

# MUSIC Production & Recording Arts

## A Career Path at Mercy University

Text and photos by Ken Valenti.

**M**adison Rivera, whose goal is to make and produce music as well as work on movie scores, remembers the moment she knew that she'd made the right decision by enrolling in the Music Production and Recording Arts program at Mercy University.

It was during her freshman year, December 2023, that the Lower East Side resident recorded her first song, "Trendsetter," a hip-hop number, at the program's studios on the university's Dobbs Ferry campus. She enjoyed the experience. "That was the moment I knew that I belonged here, and I could continue making music." A sophomore now, Rivera said that she appreciates the way everyone in the program acts as a community. "We all try to help each other to be the best we can be."

A sense of purpose and drive can be found in the studios in Victory Hall, where students gain hands-on experience, beginning in their first year, and meet big-name professional musicians and recording artists. "When Guster and Noah Kahan and these wonderful people come to us to record, our students are getting real-life experience and getting these names put on their resume," said Justin Kessler, director of the program. The skills that students

develop in the program can be applied across a wide range of media, including recording for film and television, live sound for concerts and audio skills for radio,

gaming, theater, and multi-media professions.

In Victory Hall, several studios devoted to the program are connected by a hallway that is lined with covers of an eclectic collection of albums worked on at the studios. They range from Jon Anderson, former singer for the iconic progressive rock group Yes, now with his new group The Band Geeks, to tropical rock icon Jimmy Buffett, and from salsa star Victor Manuelle to bass vocalist Morris Robinson.

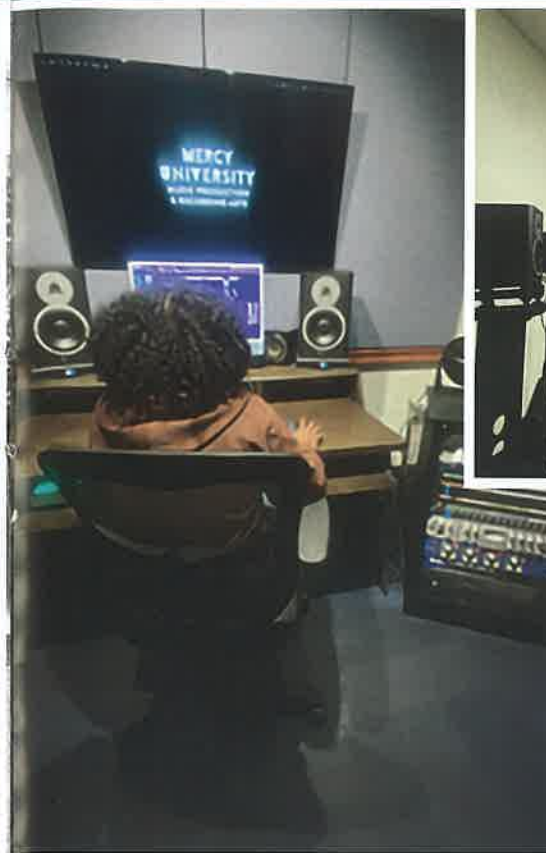
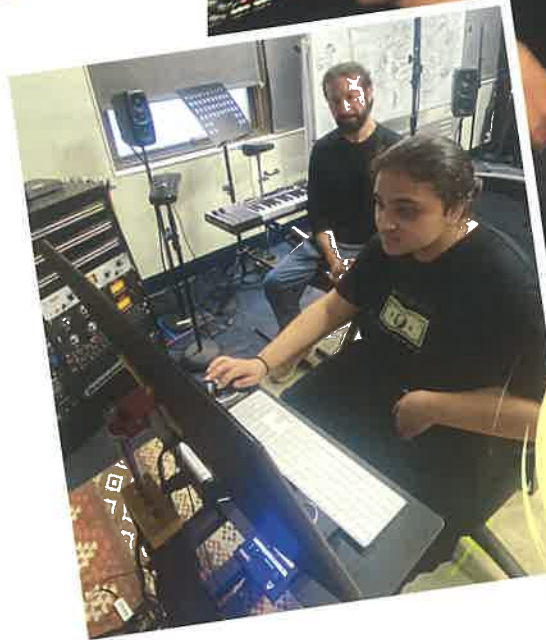
The bachelor's program requires 60

credits—20 courses—over four years in conjunction with liberal arts requirements. The school also helps students to enter their chosen field upon completing the program. Mercy maintains a database of career resources and the faculty "provides assistance to students with preparing resumes, cover letters, portfolios and personal websites used for pursuing employment," according to the university's website.

Students graduate from the program equipped for any number of careers, including producing radio shows, podcasts, or social media; composing music; managing a studio; or serving as an artist and repertoire (A&R) representative.

The 60 students now enrolled in the

At Mercy's Music  
Production program,  
students work with  
the pros, make  
connections, and gain  
real-life experience.



program are following a legacy of alumni who have found success throughout the entertainment industry in areas that include live sound and automatic dialogue replacement (ADR), which is the process of providing dialogue to a recorded movie or television show, stated studio manager Sam Stauf. He also is an alumnus of the program. He graduated in 2009 and pursued a career that included touring with Blue Oyster Cult.

Alumni have found success in many aspects of the industry, Kessler said. One won a Latin Grammy award for mixing sound. Another plays guitar in rapper Pitbull's band. A third is mastering major records in Los Angeles. The list of companies and entities that alumni have secured positions with is broad and includes the Metropolitan Opera, the *Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon, the Apollo, Netflix, and many major recording labels, among others.

The program began in 1997 in White

Plains and moved to the Dobbs Ferry campus approximately a decade ago. Now it offers several studios of varying sizes, with state-of-the-art equipment, including a Dolby Atmos system, which is designed to create an immersive listening experience. Additional amenities include a drum booth, vocal booth, and a large isolation booth. "It's been a real evolution," Kessler said. Students are assigned their own studio time and can book additional time for personal projects.

The faculty, including Kessler, bring real-life experience to the lessons. A Mercy professor since 2013, Kessler's career has taken him into many areas of the industry. "I have been a musician since I was very young, and I sort of 'Forrest Gumped' my way through the music business," he said. "I followed the moment, played in bands, and then worked at record companies. I spent a bunch of years working on records with a lot of jazz greats." Artists he has worked with include Chick Corea, Branford Marsalis, and the Black Crows, and, he stated, "There was a Bob Dylan record in there."

Kessler also became involved in children's television, editing sound for an animated show called *Wonder Pets!* As a recording engineer, he has worked on movies, including *The Bucket List*, *Dream Girls*, and *No Country for Old Men*. "Getting into teaching always was a way for me to connect that experience and that knowledge and those skills with being able

to help people," he said. While teaching for the past decade, he said, "I have been writing music and releasing music and connecting with that art and connecting with myself as an artist." That also gives him another way to connect with students. "I play on their recordings; they play on mine," he said. "They're starting record labels. We see that as something that we can offer that sets us apart."

The students benefit from an agreement with Westchester radio station 107.1 The Peak, recording shows in the studios and working on the sound and video for Peak Summer Sessions at the Barley Beach House in Rye, with artists such as KT Tunstall and Josh Ritter.

Robert Lilly, a senior from Queens, has met several artists in the program, including Kahan, Los Lonely Boys, and Phillip Phillips. Like Rivera, he appreciates the community feeling of the program. "I like that it's small, it's close-knit and allows for more time to make personal connections," Lilly said. He wants to pursue a career in video and film, and he also plays music—funk to alt rock—on guitar, bass, and piano.

Another student, Daniel Portillo, is interested in album recording and live sound engineering. A junior from Stamford, Connecticut, Portillo appreciates the comprehensive nature of the program and the wide range of its opportunities. "It's not just one part of the industry," he said. "It's everything."

## NAME CHANGE REFLECTS GROWING STATUS AND ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITIES

In 2023, Mercy College became Mercy University reflecting the expanding status and breadth of its programs across a wide variety of disciplines.

The announcement followed the addition of a School of Nursing alongside five other schools: Business, Education, Health and Natural Sciences, Liberal Arts, and Social and Behavioral Sciences. "Becoming a university is the natural evolution for our institution, and firmly rooted in Mercy's founding principles," the university's President Susan L. Parish said at the time.

Founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1950, Mercy has evolved and expanded. With campuses in Dobbs Ferry, Manhattan, and the Bronx, the university has more than 8,000 enrolled students and 73,000 alumni.