

Caroline MacLean

Roots & Tides Thesis Speech

Intro-

Hello! I want to thank you all for coming. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Caroline MacLean, and I'm a graphic design major here at PNCA. For my thesis, I've been exploring something really close to my heart: music and the people I love. I've always felt that music is such an important part of life, and I often use it as a way to connect with others, especially by making playlists for them. This project is basically a bigger, more developed version of that.

When deciding what I wanted to do for this project, I kept going back to everyone who helped me get here and the new connections I've made along the way. I can sometimes have a hard time expressing that appreciation and love, and I wanted to make something that could include all of them.

Music has helped me with connection in a lot of ways, whether it's making playlists for people, going to concerts with my friends and family, or just childhood memories of dancing around with my family. I hold really special memories that are tied to times when music was involved.

In school, I also became really interested in music-based design and knew I wanted to do something that included all of that, with the intent to create a physical representation of these connections. I'm really happy with what I landed on.

Overview-

My thesis is called *Roots & Tides*, and it's a collection of album covers inspired by the people who keep me grounded. Each cover represents someone I love. Like roots, these people have helped shape who I am and have been a constant source of support.

At the same time, music and relationships aren't static. They shift, they move, they come in waves, kind of like tides. So the title is about both of those things: the steady, grounding connections in my life and the emotional, ever-changing nature of love, memory, and creativity that runs through the project.

Before starting each cover, I conducted an interview with each of the seven people included. This helped me get a clearer idea of their music taste and see if there was a specific memory involving the two of us and music that I could draw inspiration from. I then created playlists for each person—just a short one of five songs that either remind me of them, hold a special memory, or connect to their energy in some way. It was a fun, collaborative part of the process, and I loved getting everyone's perspective and reliving some of those moments.

When it came to designing and naming each of the covers, I wanted them to feel completely different and individual. Even though they're part of a set, they each represent a unique relationship. The titles also carry a natural, grounded vibe, similar to the feel of *Roots & Tides*, and were a fun, short way to try and capture the essence of each person.

MOM:

For my mom, I created *Holdfast*. In biology, a holdfast is a root-like structure that anchors organisms to their environment, and my mom is absolutely my anchor—strong and unswayed, so

it felt like the perfect name. On her cover, patterns are shown peeking through the letters and on the back as well. This design celebrates the colorful, patterned world she created for us growing up. From the furniture to the rugs, each texture holds a memory of dancing in the living room, watching movies, or sharing pizza together. The piece combines photographs of those textures with elements of our shared love for collaging, capturing the vibrant essence of family, home, and the lasting impact of those simple, joyful moments. Paired with a dark green background, I wanted to create a place for the eyes to rest, which I feel also captures her nature.

DAD:

My dad's is called King Tide. A king tide is a natural phenomenon, where the tide reaches its highest point, reflecting both the power and consistency of the ocean. My dad is like that force—steadfast, bold, and always there. His cover captures the shared love my dad and I have for the ocean and how our bond has evolved over time. The design features a cutout on the album cover, revealing the record sticker beneath—one photo layered over the other, aligning sunrise and nightfall from the same Hawaiian view. This interplay of images reflects his journey from a structured corporate life to peaceful days by the beach, mirroring the ebb and flow of time, change, and our connection.

CAMILLE:

For my sister, I created *Golden Hour*. The golden hour is that magical time when the sun casts a warm, soft glow over everything, bringing out the best in the world around us. My sister is like that—radiant, full of energy, and always bringing light into any room she enters. Her cover captures that warmth. It features a photo of her traveling, with a swirl of colors and textures overlaid, along with my mom's handwriting for the title *Golden Hour*.

MIMI:

My grandma Mimi's is called *Full Bloom*. This felt like the right title for her because she's in a constant state of growth. She's strong, wise, and always full of light, life, and love. Her cover features some watercolor flowers that I painted. She loves to watercolor, so I wanted to do something that connected our creative sides. I made them purple because it's always felt like a powerful color to me—it shows her strength as well as her grace.

SAM:

My boyfriend Sam's cover is a visual journey through the moments we've shared. The name of his is *Innerstate*. The title is a little play on words—like *interstate*—but also about his internal world, his emotions, and the quiet strength he carries. It blends photos I took of Sam skating, doing what he loves, with his personal doodles. Together, these elements capture the messy, real energy of our connection. The design has a kind of gritty, DIY feel that nods to the music we

both love and the rawness in that sound. I wanted it to feel personal but also a little messy and playful, like our relationship. The process of making this one meant a lot because it captures not just who he is, but who we are together.

EMILY:

Emily's title is *Solar Flair*. The title plays off the idea of the sun's flare, symbolizing both her inner brightness and the way she lights up any space she's in. It's a nod to her strong, presence—like a burst of energy—shining through and creating life wherever she goes. Plus, the playful twist on "flare" adds a fun, spontaneous touch that fits her lively personality. Her cover has a sort of girly DIY vibe, with photo strips of us, hand-drawn touches, and stickers. I wanted it to feel fun and capture a playful nod to girlhood.

SOPHIE:

Sophie's album is called *Sunkissed*. She's far away, and I don't see her as often as I'd like, but the cyanotype prints of flower shadows on her cover symbolize her presence, even in her absence. The print serves as a reminder of the moments we've shared and the lasting impact she has, no matter the distance.

Gallery

For the gallery, I really wanted to create a warm, inviting space that feels like an extension of my own world. I aimed for a living room-like atmosphere to reflect where I worked on much of this project—almost like inviting people into my home and mind to experience what I've created and my relationships with these people. A lot of the items were brought from my own home, as well as from my dad's and my mom's. It was very much a group effort.

Research

The research for this project came largely from school projects and my experience as a gallery attendant for the *Eyes and Ears* show at PNCA a few weeks ago. Working the show every weekend immersed me in a music-based design environment that featured music posters, vinyl designs, and music videos. Additionally, the design lecture series that accompanied the exhibit was invaluable. Listening to talks by Bijan Berahimi, Noah Porter, and Crystal Zapata provided insight into the process of designing record covers and gave me a deeper understanding of the industry. Every opportunity I had to engage with this culture deepened my love for music-based design.

When it came to research for the individuals included in this project, the interviews and collaboration with each person were key in helping me pinpoint how I wanted to represent them. I tried to make each interview I conducted feel unique to the person. The questions were the same—like “What song or artist do you feel best represents you?” and “Is there a specific song that reminds you of a memory we share?”—but I wanted it to feel more like a conversation than a formal interview.

With my grandma, we often get together once a week to make soup, and that felt like the right time to talk about her life and music. With my sister, since she lives in New York City, we FaceTimed while we were both getting ready to go out—it still felt really special.

On a broader level, I also drew inspiration from various influences. Steve Keene, for example, was a particularly interesting artist to study, especially for Sam's cover. Keene's collaborations with Pavement—one of our favorite bands—felt like a natural connection. His DIY, fast-paced process, and bold, expressive style align with the goals of my project. I'm inspired by how Keene captures the authenticity of music in his art, embracing imperfections while maintaining a cohesive visual language. Similarly, this project aims to celebrate each person's individuality while connecting everything through my own design style.

Audience

My audience for this project, while largely being my friends, family, and myself, also became anyone who sometimes struggles with connection and putting things into words. Like the gallery space, I wanted the whole project to feel like a safe, welcoming place—somewhere people could step into and start thinking about what they might create for their own loved ones. Maybe even look at the interview questions I used and consider how they'd answer them for themselves or their people. Every time I've explained this concept to someone, their response has really solidified this idea for me. It's about deepening the connections we already have, and I think that's something everyone relates to in some way.

Shifts

When it comes to how the project changed from the beginning of the year, the concept has actually stayed the same—which I'm really proud of, because if you know me, I sometimes get halfway through a project and decide to completely change everything. That's another reason I know this concept meant a lot to me: I was able to stick with it.

The things that changed were mostly due to time and budget constraints. I originally proposed that I would complete a book along with the covers, but I quickly realized that with the time and energy I was putting into each album cover, creating an entire book on top of that just wasn't realistic. And once I found out the cost of printing the covers, I knew I made the right call—adding a book would've been really expensive.

Around midterms, I also had the idea to create a case to house all the records since they're part of a collection, but again, due to time and cost, it didn't make sense in the end.

Self-criticism

This project was also a first for me. I don't think I've had another project where I've been the designer, art director, curator, and collaborator all at once. So while I was making the work, I was also constantly thinking about how to honor each relationship and translate it through design. Figuring out how to do all of that within the time I had is something I wish I had more experience with going in.

Throughout the project, I also had to make some really tough decisions because I had so much heart and soul invested in it. When I first came up with the idea, I think I had around 10–12

people I wanted to include. I managed to narrow it down to 7. Even then, during my midterm reviews, I was told to consider bringing it down to 5—but in the end, I stuck to 7.

If I had to do it all again, I would go in with a clearer idea of what I wanted the final deliverables to be, because I did lose some time wrestling with decisions about what to cut and what to keep.

Future directions

When it comes to the future of this project, I plan on creating a case for the albums—just something for me to have as a display. Since this was such an important and personal project, I'm really looking forward to having something I can keep forever and being able to give the second set of records to each person involved.

As for my own future, I'm excited to take what I've learned from this experience with me—how to manage time, take on multiple roles, and still create something meaningful. I've also realized how interested I am in music-based design, so that's definitely something I want to continue exploring.

Outro

I want to thank everyone again for coming and listening to me talk. I was really nervous to share something so personal, but I'm glad I was able to—hopefully—encourage some of you to take a closer look at your own personal connections and explore them further. I also want to thank my friends and family who are part of the *Roots and Tides* collection. I absolutely could not have done this without you. Even while making a project about all of you, you still helped me through every step of the process. I have such an amazing support system, and I know I haven't even

scratched the surface when it comes to showing how much I appreciate you—but I'm just getting started. Thank you all again so much!

QUESTIONS.