

COMMUNITY

# Adam Cole of TruerMU: “Don’t wait until you’re perfect”

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By [Edward Sylvan](#), CEO and Founder of Sycamore Entertainment Group



Don't wait until you're perfect. The way to get good at something is to do it, however, you feel about how well you are doing it. Over time, you get better just because you're out there. When you stay at home and perfect and perfect, never actually putting yourself at real risk, you only improve the things you're already good at. Determine what the minimum level of professionalism is for the

thing you're trying to do to protect your growing reputation and relationships, and then go out there and do what you want to do, day in and day out. That's what pros do.

*As a part of [our series about rising music stars](#), I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Adam Cole.*

*Adam Cole is a songwriter and creator of the video channel TruerMU where he interviews people involved with music. He is also a songwriter who has released seven albums. After graduating from Oberlin College, Adam worked as a professional jazz musician and later a choral educator before becoming the Director of Willow Music in Atlanta, GA where he teaches piano and songwriting.*

### The Five Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me ...



**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Can you tell us the story of how you grew up?**

I spent nearly my entire childhood in Atlanta where I was raised in a home with two parents who were music lovers but not really musicians. I took piano lessons for twelve years but it was only when I got to Oberlin, where there's a world-class

conservatory, that I began to realize how good it was possible to get. That's when I started taking music seriously, and it took me 30 years of practice with a lot of teachers to become a competent performer.

### **What are some of the most interesting or exciting projects you are working on now?**

I love demos and was always inspired by the format of The White Album, which I listened to a million times. The songs in it are rough, there are too many of them, and there are strange noises in them, production noises, people turning things on and off. I love this unpolished sound, and I've always enjoyed unreleased tracks, scratch recordings of hits, and so forth because they have a kind of energy that's often missing from highly produced tracks. The finished tracks have been designed like a building to hold together and keep your interest. The raw demo has nothing but the song and the performance to carry it, nothing to trick or manipulate you, and because it's often the first time someone sings a song, it has a kind of meaning in the performance, an honesty that's really compelling.

I originally intended to release Demo Crazy, which has 45 demos totaling 2 1/2 hours of music, just as a way of protecting the songs through copyright. I wrote dozens of songs between 2016 and 2020 and I felt compelled to share them. Some recordings are straightforward, some show me experimenting, and some are just downright silly, but all of them have something unique I want to put into the world.

Once I started the process of creating this collection, something unexpected happened: I started to care more about how they sounded. I had to make decisions about what could be improved, and what should stay the same. Realistically I wasn't going to be able to afford, either time-wise or money-wise, professional-quality recordings of all these songs. And yet there were lots of things I could do to improve the presentation of the recordings.

On some tracks, I decided to do something I haven't done in 20 years, which is to add background vocals. My other demo collections are mostly piano and solo-voice because I was striving to get as good at that simple presentation as I possibly could without resorting to any "tricks." But now I started to think, "Hey, yeah, what if we doubled the vocal line here? What if I did a full-on Beach-Boys

acapella montage during this part?" The recordings remained rough, but now they had more flourishes, more like album-cut demos.

Then there were the songs where I had been brave and decided to record me singing while playing the guitar. I started to get dissatisfied with those and thought, "What if I could up my guitar skills a little and record those so they're at least in the ballpark of competent?" I practiced a lot, got a lesson or two, and redid the tracks that needed the most work, becoming a slightly better guitar player in the process.

**Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?**

That's an interesting question! (laughs) I learned a lot about mixing and mastering multiple-track recordings that I didn't really know before, but that wasn't particularly funny...let's see...I think at one point when I was really churning out tracks, I was sharing too many of them with my friends who listen to my material. I sent one guy six songs and he was like, "Whoa! Whoa! You're overloading me!" I started to realize what a commitment it is to ask someone to listen even to a few minutes of your music because they don't have the background in place like you do to hear it properly. I've got a whole story and dozens of listens behind me when I play one of my songs, and if I was to hear it for the first time, especially before it's properly mixed and mastered to be easy to listen to, I would be a little more skeptical.

What is mixing and mastering? Let's say you have seven tracks: a piano part, a main vocal, a second vocal that sometimes doubles the main vocal, and 4 background vocals. Each of those tracks has to be loud enough or soft enough at the right time. All the parts have to be audible, they have to blend, and the most important elements have to stand out at the right time. That's mixing when you decide how the parts are going to sound. And not just loudness...you decide how much reverb...how echoey...each part is going to be, whether it should sound like you're in a bathroom, a cathedral, or a small living room. Also, how rich the low bass parts should be, how tinny and crisp the high treble parts should be. And also what parts of each track you want to take out if they're not necessary.

After you get all of that done, the track has to be mastered. That's where you decide if the track as a whole is working, if the volume is right compared to the other tracks, if you need to add compression to make the different parts even out, and if there are any elements that sounded good before you started mastering that now need to be fixed!

In this way, even a simple piano and vocal track that sounds like it was done in 3 minutes can take hours and hours of work. If you do it right, nothing sticks out, nothing gets in the way, and the listener has an organic listening experience. The hours are spent tracking down each of those moments that pull the listener out of the flow so it's seamless.

Why do I describe this as "unmarketable?" Bruce Springsteen can get away with releasing a three-hour album of demos and outtakes ("Tracks") because he's got a huge fan base that wants to hear his unreleased material. They can relate it to their history with him and what they've heard of his previous work. For someone like me with a much smaller fan base, even getting someone to listen to a single song all the way through is daunting, much less forty-five of them!

But something in me says, "So what? These songs deserve to be heard, they won't be heard unless I release them, and this is the only way to do that." Whether it was a wise decision, by preparing these songs for release, I still learned so much.

So who is the album for? It's for people who like songs, the joy and variety of them, and for people who prefer honesty in their records, something sincere, primal, unrehearsed. We've had so many technologically enhanced and perfected recordings, and even when they're good, you never know what's the artist and what's technology. Demo Crazy is me as vulnerable as I can make myself.

**We are very interested in diversity in the entertainment industry. Can you share three reasons with our readers about why you think it's important to have diversity represented in film and television? How can that potentially affect our culture?**

I think it's not so much about diversity in leveling the playing field or widening our horizons, although I'm glad to see that happening. I see diversity as combatting a kind of manipulation from above. We're given a smaller and smaller menu and the

people that give it to us do everything in their power to convince us that that's what we actually want.

I think this starts in our food and our entertainment, and its ultimate destination is our politics. The people who make all that money by funneling our lives into two products benefit when we see the world as being made up of two choices, and teaching us to pick one side and hate the other is all part of that. So, ultimately, having diversity in music is one way to fight a very powerful and dangerous manipulation.

**What are your "5 things I wish someone told me when I first started writing songs" and why. Please share a story or example for each.**

1. Your friends and your family aren't necessarily your audience. When I started out, I shared what I was doing with my family and friends and expected them to spread the word. Most of them thought it was cool that I was writing songs, but they didn't want to buy my albums or tell other people about my music. That hurt for a long time until I realized that an audience is a very specific group of people who think like you, and there's no reason your friends and family should be those people.
2. You have to listen to your recordings 100 times before you can hear them the way someone else hears it for the first time. By that 100th time, you're sick of it, and any little thing that bothers you about it will turn you off, which is exactly what happens to new listeners on the first go. I put out a few recordings here and there that I should have listened to longer because once they're out, you have to listen to them that way forever!
3. If the criticisms are all the same, it's probably you, and if they're all different, it's probably them. I've had creative projects where I kept getting the same comment again and again, but because it was my baby because I had a story attached to it that was important to me, I convinced myself that they just didn't know what they were talking about. Then I had the

pleasure to hear the project for the rest of my life and say, "Oh. Yeah. They were right. On the other hand, sometimes everyone has a different complaint about your music, and ultimately you have to shake it off and go with your gut. Everyone's got their own story going on, and your creative project intersects with that story in various ways that don't always mesh. Sometimes if something's too new, or too different, and you know the real value of what you're doing, you have to have faith, put it out there, and wait for the world to catch up.

4. Get better and better at being you, rather than getting better and better at copying someone else. It's fine to use other people as inspirations, even as jumping-off points for your own material. Ultimately, though, your project has to have something in it that only you could have done, and it's important to be comfortable enough with your strengths AND your limitations to recognize what that is and that it's worth sharing.
5. Don't wait until you're perfect. The way to get good at something is to do it, however, you feel about how well you are doing it. Over time, you get better just because you're out there. When you stay at home and perfect and perfect, never actually putting yourself at real risk, you only improve the things you're already good at. Determine what the minimum level of professionalism is for the thing you're trying to do to protect your growing reputation and relationships, and then go out there and do what you want to do, day in and day out. That's what pros do.

### **Which tips would you recommend to your colleagues in your industry to help them to thrive and not "burn out"?**

For me it's always been great to have different kinds of projects to work on—music for a while, writing for a while, playing the piano for a while. Having multiple areas to grow in, explore, and even max out on, allows me to remain productive

and still learn. If you smell something burning, it's really important to stop before the fire starts, or you can kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

**You are a person of enormous influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. 😊**

Demo Crazy is that movement. I want more people to be hungry for an older kind of music-making because there's a joy in it that I think people are looking for without realizing it.

**None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?**

So many people! First and foremost is my daughter Cecilia, a wonderful musician and my biggest fan. She likes listening to my songs, she shares them with her friends, and she tells me all the time which ones are her favorites. This has kept my hopes alive, kept me working, and reminds me that at least one person out there has a real relationship with my music.

My two best collaborators, Dave Pickett and Ben Coker have given me so much of their professional musicianship over the years, and the best that I've been able to do is because of what they bring. They're the voices I listen to most when something could be better and I'm not ready to admit it. If you like what you're hearing, they make it possible on some level.

I also have friends who inspire me with their music-making: Steve Espinola, Bradley Cole Smith, and Lionel Cole, among many, many others. These are people who showed me through the years how to be a songwriter. Their example led me to the good stuff, and I've spent my life learning to do what they do so well.

**Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?**

"Don't criticize, condemn, or complain." Dale Carnegie. Hardest advice in the world to follow, and if you think it's misguided, I'd say think deeper. It's possible to provide essential feedback and have conversations that help everyone grow

without invoking the "three c's." While I don't live up to that ideal very often, it's inspired me to be a different kind of teacher, and I think my students have benefitted from it.

**Is there a person in the world, or in the US whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. 😊**

Bruce Springsteen. As public, as he is, as open as he's been, there are so many questions I have. Or maybe I just want to thank him and really know that my thanks have been received. I think if I could have a good conversation with Bruce Springsteen, my soul would be eased.

**How can our readers follow you online?**

My YouTube Channel, TruerMU—The Truth About Music, is where I make most of my noise. I interview bands and celebrities as well as up-and-coming artists and all-around-interesting people. I have a mailing list at my website, [www.acole.net](http://www.acole.net). Of course, I'm on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

**This was very meaningful, thank you so much! We wish you continued success!**

Thank you! Keep up the good work!

— *Published on October 5, 2021*



Edward Sylvan, **CEO and Founder of Sycamore Entertainment Group**

Growing up in Canada, Edward Sylvan was an unlikely candidate to make a mark on the high-powered film industry based in Hollywood. But as CEO of [Sycamore Entertainment Group Inc.](https://www.sycamoreentertainment.com/) (SEGI) Sylvan is among a select group of less than ten Black executives who have founded, own

and control a publicly traded company. Now, deeply involved in the movie business, he is providing opportunities for people of color.

In 2020, he was appointed president of the Monaco International Film Festival, and was encouraged to take the festival in a new digital direction.

Raised in Toronto, he attended York University where he studied Economics and Political Science, then went to work in finance on Bay Street, (the city's equivalent of Wall Street). After years of handling equities trading, film tax credits, options trading and mergers and acquisitions for the film, mining and technology industries, in 2008 he decided to reorient his career fully towards the entertainment business.

With the aim of helping Los Angeles filmmakers of color who were struggling to understand how to raise capital, Sylvan wanted to provide them with ways to finance their creative endeavors.

At Sycamore Entertainment he specializes in print and advertising financing, marketing, acquisition and worldwide distribution of quality feature-length motion pictures, and is concerned with acquiring, producing and promoting films about equality, diversity and other thought provoking subject matter which will also include nonviolent storytelling.

Also in 2020, Sylvan launched SEGI TV, a free OTT streaming network built on the pillars of equality, sustainability and community which is scheduled to reach 100 million U.S household televisions and 200 million mobile devices across Roku, Amazon Fire TV, Apple TV, Samsung Smart TV and others.

As Executive Producer he currently has several projects in production including *The Trials of Eroy Brown*, a story about the prison system and how it operated in Texas, based on the best-selling book, as well as a documentary called *The Making of Roll Bounce*, about the 2005 coming of age film which starred rapper Bow Wow and portrays roller skating culture in 1970's Chicago.

He sits on the Board of Directors of Uplay Canada, (United Public Leadership Academy for Youth), which prepares youth to be citizen leaders and provides opportunities for Canadian high school basketball players to advance to Division 1 schools as well as the NBA.

A former competitive go kart racer with Checkered Flag Racing Ltd, he also enjoys traveling to exotic locales. Sylvan resides in Vancouver and has two adult daughters.

Sylvan has been featured in *Forbes*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times* and has been seen on Fox Business News, CBS and NBC. Sycamore Entertainment Group Inc is headquartered in Seattle, with offices in Los Angeles and Vancouver.

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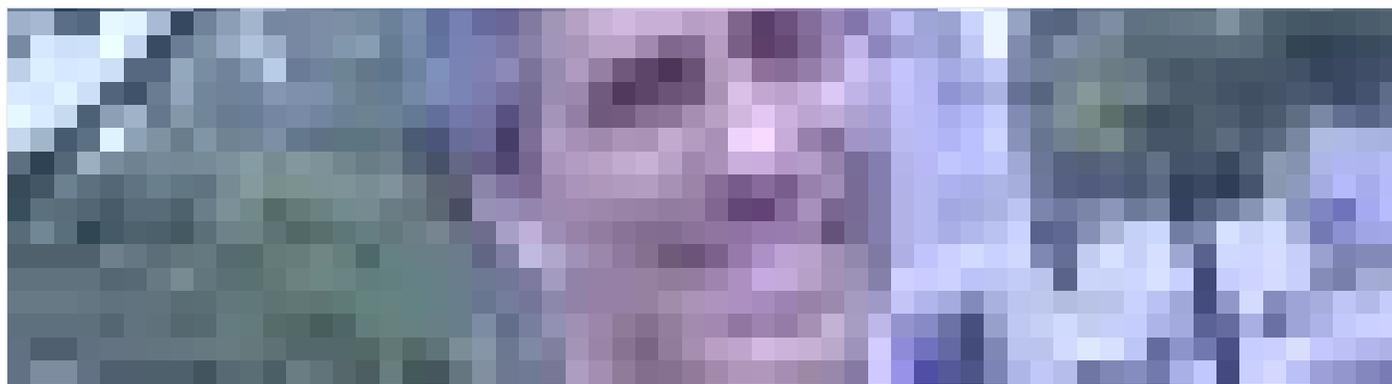
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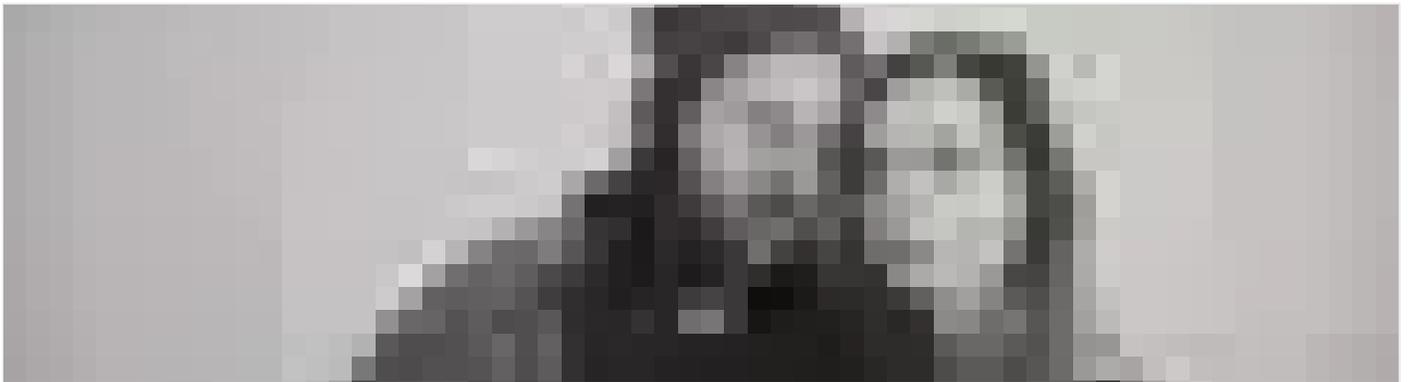
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