

MA Commercial Music

Producer Creation:

ADAD7004

Tileyard Education

Tariq Hussain

Word Count: 4859

Introduction

Creating my album 'Abnormality' presented a number of challenges. Some of which I was very prepared for, others I was not at all. Having spent the last few months writing and producing the project, I have now analysed my workings to decipher what went right and what went wrong throughout the process. This includes a look back onto my original idea, as well as how to manage these projects going forward.

Proposal Reflection

My original plan was to finish an 11-track electronic music album that would combine underground music with a commercial influence and appeal to a wide range of listeners. I also intended to use my synesthesia as a guide by just making blue-coloured music. Due to the psychological hurdles (temporary loss of synesthesia) that I encountered, I realised that I was no longer writing 'in blue'. This didn't feel like a huge loss for me, creatively speaking, as I felt as though there was no reason to limit myself to initial ideas. It became apparent to me quite early during the writing process that the album was going to be less commercially accessible than I intended. As a producer, I enjoy working on commercial tracks for other people as it almost feels like a game where I'm in a fantasy world that I don't belong in. As an artist, I've learned that creating music with a commercial appeal is something I can only do by mistake since it goes against what feels natural to me.

Despite the fact that I finished 13 tracks in total, I opted to cut the album down to 10 songs. Although I enjoy the other three tracks (Elevate, Oslo, and Magenta), I don't believe that they matched the album's overall aesthetic. Elevate being too commercial, Oslo being too experimental, and Magenta didn't sonically connect with the other tracks.

After a short period of time, I quickly realised that my self assigned timetable was completely unrealistic as I did not take several factors into account, such as spontaneous work appointments, as well as manageable breaks to prevent burnout. The album has been an incredible learning curve on what 'not to do' when trying to complete ambitious and time consuming tasks.

Songwriting Influence & Application

Album Influence & the Use of Poetry

Kendrick Lamar's billboard topping album 'To Pimp A Butterfly' became an unusual influence for my album. Although it is fundamentally a politically charged hip—hop release, I pulled inspiration from his use of continuing story beats throughout the album (**Singleton, 2015**). At the end of almost every song, he has a portion of a self monologue. This always resonated with me deeply, and became the influence of me applying the poetry of a friend of mine to my album. La'Mel Clarke and I have collaborated in the past, both with poetry and with music and dance. I decided to record a few of his poems that resonated with my own internal struggles and trauma, leading to me having his voice scattered sparingly across the album.

For the most part, I am happy with how the poetry is applied. Using plugins such as Valhalla's Supermassive and Ableton's stock 'Echo' plugin really helped to emphasise the trippy nature that I was going for. Almost every instance where La'Mel's voice is being used, I have had vast amounts of automation on the delay plugins. This allowed me to give a disjointed and out of sync feel to reflect the emotional depth and turmoil of his words.

I also created a Spotify playlist of music that I felt connected with what I wanted to create sonically. This ranged from dance led tracks by artists such as Bonobo and Four Tet, to the more 'electronic music' focused stylings of Rival Consoles. I had intended to use reference tracks throughout the record, but it didn't fit into my natural workflow. I've always preferred to start writing and see where it takes me.

Track listing Breakdown

Identity (Part I) - Abnormality's opening track begins with big cinematic synths, predominantly using Arturia's emulation of the Jupiter synth, alongside a ton audio processing. This song portrays my delicate mental state. As a result, I included phrases from La'Mel's poetry such as "I am struggling" and "Is my brain broken?". I wanted this track to really push my production to the point where I felt comfortable and secure enough not to rely on heavy percussion so that I could let the synths do the talking.

There's a slight sonic influence from Rival Consoles, whose use of arpeggiated synths I've long appreciated. The vocal was taken directly from one of La'Mel's recordings that we had previously done on my SE Titan microphone for one of his personal projects. Because some of the lines resonated with me deeply, it felt essential to have them on my opening track.

Her (feat Rojaz) - Her is the most commercially accessible track on the album. Although it retains my usual aesthetic of groovy drums, trippy synths and deep bass lines, Rojaz's influence brought the track to a more inviting place for non electronic music followers. The collaboration was extremely organic, as we wrote the whole song in one session.

However, after finishing it before starting work on the album, I decided to add some more

production to make it fit in with the rest of the project. Using Arturia's Pigments synth, I added spacey synths around the track to add a sense of weirdness and sorrow to compliment her vocals. This helped elevate the feel of the track more so than previous iterations. I also compressed the vocals further so that it felt slightly more in line with a pop produced vocal. On reflection, I feel as though it would have been nice to have rerecorded the pianos live. As they currently stand, they do feel like midi instruments, preventing this song from reaching its full potential.

Uprising - My album's third single was written specifically for the dance floor. Using strings as an opener felt like a tease that the album would start to veer away from DJ-driven tracks before finally exposing itself as a full dance instrumental. As a subtle connection to the next track, I chose to put La'Mel's voice back into this song towards the end. The production of this track was inspired by Floating Points, as noted from the use of gated strings throughout throughout.

Horizon (feat La'Mel Clarke) - The original version of this track was birthed in 2018. It was a song that I had always struggled to complete. From the initial conception of my album, I had always wanted to include an interlude, so I decided to revisit & reproduce this track into just that. I contacted La'Mel and asked him if he could write something original for this interlude. This song was to bridge a more upbeat dance track with melancholic strings (Uprising) to the following track that was created during an all time low. Within a week, we were in the studio, where I decided to not have the music being played during recordings. To bring out the best in La'Mel, I used numerous techniques I learned in theatre school, including deep breathing with closed eyes. I also made sure all the lights were switched off so that La'Mel could feel completely isolated, this allowed the poet to feel trapped within his own words. I felt as though this helped evoke a sense of sorrow in

his voice. However it would have been great to have also recorded some additional ad libs to create a more 'trippy' feel.

Last Night I Cried On The Phone - After what felt like a complete emotional breakdown, I decided to spend some time at my girlfriends home to escape music and work. I brought my laptop with me so I could distract myself whilst she was working. Whilst sat on her bed, I opened Ableton to just practice some production techniques, such as resampling, leading to the birth of this track. The feel of the song is very aggressive, which reflects the angst that I had at the time. During the making of this song, I realised that I had lost (in a way) my sense of colour whilst hearing music. To date, there have been no studies linking depression to synesthesia being removed, but upon research, I found anecdotal content about depression changes the affects of the condition (**Reddit, 2016**).

iRoller - Continuing down the dark path, iRoller maintains the aggression whilst returning back to my dance roots. Like Uprising, I also brought La'Mel's voice back towards the back end of the track.

pick me up - Another song made during my time away, pick me up starts off with melancholic bells and organic drum breaks. I applied randomisers to my main melody so that the notes could on occasion either go up an octave or a 7th. This further reflected my mindset at the time where I would have described my brain as 'off kilter'. The track later switches up to a more funky house style, which resembles the side of me that most people recognise. Fun, upbeat and frankly quite silly.

Can't See It Through - My singing debut comes towards the end of the album. Originally, Can't See It Through was my final track, however it felt like the perfect Segway between a more intense dance track and the final hip hop piece.

Internal Liberty - I became a music producer because of producers like Dr Dre and Kanye West creating amazing sample based hip hop beats that I would obsess over during my childhood. Ending my album with a rebooted version of a hip hop beat that I started last year felt like the perfect summary. The vocal sample from Michal Urbiniak's 'Free' felt extremely liberating for me, which seemed like the most fitting way to conclude an album with dark moments scattered across. I recorded a take of La'Mel repeating his poem in a happier tone to place in the middle of this piece to contract the previous tone of said poem.

Production Techniques

Digital Production Techniques

Although I wasn't able to apply many songwriting references to my work, I did take a large influence from Floating Points in regards to production techniques on the album. Having bought his album 'Crush' on vinyl last year, I had his gated synths practically programmed in my brain. Although the music itself speaks differently, I would say that I tried my best to achieve as close to his sonic aesthetic as I could whilst still sounding like myself. The fact that I am almost entirely software based, naturally makes the differences in production more noticeable.

Feedback loops

I am a huge fan of feedback loops, it's something that I have applied to a lot of my music, usually discreetly to compliment risers and warped vocal effects. In my opening track 'Identity Part 1', I relied on this technique heavily throughout. Using the 'Echo' plugin, I would automate the feedback, as well as the the filter envelopes to give the delay a warped effect (**Sasso, 2018**). The most difficult feedback loop that i created was for the lead up to the abrupt ending of the song, this is where I looped the entire master before cutting everything immediately. To achieve this, I applied automation to the gain, to keep a consistent level on my master as everything was amplifying further. I also adjusted the delay time, which gave a natural pitch variance to the sound. This was then resampled and reversed to become the introduction of the track. Overall, I am very happy with how I applied this method, perhaps it would have been interesting to have done the automation live rather than by clicking them in through Ableton, for a more human-like transition.

Resampling

In my track 'Last Night I Cried On The Phone' I used a ton of resampling to create my whomping bass lines. The original synth was created in Arturia's CS-80, using it's randomised sequencer to combine the low growling bass and high reese synths together. I found it very difficult to shape this sound, particularly as I'm not well versed in using the CS-80. Resampling was a great method for me to cut the sounds I liked from the sequence, re pitch and then reshape them as audio. The benefit of myself being an Ableton user is that the DAW excels at fast audio manipulation, allowing me to develop my ideas on efficiently (**Bloom, 2017**). My sonic reference for this method was Leon Vynehall's 'Ecce! Ego!'. Although his synths are less aggressive, the tone of them really spoke to me and definitely impacted my thought process and creating these sounds.

Analog Production Techniques

I often try my best to emulate an analog feel with my tracks, to make them feel less 'in the box', usually by applying a ton of distortion, primarily using Soundtoys' Decapitator, but I wanted to take it a step further by applying analogue compression to various stems of a few of my tracks. All of my analog recordings were run through Logic Pro, using a patch bay system so that I could alternate between different pieces of hardware.

Recording Audio

Only a few instances of live recordings were done during the process of the album. As previously stated, I had two sessions of recordings with La'Mel, one of which at my home set up with a poor SE Titan microphone, that generally leaves quite a noisy recording. We also got to use the Tileyard underground studio to use the Lauten Atlantis microphone. This microphone gave such a clear recording, which is noticeable when hearing how much more clear the vocals of 'Horizon' are to 'Identity (Part I)'. With a bit more time, it would have been great to have recorded more on that microphone.

Both 'Can't See It Through' and 'Lost Love' feature my own vocals, that were simply recorded with my SM58 from my desk. Although these recordings aren't fantastic, I preferred them to when I attempted to replace them with takes I did on the Lauten Atlantis, perhaps because I became too familiar with the demo vocals.

TLA

Summit Audio's TLA-100a was used to add additional warmth to a few tracks on my album. Although I didn't get much time with it, I managed to run through the bass line of 'Can't See It Through' as well as the drums of 'Last Night I Cried On The Phone' through the it.

I wanted to capture a similar drum aesthetic to the producer Flying Lotus for 'Last Night'. I opted to run just my kick and snare through the TLA whilst leaving the rest of the drums to be more digital. I felt like having a cross between more dusty analog drums and digitally processed hats made for a more interesting mix. At first, I found the contrast a bit jarring and disconnected, but after applying some eq by rolling of the high end of my additional drum parts, it felt much more glued together.

With the bass line of 'Can't See It Through', the TLA added two things that really helped it power through in the mix. It gave it far more strength and punch as well as adding noise, making the bass feel more organic. Using a fast attack on the compressor allowed my bass to really snap with each note. This isn't an approach I would normally take with bass compression, but I felt as though it worked very well on this.

Empirical Labs EL8XS Distressor Stereo Pair

The Distressor was used for quite a few of my synths, including those in Lost Love & Can't See It Through and iRoller. This managed to bring what originally sounded far too digital to feel a lot more analog. Had I scheduled my timings more efficiently, I would have loved to have run every instrument channel of the album through this compressor as even a subtle bit of use made my music feel so much more wholesome.

Mixing & Mastering

One of my new favourite plugins that was used throughout the process of this album was iZotope's 'Exciter'. The Exciter plugin allowed me to quickly boost a specific band of frequencies with particular characteristics such as tape emulation or simply to give it an 'analog' eq boost. This made it very easy for me to find the general tone of my mixes before applying further EQ if I ever felt that unpleasant tones would resonate from some of the boosts.

After much research on mixing in mono or stereo, I opted for doing a bit of both. With Ableton's Utility plugin, I set the tracks master to be 70% mono, allowing a small increment of the stereo image to be audible. This way I could notice a lot of the beneficial parts of mixing in mono such as ... whilst still being able to notice those slight variations. Mixing in mono has several benefits such as receiving less ear fatigue, making better decisions when equalising and having a better understanding of where to place instruments within the mix (**5 Advantages of mixing in mono - Audiotent, n.d.**). My only drawback from this method is that with some of the songs were intended purely for stereo listening, such as Horizon and Identity (Part I). With those songs, I allowed myself to do the majority of the mix in stereo.

I had one severely unfortunate drawback when mixing this album, my contract had expired for my home and I had still not found a new place to live and complete my work. Although I was able to use the writing rooms at Tileyard, as well as having a mixing session in the underground studio, due to time constraints, I had to complete some of my mixing in my Pioneer studio headphones. Fortunately, I have had them for a few months, so I am aware that they are too bass heavy on playback. I would have to frequently check my mixes from my phone/computer speakers as well as a pair of hi-fi speakers in the living room of where I am currently staying.

In my track 'Lost Love', I struggled to mix my vocals to a great standard. I became very attached to the original recording, which was done on my SM58 as a demo, whilst the music was still being played from my monitors. So when I had re-recorded them with the Lauten Atlantis microphone, I lost the rough aesthetic that the track previously had. I attempted to blend the two to retain the original messy feel whilst having a touch of clarity from the Atlantis. Ultimately I don't feel as though I did the best job on this vocal mix, So I would definitely have to come back to this project with fresh ears to reattempt to mix this part of the track.

After attending a Sylvia Massey masterclass, one thing she mention struck a chord with me. She mentioned using a guitar pickup as a microphone for room noise. Although I didn't apply this method myself, it led to an idea of what I could do to thicken Identity (Part I). I decided to record the audio of the entire track from my speakers with my SM58 microphone. I then compressed and overly distorted this recording and placed it quietly in the back of the mix. After this, I duplicated this channel and turned the pitch down by an octave. Applying further eq was necessary here to make sure that only a touch of it was felt in the song, rather than noticeably heard. I did this because I did not have time to run any of my stems from this song through analog gear, this method was used to compensate for this by having some sort of live feel to the track.

Rather than mastering my album, I decided to just add a simple mastering chain to each track, that I would adjust based on how early the track would peak through my limiter and when there would be a noticeable loss of dynamics. I simply would use Ozone Maximiser, for a slight boost to thicken the track, followed by Ozone Vintage Limiter. Because I tend to mix quite quietly, this allowed me to get quite a large boost on my limiter without noticing a

huge loss of dynamics. This is a rough master technique that I use to allow my tracks to be 'playable' for DJ's. As most of the labels I would send my tracks to are run by DJ's, it makes sense to have them club ready from the initial mail out.

Personal Development

Looking back on the highs and lows of a project like this has helped me identify where I need to improve in order to advance in my career. This entails greater mental health treatment, better time management, and the setting of far more realistic deadlines.

Mental Health Development

Pursuing a career in the arts can be an extremely anxiety inducing. A 2019 study by Help Musicians found that 60% of musicians struggle with mental health issues. This is over double the national average of people with the same struggles, weighing at 25% **(O'Connor, 2019)**. The main problem I found with my planning, was not taking into account that I am likely going to suffer mentally if I don't take the steps to insure my own stability.

Throughout the period of developing this album, I suffered from severe anxiety and panic attacks, as well as uncontrollable crying at random moments. This caused several setbacks where on a bad day, I would be completely unable to work, it was completely devastating. However, there are steps that I can take moving forward to help me deal with these matters, allowing myself to better manage my work flow. Behavioural activation is a method of 'increasing your activity level' allowing you take part in rewarding activities **(Tull, 2020)**. Throughout the last few months of working on this album, I allowed my anxiety and

depression to keep me indoors, with minimal socialising and pleasant experiences. Making more of a conscious effort to spend time having life experiences, rather than solely focusing on music, would ultimately allow me to work more efficiently and productively.

The timetable that I had given myself left little to no time to unwind and relax. This led to several moments of severe burnout, which can take multiple days to bounce back from, even during periods where my anxiety has lessened. As a type 'A' person, I tend to overwork myself until I consider what I have done to be perfect. Usually my burnout symptoms would be more physical than mental, where I would be extremely exhausted throughout the day. Now that I have experienced these things, I know that moving forward, I will have to practice better sleeping patterns, more breaks and a healthier diet (**Fraga, [healthline.com](https://www.healthline.com)**).

Further Tactics for Development

Due to the nature of the music that I create, I will need to re-immense myself into the nightlife scene. Playing DJ sets at clubs across London is not only a great way to test your songs with crowds and on large sound systems, but also to build a following (**DJ Sean**).

The way that I will develop this is by recording some new mixes, that will also be inclusive of some of my tracks on the album, to send to promoters, whilst also contacting past agents to arrange some bookings in some of Londons underground venues.

Time Management

One of the things that I struggled drastically with was my lack of time management. I have a tendency to both over and underestimate the length of time it takes to complete tasks and how best to fit them into my schedule. To better manage my time, I will have to apply techniques such as removing non essential tasks, setting time limits and having allocated

slots for breaks, rather than working until I have ear fatigue (**Time Management - List of Top Tips for Managing Time Effectively, n.d.**). Due to the fact that I have a tendency to be derailed by mental health issues, working more efficiently with these tools could allow me to have more breathing room to complete my tasks efficiently without feeling as overwhelmed.

Setting Deadlines

For the first two weeks of this assignment, I was meeting my deadlines and completing task after task for the album. However, once I had failed to succeed in one task, I found that the work load piled up on each other heavily. Upon research, several professionals have noted that establishing smaller milestones could indeed be an excellent way to better manage realistic deadlines (**Boogard, 2016**). I had only considered a deadline met when the tracks each track would be completed. This became an unhealthy and illogical approach as I was balancing multiple songs at a time, leaving myself to continuously feel as though I had nothing completed, even when progress was underway.

Release Plans

With my 10 track album now complete, it was essential for me to figure out where to take the project, in both best and worst case scenarios. My personal development plan will delve into a couple of these and how I plan to navigate them.

Plan 1: Release Project As An Album

Having only created the Shafkkat moniker in the last year, releasing an album could prove to be a difficult project to manoeuvre, both financially and with marketing tactics. Press companies tend to charge considerably more when releasing an album, compared to the

price of an EP or single (**mil-mgmt.com**). Although I have opted for the self release route in the past, This is not the direction that I will be willing to take for an album project. The reason for this is due to the toll it would take on me psychologically and financially. The cost of promoting each individual track on platforms like 'submithub' would be prohibitive for me.

As this is a large body of work, I would only feel comfortable if it were to be accepted by larger labels, as the experience of self releasing my last EP has shown me that a good network and funding goes a long way when promoting more tracks in a single release. Having a few connections to dream labels such as Outlier (Ninja Tune) seems great on paper, but due to the fact that I am a relatively unknown artist, I realised that an alternative plan would have to be executed for a higher chance of personal success.

Plan 2: Split Album Into Multiple Releases

This contingency plan seems to be the most realistic option as it also allows me to send my album to labels as a playlist, where labels can pick and choose tracks that they would want to release (either as a single or an EP). This is a common occurrence in the electronic music scene, as most of the Labels are run by DJ's themselves, calling back to the crate selection experience. The main problem with this method would be my connecting thread throughout some of the album. Using La'Mel's vocals and poetry isn't something that I would want scattered across multiple releases as it is being used to bring a sense of cohesion to an album of mixed music. I would have to revisit tracks such as Uprising and iRoller to remove traces of the poetry that were applied to the songs solely for this reason.

The main benefit of this method is that consistent releases are far more beneficial for Spotify algorithms. Not only does it allow myself as an artist to have a large plethora of work for potential listeners to check out, but I can frequently submit to Spotify Editorials as I am only able to do this on one track per release (making singles far more beneficial for targeting Spotify official playlists than albums) (Bakken, 2020).

Although I would prefer to release an entire album, knowing that I can stagger multiple releases also allows me to continue to be 'active' as an artist whilst focusing on other means of work and income. I would also be able to re-include the three songs that I removed from the project to the selection.

Conclusion

Although the project had shifted since its original concept, I feel as though the album ended up being more true to my artistic style than what I had originally planned.

Fundamentally, I am an underground music artist and although I can have a song like 'Her' on the album with more crossover potential, the main body of work feels more authentic to be either more club based or experimental. I now have 10 completed tracks that cross over styles that fit multiple pockets within the diverse electronic music scene. Whether the album lands with a label that I would be proud to release with or whether I spread it out over multiple releases..

I have learnt to listen to my mind and body during this process, as it is far more beneficial to be well rested and to apply methods of self care, than to torture myself just to get each track finished.

Bibliography

Bakken, R., 2020. 6 Ways To Hack The Spotify Algorithm. [online] LinkedIn.com. Available at: <<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/6-ways-hack-spotify-algorithm-rebecca-smart-bakken>>

Bloom, M. and Bloom, M., 2017. Resampling: Different Methods in Ableton Live | Sonic Bloom. [online] All Things Ableton Live, Push & Max for Live Resampling: Different Methods in Ableton Live. Available at: <<https://sonicbloom.net/en/resampling-different-methods-in-ableton-live/>>

Boogard, K., 2016. 5 Strategies to Stick to Your Self-Imposed Deadlines - The Everygirl. [online] The Everygirl. Available at: <<https://theeverygirl.com/5-strategies-to-stick-to-your-selfimposed-deadlines/>>

Corporate Finance Institute. n.d. Time Management - List of Top Tips for Managing Time Effectively. [online] Available at: <<https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/careers/soft-skills/time-management-list-tips/>>

Music Is Love Label Management. n.d. Our PR Services | Music Is Love Label Management. [online] Available at: <<https://mil-mgmt.com/pr-services/>> [Accessed 6 August 2021].

O'Connor, R., 2019. Music is good for our health, so why are musicians suffering so much?. [online] The Independent. Available at: <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/music-mental-health-industry-artists-depression-anxiety-lady-gaga-zayn-demi-lovato-a8732341.html>>

Reddit.com. 2016. [online] Available at: <https://www.reddit.com/r/Synesthesia/comments/44iheo/is_synesthesia_affected_by_depression/>

Sasso, L., 2018. Echo In Ableton Live. [online] Soundonsound.com. Available at: <<https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/echo-ableton-live>> [Accessed 6 August 2021].

Singleton, M., 2021. To Pimp a Butterfly: Kendrick Lamar's new album is perfect. [online] The Verge. Available at: <<https://www.theverge.com/2015/3/19/8257319/kendrick-lamar-album-review-to-pimp-a-butterfly>>