought possible, such as quizzes for compression, reverb, and delay.

JK: What’s it like working at Audiofile?

DC: I feel really grateful to be in a passionate start-up environment with really creative people. I love coming to work here and be around other creative people. I’ll come down here just to work on anything, just being in the same space with these other creative people is inspiring. And when I leave work I’m really happy. I’ve never felt a sense of fulfillment like that.

J: I was always drawn toward entrepreneurship, even when I was a young kid. In middle school I used to ask things on Apple for fun. I didn’t make much money, but it wasn’t about that. When I was thirteen, I would trade Apple stock with my dad. I’ve always known that I’d either work for myself or be involved in a smaller organization where everything you do can really impact the future.

JK: What are some of the most meaningful experiences you had at McNally Smith?

DC: A large part of the experience was simply being the people I met and the overall creative environment. I think networking is a big part of making the most of a music school like McNally. All of the friends, teachers, and mentors I met influenced me in different ways. I also think there’s something to be said about the academic approach to learning music recording and production. Just breaking everything down and fitting in the technical gaps. Everybody comes into a music school with a certain amount of knowledge gaps, and the structure and way everything was taught gave me a solid foundation, whether it was in my percussion A.A.S. or in music production.
Can you give me any examples of how you've been able to apply what you learned at McNally Smith to the work you're doing now?

A lot of the foundational skills from my production classes, signal flow especially, have been very helpful for mixing and recording other artists, or even just producing my own beats. Just having a solid understanding of the basic technical foundations of the recording process has been crucial, and also helped me in developing Quitztones.

You started as a performance student in percussion. How did you get into music production and music technology?

I was playing drums and I saw a friend using Logic, and it reminded me of when I used to mess around with an 8-track when I was a kid. I thought Logic was awesome, so I finally got a Mac and a copy of the software. The first thing I did was program some drums. Because I was already a drummer, I remember thinking, “Oh, I know what to do to make this feel right, I know how to approach this groove.” I discovered how my musical training instantly transferred to the role of producing music. It all ties together, like knowing what the best sound is, when you’ve captured a good take, editing a performance and knowing how to comp the best take rhythmically and musically.

Do you see yourself as a musician, engineer, entrepreneur? How do you describe yourself?

I’ve always had an issue describing myself and writing bios because I feel like the word “entrepreneur” is tossed around very loosely these days. I see these people on Facebook with job titles like “CEO of Me,” but I always wonder what they’re actually doing. For me, it’s not a title, it’s more about what you actually produce and execute on. That’s what matters to me. I don’t care so much about how I describe myself. I care more about what I put out into the world and the quality of what I produce. I hope that it speaks for itself. I also kind of gave up on writing bios because it’s constantly changing. It bothers me when I see bios where people list 20 different titles like “CEO, manager, inspirer, recording engineer, producer, multi-instrumentalist,” just listing everything on and on. I whipped my Twitter bio down to Music, Web Sites and Apps. That encompasses what I’m into right now. I’m more interested in having people know what I’ve built, and I hope that the passion and time that I’ve put into what I’ve done will speak for itself.

Looking back with 20/20 hindsight, what advice would you give someone just entering McNally Smith?

Make as many connections as possible. I’ve always been bad as an in-person networker, which is kind of funny because I do freelance social media marketing for Audiolife and other companies (laughs). I’m good at the online social interaction, but I’ve never been a really social person. I’m a classic introvert. So, push yourself to meet as many people as possible, even if you feel uncomfortable about it. If I could go back and give myself any advice, it would be to not be so worried about knowing exactly what you’re going to do in the future, and just go with what you feel strongly and passionately about. In my case, I was so into drumming and I thought that’s what I was going to do, but it led to so many other things, and if I had never started with doing something that I was passionate about, I wouldn’t have ended up here. You never know what is going to lead to what or where.

That’s an interesting point, especially considering everything you’re now involved with. Do you have any regret that you’re not a professional drummer and that your path is taking a different direction than you thought it would be?

No, not at all, but I used to struggle with it. When I was trying to convince my parents to be on board with the idea of me going to music school, they made suggestions like, “What if music was just a hobby and you went to business school? You could still do music.” But I was so adamant that I had to do music 100%.

Now looking back, I’m okay with the direction I’ve taken and the fact that performance isn’t all I’m about. I haven’t left music; I’m making apps that are for musicians. I have a blog that’s for audio engineers. Everything I’m doing is still tied into music, and I feel like there are so many ways to be in the music industry beyond what you might think you’ll do when you first start college. And that goes back to what you call yourself. Are you a musician? An engineer? There are so many other angles, and they all benefit one another. Are you into the audio visual side? I was exposed to a lot at McNally. Like when I took a class with Dr. J. Anthony Allen, he’s big into mixed media, combining music and video, and I thought it was incredible. You really can’t put yourself in a box, there are many paths you can take.