

Name: Maxime Burgener

Student Number: 1904587

Module Title: Creation
(ADAD7004_LON)

Assignment Title: Element 1

Module Lecturer: Ciaran Robinson

Introduction

When starting my master degree at Tileyard Education, I set two main goals I wanted to achieve before the end of my studies. Prior to my enrollment at Tileyard, I was co-writing and performing with my brother and swiss artist, Pat Burgener. Even though we were successfully writing songs, neither of us was able to produce them. In order to make our team as independent as possible, I decided to take my production skills to the next level. That way we would eventually be able to deliver a finished song without involving a third person in the process. That was one objective when pursuing a master in production. Secondly, I wanted to start collaborating with other artists, since writing and producing in different musical genres has always appealed to me. On top of that, I thought it would be a good opportunity for me to slightly detach myself from Pat Burgener's project and gain a new perspective on it for the future, as well as creating something of my own.

The Project

My final project will be segmented in two different parts to embody the two goals I set myself when starting my MA. The first part will consist of a 5 track EP created in collaboration with Pat Burgener; since it is a collaboration, we will be sharing the creative control. The second part will consist of creating a portfolio of five tracks for the respective projects of three different artists from my MA. This part will focus on co-writing and producing music that matches the vision and image of carefully chosen artists I enjoy working with. Since a total of ten fully produced tracks is an ambitious goal, I might reinterpret some of the tracks in acoustic versions, in case I do not manage to reach the number of tracks I challenged myself to produce.

Collaborators & Artistic Direction

Pat is a singer-songwriter with a sound inspired by the likes of Ben Howard, The Lumineers, Matt Corby and Fleetwood Mac. Until recently, Pat's sound has been dark and gloomy with only a couple of more upbeat songs. The main idea of this collaboration will be to create an EP where most of the songs are uplifting and empowering with possibly one darker and more experimental track. We decided to follow this new direction to challenge ourselves since we both find empowering and uplifting songs more difficult to write than more melancholic ones. In an interview, Beck described a similar experience when talking about his recent album *Colors* (Jones, 2017): "the songs on the album are simple, uplifting and galvanising, that kind of feeling. Those are the hardest. This new record I focused on that feeling. It's the easiest to fail at". In terms of stylistic direction, we do not want to be too specific about where we want to go in order to avoid limiting ourselves but we will definitely stay around alternative folk and pop.

For the second half of my project, I am going to work with three different artists from my MA. The first one is Chiara Oldano, a soul-pop singer from Italy with impressively powerful vocals. Stylistically, we are usually drawing a lot of our inspiration from the Motown era, using backing vocals and extended chords thoroughly. However, in order to stay relevant in today's industry, we are using sounds, samples and textures that are more commonly found in modern pop music. The second artist I will work with is Michaela Charvatova, better known as her stage name Maella. She is a very talented singer-songwriter from Prague who blends beautifully the intimacy of folk with the rawness of rock music. After only working together once, we already found that we had very strong songwriting complicity. However, our respective vision when further developing the songs tends to differ.

Personally, I would see Maella as an Indie singer-songwriter performing emotional and catchy songs in a similar vein to the American artist Phoebe Bridgers. This is the reason why, for my final project, I will challenge her to write a little bit more in that style. The third artist I am planning to work with is Ofuré Alli. Ofuré is an R&B singer from London with one of the most incredible voices I have heard so far. Working with Ofuré might be challenging for me, since out of all the music genres I am going to address in this project, R&B is the one that I am the least familiar with. However, after working on one song together, we quickly found a middle ground between our styles and we both realized that we have a good chemistry.

Reference & Influence

For the final MA project, my point of reference will be the work of Brian Burton aka Danger Mouse, who is extremely versatile and has produced the likes of Portugal The Man, Broken Bells, Adele, Norah Jones, Gnarls Barkley, U2, The Black Keys and ASAP Rocky (Waxploitation Records, 2020). I researched his working process in order to get an insight into his techniques and an idea of ways I could approach this EP.

Danger Mouse's Technics & Aesthetic

As a multi-instrumentalist, Danger Mouse is often heavily involved in the songwriting process when working with artists (Music Feeds, 2013). In order to get a song to its maximum potential, it is important to make sure that the song could stand by itself before entering the production stage. This way, the production around the song will be coherent and support its' message. In some cases, using the production early on will help generate ideas for melodies and arrangement. However, in many cases the production can sound disjointed to the song because the songwriting will be limited by the production style and arrangement (MPG, 2020). As a producer, it is

part of the job to make sure that a song is strong enough before bringing it to the next stage. Norah Jones explained Danger Mouse's involvement in the songwriting process when they worked on her album *Little Broken Heart* (Bowers & Wilkins, 2012): "Brian and I really worked on this whole record together, including the songwriting process from the beginning to the end". As another example, John Gourley the leader of the band Portugal The Man, expressed why he believes Danger Mouse is one of the best producer around (Here & Now, 2013): "for me it is essential that a producer can step up to play a keyboard, play a bass, play a guitar and help you with things, instead of just saying 'I think this could be better'. In our song *Modern Jesus*, Brian is the one who wrote the keyboard hook that you hear throughout the whole track!" At the end of the day, the song will always be king and as commonly known in this business: you cannot polish a mediocre song (Clark, 246-247).

When it comes to the production, Danger Mouse has a few tricks to help him get an aesthetic and overall atmosphere for the song he is working on. One of the biggest characteristics of his sound comes from his use of distortion. Incorporating re-amping and distortion in his productions is a technique he got from collaborating with singer Mark Linkous (Davie, 2014): "Mark never really liked his voice, so he would beat up the finished product so it wouldn't sound like him when he listened to it". The Decapitator from Soundtoys is a plugin he uses regularly to provide some crunch to the drums. However, most of the time the driven textures are recorded directly at the outboard stage by cranking the pre amps on the Neve console. In addition to that, Danger Mouse often blows out an LA-2A to get the characteristic squash of this legendary compressor. However, even though squashing the sound can give an interesting texture, it has to be used carefully since it can greatly

compromise the mixing stage (Davie, 2014).

According to his go-to engineer Kennie Takahashi, when it comes to audio recording, Danger Mouse has an approach that differs from most renowned sound engineers around the world. Whether or not he is recording with the best gear, does not matter to him. As long as the recording moves the listener and has some character, it is not important to him if it was recorded through a noisy Dictaphone or the best microphone in the world (Davie, 2014).

In terms of mixing, Kennie and Danger Mouse always mix a record while doing the tracking so they can get a more accurate idea on the sound they are developing (Davie, 2014): “by the time we’ve finished tracking, it’s pretty much 80-90% there”. However, if transitions are not smooth enough, they would use effects’ automations to divert the listeners’ attention from one element to another. Mixing in the box is also an approach that Kennie and Danger Mouse find valuable since it streamlines the work and tends to enable professional results faster. In terms of plugins choice, they use the usual suspects such as Soundtoys, Waves and even the Pro Tools stock plugins. When it comes to equalization, they are not afraid to be radical in order to get the recorded source closer to the vision they have for the production (Davie, 2014).

Psychology Behind The Producer

As a producer, it is important to be proficient in the technical aspect of audio recording and mixing. However, when it comes to record making, the psychology behind working with artists/bands and getting the best possible performance out of them is undoubtedly just as important of a skill to have. When working in the studio, the producer is the one making sure the people involved in the session are

comfortable. Learning to say the right things at the right time and creating an environment where artists feel safe are some of the factors that will impact the quality of their performances. At the end of the day, it all comes down to dealing with the nature of people and nurturing an emotion that will captivate the listeners' ears (Ramsey, 2016).

Creating a good environment boils down to providing mood lights, water, a comfortable couch and making sure all the technology is working before the client comes into the studio (Hargreaves, 2020). Jon Mark Weiss, a sound engineer/producer with more than 30 years of experience in the field, shared in an interview that he once had a session with a young artist where they were struggling to record strong takes. When Jon heard from her father that she was performing really well when rehearsing in her bedroom, he decided to bring her bedside table, mirror and candles in the studio in order to make her feel at home. As expected, her performance improved and he managed to get the material he needed (Weiss & Calilhanna, 2020).

As another example, Tim Palmer, who worked with the likes of U2, Pearl Jam and Ozzy Osbourne, explained that a producer has to become the artists' confidant and resolve any conflicts of interest in order to foster a creative environment. He stated: "If a band likes to record underwater eating bananas, then that's probably your best plan. Don't forget that being a producer is a bit like being a juggler" (Clark, 2010, p.247).

In terms of the general attitude to adopt, it is crucial to be enthusiastic and involved in the sessions. The artists have to feel that the producer/engineer will support them through every step of the way. According to Ganesh Singaram from

Blue Box Studios, getting a good headphone mix is also an important part for enabling great performances when working with vocalists. If they are struggling with timing, increasing the hi-hat's volume will help hear the tempo's subdivisions more clearly and will most likely improve the performance. Getting the right balance between the performer and the backing track will allow them to sing in the most natural way and consequently improve their dynamic control. It might sound obvious but if performers enjoy the mix, the emotion will translate much better and therefore the overall performance will be improved (Ramsey, 2016).

My Plan

In order to successfully bring this project to fruition, it is important to establish a detailed plan of the different steps to undertake in relation to the time I have available. My project will be segmented in three different stages: the songwriting/pre-production, the production/recording and the mixing/mastering. Due to the corona virus, the deadline of the project has yet to be determined so for the sake of this essay, we will set the deadline to the 15th of August. You can find below a timeline that illustrates the periods where each stages will happen.

Project Timeline

Projects	May 24th - 31st	Jun 1st - 15th	Jun 15th - 30th	Jul 1st - 31st	Aug 1st - 15th
<i>Pat Burgener's EP</i>	Songwriting & Pre-Production	Songwriting & Pre-Production	Production	Recording & Mixing	Mixing & Mastering
<i>Artists' Portfolio</i>	×	×	Songwriting, Pre-Production & Vocal Recording	Production & Recording	Mixing & Mastering

As you can see, the planning of the project will be split in two different parts: the collaboration with the solo artist Pat Burgener and the creation of the artists' portfolio. Due to the corona virus pandemic, I am planning to do all the writing and pre-production for Pat's EP between May and June since we are currently in the same location. For the artists' portfolio, I am planning of flying back to London in mid-June in order to write all the songs with my fellow students. However, since the future is still uncertain, I might have to replace my trip in London with remote songwriting sessions. In terms of recording, I would prefer to save time by doing everything from my home studio. However, I will certainly book a session at Sean Hargreaves' studio if I believe that recording real drums would improve the overall sound of a track.

Conclusion

To conclude, I am confident that the research I have gathered for this essay gave me enough valuable insight for me to get my final project to fruition. The fact that a well-written song is the secret to great productions is surely something I needed to be reminded of. Secondly, gaining insight into the ways Danger Mouse adds character and texture to his work will be of great help to deliver a professional sounding product. Thirdly, I have acquired valuable knowledge on the psychology behind being a producer, which will help me operate in the best possible way when it comes to the recording my projects. And last but not least, I have carefully planned each step of the process in order to avoid shortage of time when delivering the project. It is important to note that despite all my preparation and research, it is crucial to stay flexible and adaptable when undertaking a project of this magnitude. As a creative, there will always be good and bad days but the most important factor is to adopt a resilient mindset and stay as positive as possible at all times.

References

- Bowers & Wilkins (2012), "*Norah Jones discusses her collaboration with Danger Mouse*", available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zXnM0UugM0
(Accessed: 21st May 2020)
- Clark, R. (2010), *Mixing, Recording, and Producing Techniques of the Pros*, 2nd edition, United States: Cengage Learning PTR
- Davie, M. (2014), "Danger Mouse: Producer Of The Decade", *Audio Technology*, 26 November, available at: <https://www.audiotechnology.com/features/danger-mouse-producer-of-the-decade> (Accessed: 21st May 2020)
- Gilchrist, T. (2013), "How Does Producer Danger Mouse Create Original Music For Broken Bells, Beck And Gnarls Barkely? By 'Copying Somebody Else'", *Forbes*, 31 December, available at:
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/toddgilchrist/2013/12/31/9/#3d237b8c1edf>
(Accessed: 21st May 2020)
- Hargreaves, S. (2020) Conversation with Maxime Burgener, 15 February
- Here & Now (2013), "Portugal. The Man Collaborates With Danger Mouse On New Album", 9 September, *wbur.org*, available at:
<https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2013/09/09/portugal-the-man> (Accessed: 21st May 2020)

Jones, D. (2017), "Beck sets release date for new album and talks failed Pharrell collaboration", *NME*, 1 March, available at:

<https://www.nme.com/news/music/beck-sets-release-date-new-album-talks-failed-pharrell-collaboration-1998507> (Accessed: 21st May 2020)

MPG Music Production School (2020), "The Music Production Process Step 1: Writing a Song", *music-production-guide.com*, available at: <https://www.music-production-guide.com/writing-a-song.html> (Accessed: 21st May 2020)

Music Feeds (2013), "*Interview: Portugal. The Man Discuss 'Evil Friends' And Working With Danger Mouse*", available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRGFwZSNp2k> (Accessed: 21st May 2020)

Ramsey C. (2016), "The Psychological Aspect Of Record Making", *Audio Media International*, 16 February, available at:

<https://www.audiomediainternational.com/2016/02/16/the-psychological-aspect-of-record-making/> (Accessed: 21st May 2020)

Waxploitation Records (2020), "Danger Mouse", *waxploitation.com*, available at:

<http://waxploitation.com/danger-mouse> (Accessed: 21st May 2020)

Weiss, J. & Calilhanna, A. (2020), "Psychology and The Music Producer", *Disc Makers Blog*, 16 April, available at:

<https://blog.discmakers.com/2020/04/psychology-and-the-music-producer-2/> (Accessed: 21st May 2020)