

Proposal

Create a Portfolio of Professional Work.
To be used to demonstrate my skills as a music producer.

Introduction:

For my final assessment I have decided to create a very high quality of productions to show my skills as a music producer. This can then be used towards a professional portfolio after completion of the masters degree. The portfolio needs to showcase my abilities in the following fields with additional focus on the mixing and mastering:

- Recording
- Editing
- Songwriting
- Arrangement
- Mixing
- Mastering

The above topics should be well known to any music producer and the more proficient they are in each can determine just how successful they can be. There are seven routes, or launching pads, from which most successful record producers choose to get started, 1 - a musician or artist, 2 - audio engineers, 3 - songwriter, 4 - DJ, 5 - Home studio hobbyist, 6 - Find a new act, 7 - the who the hell knows how they got started route (Burgess, R, 2002, P.13). This quote is from an old text and there are other routes now to consider including social media however I believe by having a strong knowledge in the 6 listed topics above you will have a solid foundation to launch a career as a producer. Through the understanding of each stage of a track being produced, you will be more capable in guiding the experts to what you would like to achieve.

Where am I and where do I want to go?

To obtain future work as a music producer or engineer I must have an impressive portfolio and website to showcase previous work and impress possible future clients. Where website design and promotion of my services will come at a later stage, this project is solely focusing on the portfolio side of things. Currently due to Covid a lot of the industry are working from home/ studios and is making it increasingly difficult to network and use means other than the internet to advertise services. After conducting a survey in regards to how people decide who they choose to mix, master or produce for them, it appears the quality of previous work really helps become a deciding factor. The below question was asked to 50 individuals on a number of online forums in relation to Home studio recording, mixing and mastering (See 'appendix A'):

Q2 - When choosing between possible producers or engineers, what was the most important deciding factor?

Price - 18%

Example projects - 72%

Reputation - 6%

Other - 4%

As these results show, examples available for the client to listen to really do have a big say if you are to be contacted for work. Due to this reason I feel I need to focus heavily on the mixing/mastering during this project. As the audio examples I plan to have available on my future website will be a high quality wav file, I need to take advantage and ensure it will impact the listener to my advantage. A potential client could have listened to many example mixes before visiting my work and if the initial sound is not comparable I will more than likely lose a lot of work and be unsuccessful.

Currently I do not feel my productions are at a high enough quality to be able to secure much future work so will use this opportunity to research into where I need to improve and help me achieve the best possible portfolio by the deadline. To identify the areas of my production that need improvement, therefore areas to research, I will be completing the following tasks:

- Obtain feedback of my tracks from professionals and peers
- Compare my current tracks with successful released tracks by using appropriate software
- Create a SWOT analysis

What exactly do I want to achieve and how will it be measured:

By the end of the assessment I would like to have 6-8 tracks (approximately 30-45 minutes) and they will be to a high enough standard to stand next to current releases in the charts. To measure this I will use the following methods:

1. **Feedback from professionals, tutors and peers** - I will send each completed track to industry professionals, tutors and peers and collate the feedback I receive. I will analyse this to identify where I have succeeded and failed.
2. **Create a 'successful production' checklist** - This will list the key areas I am aiming to achieve in each production, this will be a breakdown of the 6 abilities I am looking to showcase as outlined in the introduction.
3. **Gain interest from a publisher, manager or label** - I will send a number of the tracks off to relevant companies and see if I get a positive or negative response

Feedback from professionals (From previous productions):

From our development module I have examined feedback from Ciaran Robinson, a highly skilled recording and mixing engineer, producer, guitarist, songwriter, sound designer (the list goes on). From the 9 tracks submitted he gave the following areas needed for improvement:

- "Vocals need to be aligned better - there is software for this" - (Editing)
- "Use more modern elements/techniques" - (Songwriting/arrangement)
- "Timbres are dated" - (Sound Design)
- "Improve with a heavier production style" - (Songwriting/arrangement)

(Robinson, 2020)

Tom Fuller, a highly successful producer, songwriter and mixer has analysed a number of my previous productions and has given the following feedback:

- “The kick regularly masks the bass notes” - (Mixing)
- “Use EQ better, understand where the sounds are clashing” - (Mixing)
- “Vocals are too far back” - (Mixing)
- “Chords need variation” - (Songwriting/arrangement)
- “Transients are not under control” - (Mixing/Mastering)
- “Add more mids to the sides” - (Mixing/Mastering)
- “Try and use arrangement to improve width of mix” - (Mixing/Mastering/Arrangement)

(Fuller, 2020)

Jamie Searls, a singer/songwriter has given the following feedback from a previous songwriting camp at Tileyard Education:

- “Remember the first 5 seconds of a track are critical” - (Songwriting/arrangement)
- “Work on the song structure to keep the listener interested” - (Songwriting/arrangement)

(Searls, 2020)

Feedback from peers:

Amit Dhiman, a producer who specialises in a similar genre to myself (Hip Hop) gave the following feedback after listening to a number of tracks:

- “The vocals can sound very dry, try to find a better vocal chain” - (Mixing)
- “The tracks do not sound very loud” - (Mixing/Mastering)
- “Try to use better samples or layer, they sound quite thin or poor quality” - (Mixing)

(Dhiman, 2020)

Nick Pavone, a producer that specialises in film/TV scores gave the following feedback:

- “It sounds quiet” - (Mixing/Mastering)
- “Stereo spread seems quite narrow” - (Mixing/Mastering)

(Pavone, 2020)

SWOT: (See diagram Appendix B)

From analysing my **strengths** I believe there is a good foundation there to begin this project. Being ‘dedicated and focused’ is a must for this extremely tough and competitive industry. Hook creation can be seen as a talent and not all producers are able to create these themselves so definitely gives me an advantage if I implement them correctly. Owning Izotope Production suite ensures I have the tools required to get a professional sounding mix and master from using top quality effects and processing through to audio processing. The fact I understand a majority of these effects will speed up the process, however there is still more to learn. The support network I have gained from Tileyard is incredible and to have support/feedback from some big names is something many people would only dream of. I must ensure I use this to its maximum potential.

Where Izotope and logic stock plug-ins may get me by, they are not the best of the best which will definitely affected the final quality of my tracks. Equipment needs, adding to my **weaknesses**, are quality microphones, Monitors, Sample libraries and synthesisers, also hardware units like compressors and pre amps that could add to the final sound are missing. These could be available if costs were not an issue! My mixing and mastering skills are far from comparable to current industry professionals and is where a large focus of my research and development need to be aimed. My dated production style, due to a very long break in my

previous production hobby is keeping my tracks from getting recognition and turning heads. By focusing some time on this I believe it could be turned into a strength fairly quickly.

I need to maximise the **opportunities** given to me from professional feedback, ensuring I utilise their knowledge into my productions. Tileyard have many connections and with this allow many products to be discounted. As I am focusing massively on mixing and mastering quality for this project, good quality monitor speakers are a must and models previously out of my price range are now attainable like the Adam AX series. The studio at Tileyard education is top class and used by industry professionals for recording and mixing, including artists like little mix and Sam Smith. An opportunity to create a production at this studio can not be ignored. Since beginning this course, I have joined many social media forums. From these I have already been offered work and once I have a good website and portfolio to offer clients, these will be a great way of fishing for clients and obtaining paid work.

Threats seem to be minimal compared to the previous sections, however each threat is massive. Covid has already prevented use of Tileyard facilities, producers and artists collaborating in the same studio, networking at events, and people have got less disposable income. For this project I will struggle to achieve high quality vocal recordings on some of the tracks due to household restrictions. These would eventually be re recorded however the time delay will have a high cost in regards to delay of completed portfolio and website. The competition is extremely large with many budding or successful producers offering services for a wide range of prices. There will probably always be someone better just round the corner to take a potential client. Piracy and theft is also common, it is important that ideas and productions are not uploaded to the internet until being registered with PRS or contracts signed.

Modern Techniques:

To improve on my 'dated production style' it is important I use a number of modern techniques to help make my productions shine and compete with current commercial hits. According to Izotope, 5 popular music production techniques are:

1. Reverse Reverb
2. Sidechaining
3. Gated Snare
4. Stuttered Vocals
5. Pitch shifting and Time stretching Vocals

Getting to know how these popular audio effects are made is a must for music producers. It's like learning the standard tunes as a musician; you need to know the basics in order to make something really great. In addition, if you're working with clients, they will want to hear specific production effects in their music (www.izotope.com 2018).

It is important to gain experience in using these techniques as if used correctly will massively improve my productions and help gain more clients. Currently in hip hop/trap genres, pitch shifting is used extensively for many artists in both verses and choruses. For instance - Da Baby, 'Rockstar' uses a very obvious auto tune effect during the chorus, whilst also utilising it on his voice to create a pad sounding instrument at the start and throughout the track.

It is important that my final tracks for this project include at least 1 of these techniques in some shape or form. I will ensure that 1 of the tracks incorporates all 5 of these techniques to see if this has a big effect on my production style.

Comparing Tracks to Current releases:

Using reference tracks to help mix and master is extremely important if you want to get a great sounding record that can hold its own against the industry standard releases. By referencing an already successful released record on your own studio monitors you will get a good base of where you need to be in regards to the frequency levels. This will ensure that the mix is much more likely to translate well to other audio systems like car stereos and i-pods. It is important to pick the correct reference track for each production, where you should aiming for the following -

1. Only use quality audio (no mp3 or lossy files)
2. Make sure it is the same genre
3. Try to get similar sounding instruments to your production

(www.audio-issues.com)

By A/B'ing my mix to the reference mix I should be able to hear differences and therefore make improvements continuously until a similar feel is reached. I will also use software to analyse the mix/masters which can help guide me to the finish line!

Due to a weakness of mine being the loudness of a track I will be monitoring the loudness of the finished productions to get them to a similar level to the professionals. The loudness war is/ was an ongoing battle to make tracks sound better than the competition purely by sounding louder. This was used for TV commercials initially but wasn't long before the mainstream music industry caught on (www.soundonsound.com 2014). Loudness is measured in LUFS and have 3 different measurements - momentary, short term and integrated. To compare my finished productions I will be comparing these values, together with the true peak and LRA.

It is important to note that just by looking at the LUFS meter will not confirm my track is perceived louder, other considerations are the frequency spectrum of the track. As lower frequencies sound quieter than higher ones it is important to get the right balance of these. By using a spectrum analyser I can easily compare the frequency response of my track and commercial references allowing me to see any issues that need addressing. For this I will use izotope production suite, in particular insight 2 which allows me to monitor the levels, frequency and stereo image.

Comparison checklist: (See appendix C)

From previous research, professional guidance and personal goals, I have created a list of expectations that a successful production should meet. Martyn Ware's 30 top tips for songwriters was my starting point for this list. I have removed or combined some of the tips to coincide with my project. Due to Martyn's success in the industry being a founding member of The Human League and Heaven 17, producing with artists such as Tina Turner and Terence Trent D'Arby, his insight into music production is invaluable. The checklist is possibly going to be changed during my reflection report, with things being added or adapted. These expectations are from myself after conducting the above research and analysing feedback.

Conclusion:

I believe I have set a challenging yet achievable task for this project. I have a large amount of research to be completed in regards to mixing/mastering audio and sound design to ensure my productions can compete with the professionals. My reflection on the project will undoubtedly open up some other areas of focus, however the end goal remains the same, 'Create a Portfolio of Professional Work. To be used to demonstrate my skills as a music producer'.

I feel due to the vast amount of topics this project could require me to research, analyse and practice, I have managed to identify my key areas of weakness, and as such will see the largest amount of improvement in the final product over the given timeframe. I am confident that following on from this masters degree I will have the skills and knowledge to begin a career in the industry, even if further development would be required before initial start up. This will be discussed during the reflection report.

APPENDIX A

Social media Survey

The below questions were asked to the following Facebook group forums to get an idea into how people search for producers/mixing engineers online:

Groups asked:

- Logic Pro X for professionals
- Home Studio Recording
- Apple Logic Pro X users
- Mixing and Mastering

Q1 - When looking to find a producer or mix/mastering engineer for a project, how do you go about finding them?

1. Advert (Facebook) - 82%
2. Search engine - 90%
3. Referral - 35%
4. Repeat customer - 94%
5. Other - 78%

This question allowed for multiple answers, hence the unusual percentages! These results suggest possible clients are using multiple means to find an appropriate producer, again solidifying the case to have exceptional example tracks. Referral was lower than I expected.

Q2 - When choosing between possible producers or engineers, what was the most important deciding factor?

1. Price - 18%
2. Example projects - 72%
3. Reputation - 6%
4. Other - 4%

This is explained in the main body!

APPENDIX B

SWOT Diagram

Strengths:

Can create catchy hooks
Own Izotope Production suite
Have great singers/artists available
Great support network
Mentor availability
Understand majority audio FX
Dedicated and focused

Weaknesses:

Poor sample library
Poor monitor speakers
Poor microphone choice
Dated production style
Mastering my own mix
implementing EQ decisions
Quiet Masters
Repetitive Productions
Stereo spread
Cash Flow

Opportunities:

Feedback from professionals
Available sample libraries
Social media forums
Use of Tileyard studio
Networking on campus
Improving engineering skills
Possible collaborations
Future paid work
Improve hardware

Threats:

Covid restrictions
Competition is large
Piracy

APPENDIX C

Comparison Checklist

2. Good lead voice
3. Good Story
4. Is there 1 or more hooks
5. Repetition used but not over used
6. Harmonic structure
7. Original sample or sound used
8. No average lyrics
9. Strong bass line
10. Syncopation utilised
11. Interesting intro
12. Interesting instrument used
13. Has a modern production technique been used
14. Does the track appear loud
15. Is there good stereo spread
16. Is each verse different musically

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