

MARCUS GREEN

Commercial Music Production

Creation (ADAD7004)

Element C3

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1. Summary

I have developed a portfolio of music creating eight tracks based on a theoretical framework that focuses on introducing greater diversity into my existing portfolio of music, characterising my individuality as a producer. The primary objective of this approach was to utilise this work to leverage bids and future work opportunities, I was mindful therefore, that the portfolio also needed to be evaluated against industry practitioners to validate the relevance and ability to succeed. I recognised that my existing portfolio had limitations to gender, being predominately male singers, and genres favouring a fusion of hyperpop, trap, noise and metal. I also fuse live music production with DJ'ing when performing shows with my group Crowd Control Collective.

Developing ideas for this new portfolio, I was keen to collaborate and produce an all-female portfolio across multiple genres. The aim of this approach was to gain insight and learning from working in different styles, personalities, vocal ranges and genres that would stretch my expertise into new areas. I have leveraged research insight into these areas including lessons to advance my skills and better identify potential pitfalls to avoid in the production process by also referencing Super Producers and their methodologies.

I have stayed true to the core aims of my proposal, making some smaller modifications through learning. I reduced the number of tracks from 10 to 8 as I felt the portfolio adequately represented the chosen genres from the tracks produced. I prioritised my objective to ensure the songs sounded cohesive overall taking reference from (D. Stone, 2021) focusing on this rather than developing an additional two songs. I originally selected the genres of Hip-hop, Alt Rap, Pop, Alt Pop, R & B, Jazz and Blues. I have modified these in the final portfolio to include RnB, Soul, Alternative Pop, House and alternative Hip-Hop influenced by artist selection.

A key lesson from developing this portfolio is to remain flexible with my objectives, selecting the artists to work with, recognising individual talents in certain genres, and developing relationships that flourish through collaboration is of more importance, and more likely to produce a quality outcome that can be commercially successful. Utilising reference tracks from successful artists in the music industry as a benchmark to shape the development of new sounds and songs proved invaluable as a foundation for song writing and relevance to the genre.

Creating an individualistic style takes time, and a key lesson is the realisation that my style is relevant in the moment having influenced the production of this portfolio; however, I also appreciate this will change and evolve over time as experience grows, tastes develop, and appreciation deepens in key areas.

Creating a habit of consciously seeking feedback and proactively learning across all aspects of music production is also essential for my future development and creativity, I will take the learning from this portfolio and all future production projects to stay dynamic, remain open-minded and be commercially aware. Over time this will enable me to grow in confidence and embrace more challenging and boundary pushing projects.

2. Research, Discussion and Feedback used to inform the project.

1.1. Research methods

When conducting the research for this project there were a number of methods I chose to utilise.

- **Peer feedback** was a vital part of this project, recognising though music is subjective there are still areas that people can generally agree on such as the mix or certain style choices.
- **Experimentation** research with various techniques including the problem solving of issues. Trying different techniques some familiar to me and some new was very important to the development of this project. For example, using different styles of vocal compression. I chose peer feedback and experimentation as these allowed for changes to be made throughout the whole process which in turn gave me more control over the end result.
- **Methodology research** was used to gain insight into Super Producer methods to understand the benefits and pitfalls to avoid.
- **Survey research** informed the production process, taking feedback from artists and musician before and after the mixing and mastering phase of production.
- **Data analysis** helped me to identify the priority areas to create a diverse portfolio adjusting my approach to focus on an all-female portfolio.

1.2. Research finding that shaped my portfolio approach.

When creating my portfolio, it was important that I completed more detailed research into the areas identified in my proposal to inform the validity of the framework and the feasibility of the proposed approach. I originally wanted to create a portfolio of 10 tracks from different artists using both male and female artists. However, when I considered the elements of my existing portfolio, I noticed that I had more projects with male artists than female. I wanted to assess if this also reflected a key issue in the industry, was there a disproportionate amount of female to male artists in the charts? I found that statistically “Only 20% of artists in 2020 Billboard’s year-end hot 100 were female” (L. Snapes, 2021)

When I analysed gender differences across genres there was a similar finding, but of note data analysed of hits from 1950 – 2019 highlighted that some genres, namely rock, were near totally male dominant. Women were more established as solo artist in R & B c45%, and less so in pop c20%. Statistics for women in bands was even lower in these genres with a c30% and c15% representation respectively. (K. Gutierrez, 2022). This has started to change in the last 4 years, but the data findings were a surprise in just how recent these differences existed and how long it will take to change. I therefore felt it essential using my position as a producer, to work more with female artist for both artistic and ethical reasons. I subsequently adjusted my approach choosing to only use female artists for this project.

In light of research findings, I decided to begin creating the tracks by first developing a framework for each track. “A Reference track is a song from another artist to use as a benchmark for varying elements in your own production. For example, you might try to match your master’s loudness to the loudness of a reference track” (Hyper bits, 2020). As an example, one of the reference tracks I used was a track called ‘Assumptions’ by Sam Gellaitry, I chose this track as I wanted to replicate the sonic qualities. I achieved this by manipulating and assessing different synths and their pre-sets, which I could then alter to make the sound fit to the outcome I was trying to create. Utilising this approach increased the efficiency of the production process when I already had a concept of what I was trying to replicate.

When I started selecting the 4 different artists, I considered a number of factors. The first key area was the styles and genres that each artist worked in balanced with the expertise, vocal range and experience of the artist themselves. I wanted the project to have a range of styles to add variation, but also to push myself as a producer to work in new or unfamiliar genres. “By expanding your skills, if not your tastes, to different forms of music, you make yourself more available to a wider audience – and more potential clients” (P. McGuire, 2023). I initially generated contacts with 9 artists, all with different styles and genre preferences, after listening to their respective aims and ambitions I finally selected 4 artists that specialised in RnB, Soul, Alternative Pop, House and alternative Hip-Hop. Having reviewed their experience and ability as vocalists and songwriters, I also reviewed their existing work to better understand the alignment of our joint goals. Developing a sizeable portfolio with strict deadlines, it was important that I could work effectively with each artist as well as making sure they all had good time management and organisational skill. “Co-workers who have positive relationships with one another are more likely to perform well when working on projects together. Having teammates, you respect can motivate you to perform to the best of your abilities and good communication can help perform tasks more efficiently” (S. Kavanagh, 2023).

Accepting I have much to learn producing music across other genres, I am also conscious of the guidance and advice in the industry to not be bound by these in a purist way, and I should seek to blend sounds that feel right. Inspiration has been taken from the following artists: “Don’t let your music be defined by genre labels” (Bonobo, 2020). “No one worries about genre when they’re dancing. They’re not asking themselves, ‘Is this song a dubstep song?’” (Skrillex, 2023.)

From my research there were a number of different techniques which I used in my experimentation phase. For example, one technique I implemented was a style of drum compression, called parallel compression. This is a popular style which can be created quickly, saving time when working with other artists in a time pressured environment. This style of compression also contributed to the cohesion of the overall portfolio and shaped its style. When the compression technique was applied to the drums it created a much more slammed sound bringing it further forward in the mix.

When I received the peer feedback there were a number of common themes. For example, on the tracks with Tia, the soul and RnB tracks, a common suggestion was to create more space for her vocals in order to let them lead the song, but to maintain their

dynamics. Another suggestion was to make the drums harsher or grittier for the second track with Lilwii which was an alt-pop track. Taking these comments and feedback into consideration, I was able to try to experiment with new ways to view my tracks. Using this feedback, I believe helped the mixing and mastering process as I was given suggestions I would not have come up with myself.

1.3 Research findings that informed my production approach.

When researching into super producers I felt most aligned with this concept which is also reflected in the industry. By taking on most of the work needed to complete the project I was able to have near total control over the overall sonic quality of the end result. This enabled my style of production to cut through clearly. Reflecting on this project I believe I have been able to create a formula which will enable me to finish projects much more effectively, while also working collaboratively. This approach will hopefully help me refine my sound further.

However, whilst I have sought to influence this music portfolio with my personal style, I also recognise that this will change as I gain experience, deepen my focus in key areas and the music industry changes over the decades. The search for my sound will be forever on-going appreciating this is another key part of my development as a producer.

1.4 Research findings that supported my project management approach

As projects become more complex, and higher profile working to deadlines, the risks factors also increase and inevitably expose a producer to key points of failure that can damage reputations, and the ability to commercialise their products. Expertise in communications, particularly people management, planning, music production, technical competency, resource, budget management and problem solving are all essential for success.

“What we can claim to have accomplished is based on what we finish, not on what we start,” writes Jonathan Feist, author of *Project Management for Musicians*. (2021). “Setting projects in motion is relatively easy. Completing them is far more difficult. It is our history of completed projects that defines us professionally, though, not our history of started project, we don’t get partial credit for works in progress.”

Planning for this project was complex, there are elements that are sequential, and others require iterations, particularly the initial song writing and recording with artists. Identifying these tasks highlighting dependency on others and those that can be done solely by me, was a key focus. I use Gantt charts to help visualise the overall timescales, to understand the critical path of activity to meet the deadline. I reviewed progress on a weekly basis and when issues emerged to ensure I could make sufficient adjustments to protect the end dates.

Sharing the plans with artists helped increase their commitments when working together as they understood the impact and consequences of task dates if they were to slip. When

issues arose, it was important to regain their commitment to any revised dates so we progressed together.

1.3. Appropriateness of my research approach

A key element of my research approach was the use of experimental research, whilst this proved beneficial to explore new techniques and to aid problem solving, it also by its very nature very became very time consuming to trial new techniques. To learn I had to fail on several occasions, increasing the frustrations levels when timescales were short.

The experimentation method is a key enabler for learning, I should however have perhaps better balanced the proportion of research methods to reduce my exposure to working under pressured deadlines.

The survey questionnaires were invaluable, used pre and post mixing and mastering, I was able to incorporate feedback in key areas of level, EQ, compression styles and overall sonic quality, to improve the quality of the final product. I am keen to continue this approach and to further introduce this method during the initial stages of song writing to protect rework during valuable studio recording sessions.

3. Issues Encountered and Methods used to Resolve.

While working on this project I encountered a number of different issues at different stages of the overall project. A common aspect of working on complex projects such as these is that there will always be issues or areas that don't go to plan. And an important skill that any producer should have is how to approach these issues, and how to effectively deal with them being able to quickly trouble shoot, and problem solve. "There will always be a need to solve problems and cut through obstacles, both unexpected and predictable. Yet for better or worse, they come part and parcel with making music". (Pheek, 2017)

One key issue I experienced was the time management element associated with organising various sessions with different artists for concept development, song writing and recording. All four vocalists collaborating on this portfolio are also Tileyard students with their own final projects to complete, this meant time was at an unusually high premium. Juggling everyone's calendar schedules to accommodate all the required tasks was a major challenge. The ability to deliver a project involves a constant anticipation of risks that may emerge and the need to trade-off time, cost (resource) and quality when they come under pressure from issues, if this issue had not been mitigated, the project could have missed the deadline and or suffered from a poor-quality production outcome.

I initially struggled to respond to artists cancelling sessions, or studio times changing recognising how scarce and vital a resource these were. I quickly overcame the organisation challenges using shared calendars. Creating a shared calendar enabled everyone to put in their availability and I could plan accordingly. "A shared calendar can boost efficiency and communication at home and at work. By sharing your calendar with your co-workers, family and customers the calendar will help you stay organised. As an additional benefit, they

enable you to be more productive and prevent many small errors from occurring” (Deanna Ritchie, 2023)

The second key issue that I experienced was trying to mix and master the vocals to the appropriate standard. “Vocals are tricky. They’re often the loudest thing in a mix, which leaves little room for error, and since we are so familiar with the sound of the human voice, we are quick to notice any imperfections” (J. Moss, 2017). This issue materialised when trying to align the vocals to the instrumentals of the tracks. To attain the correct professional standard, it was imperative that the tracks were cohesive and sounded like one whole project, not just vocals added to a track. This was due to the vocals being a key part if not the main feature of most of the tracks in the project.

To mitigate this issue, I investigated numerous options and decided to undertake multiple approaches. The first was to conduct more specific research in female vocal production, especially within the different genres and styles I was working in. I utilised various materials and formats. YouTube proved to be a helpful and quick resource to revisit some basic principles, however I found useful variations in techniques to specifically support female vocalists. One video that was very helpful was Josh Gudwin’s mixing with the masters. Josh has worked with several successful female artists such as Dua Lipa.

I also found several online blogs and books, detailing different styles and techniques for vocal production. These resources gave me key insight into new or different techniques and approaches I could test and trial to see which work the most effectively. Two blogs which were very useful were Reddit’s Mixing and Mastering sub reddit, and Audio engineering which was another sub reddit. These pages have thousands of subscribers who all post tips and tricks which I could experiment with to resolve issues. “A good mix is not good enough if only the technical aspects are taken into consideration; it must also transmit a song’s message and enhance its emotions” (R. Mendelson, 2022)

4. Reflection on the Projects Achievements

The first area of the project that I highlight as a positive achievement were the adjustments I made to the proposal based on research and more granular planning to ensure the outcome was realistic in the timescales. I was not prepared to trade-off quality when timescales came under pressure, adjusting to eight tracks and 4 artists made the project much more feasible.

Continuing the desire for quality, the overall workflow of the project was also an achievement, I incorporated contingency time on tasks that required iteration with artists and were difficult to estimate. The weekly progress reviews checked task completion and the continued ability to meet deadlines, and to protect time for the tasks towards the end of the plan including mixing and mastering.

By organising every key part of the project including sessions I was able to improve collaboration; I drafted an agenda for each session, discussing this with the artist so we had an agreed way forward. I also shared a visual representation of the project in each stage to

increase engagement buy-in and generate a joint understanding of the criticality of the agreed dates to work together, as a result artists were less likely to change our plans. I was more able to have a constant control over the project and foresee any possible issues that might arise. This enabled me to carefully prioritise my time to where it was needed most to ensure all key areas of the project were completed.

I identified that collaboration and engagement of new artists was a potential high-risk area of the project, I therefore sought advice from other experts and researched key pointers for success. This proved to be an achievement area for the project. Working with vocalists can be challenging recognising how daunting their performance can be, they can feel additionally nervous or overwhelmed when working in a studio or writing session, much more than a guitarist or other musician might for example. To make sure they are able to deliver the best possible performance or write the best possible lyrics it was my role to create a right supportive environment.

It was important to take time to develop a relationship with each artist and to engage in a way that they felt supported collaborating together. This was achieved by having a conversation for the first 10-20 minutes of each session on a personal level, actively asking for their views on our progress, and collectively reviewing the objectives of the session. Any changes were agreed together and reflected in the plan as a whole. At times, writing sessions were not as productive as I had planned, so by setting joint goals each time no matter how small, and seeking feedback at the end of each session the artists felt supported and committed to what was required in the next session.

Finally, the most significant success of the project was attaining the standard I wanted and being fully satisfied with the final result. Recognising there were a lot of new areas for me to overcome in this project, I was constantly unsure if this was feasible. This feeling of doubt was mainly due to my lack of experience working with female artists. Combined with using unfamiliar styles and production techniques. I was able to achieve a positive result through detailed research, good communication with artists, effective troubleshooting and proactive time management.

5. Areas of improvement

Reflecting on areas for improvement is a vital part of learning and developing skills and expertise for the future. One key stand-out area for improvement was the recording process. I chose to use precious studio time at TYE to only record the vocals, noting that the differences in vocal recordings would be the most noticeable within the final product. There were multiple reasons for taking this approach, firstly I was seeking to create eight tracks all utilising multiple instruments. Recording everything at TYE would have required more recording sessions and potentially a longer duration. I recognised how scarce this resource was, so I chose to focus studio time on achieving a higher standard of vocals. Recorded drums are a lengthy and time-consuming process usually requiring multiple engineers on site to assist with the recording, which can improve the overall efficiency. However, for this project I could only rely on myself and one engineer.

A key lesson for my development is to improve my efficiency in the recording studio, to have the confidence to record both vocalists and musicians together. I will also consider extending my network to include greater use of engineers where appropriate if studio availability becomes a constraint, recognising in the commercial world studio time is expensive and a premium. This is a key enabler to becoming a successful producer.

Whilst the workflow elements of this project were an achievement, I also feel there is room for further improvements in certain aspects of time management. Throughout my development I have tried lots of various methods to help improve on this. I have found some methods useful such as use of calendars and shared calendars. As well as creating daily to do lists which helps break down large projects into more manageable pieces. During this project I felt as though my time management skills could be improved on further to enable me to focus on the high priority areas at any given stage of the project's timeline. Gaining a deeper insight into risk management linked to prioritisation of tasks on the critical path will enable me to take on more complex projects moving forward.

I am also conscious that I found the inability to be able to control all aspects of the project very frustrating and at times stressful when things changed or were cancelled. I was naturally dependent upon the artists for their expertise, song writing, preparation, and performance in the studio. Recognising as a producer I can only be successful if I collaborate and work with others, this is a key area for improvement and personal development. Managing stress levels, continually planning effectively and learning to lead through others are key areas for improvement and continuous learning. Taking feedback from the artist and better understanding their experience will be intrinsically linked to my development.

6. What went wrong? and what did you learn from this?

Tempering an initial level of creative enthusiasm and ambition with the practicalities of developing a feasible plan to deliver a quality product. The impact of which slowed the first stage of developing this musical portfolio placing completion timescales under pressure.

In my proposal I had the ambition to create a compilation project to enhance my overall portfolio. These projects are becoming more and more common for producers. The main difference between a compilation project and a studio album is the number of artists featured. A normal studio album might have between 1-3 features of other artists on certain songs within the album. However, compilation projects from producers will normally have at least one feature on each song. This can vary if the project has intros, outros or an interlude, but it is common for each track to have a feature.

Compilation projects will also contain a number of genres or sub-genres which are normally specific to the featured artists desired style. This means that compilation projects

can have a much wider range of musical styles or influences. I made adjustments from the initial proposal to bring greater focus to the objective ensuring I still achieved the ability to commercially enhance my overall portfolio.

On reflection I was keen to enhance my existing portfolio across all genres, I now realise the scale of this ambition, which will take time and further development to fulfil. The addition of this new portfolio achieves success in the genres selected along with valuable learning points. I will enjoy continuing to work in new genres, for example Jazz and Blues and progressing my experimentation and production approaches to expand my portfolio range further.

7. Forward-Looking Development plan

To be a great producer will require expertise across all aspects of production, and a key learning from this project, is the importance of networks, communication, collaboration and dealing with complexity under pressure. These aspects are symbiotic and failure in one aspect can lead to failure overall.

A key part of my career and personal development moving forward is the ability to continually learn and develop. I have created a proactive development plan that can be iterated and refreshed on a regular basis to remain dynamic and relevant. The plan includes short term goal of 1-6 months, and medium-term goals of 6 months – 2 yrs.) that will be iterated as life and experience changes so I can build experience and retain relevant skills over time as the industry changes.

As a first step I completed a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and threats). By doing this I was able to analyse all aspects of my production career so far. I was able to visually see what does and does not need to be improved to drive the identification of my goals.

I continue to also utilise self-assessment methods including a Johari Window and my previously completed Myers-Briggs assessments, to inform my SWOT analysis. “It provides insights based on your personality strengths and weaknesses, what challenges you see ahead of you, and what opportunities are present around you now and in the future” (M. Martin, 2019).

My strengths of collaboration and having strong intuition are beneficial for succeeding in music production. However, my weaknesses in time management and networking need to be strengthened and are a constant focus for development. “SWOT analysis helps you to position your strategic direction because you’re aware of the internal and external factors that affect you” (D. Reading, 2019)

There are many styles of leadership, authoritarian, participative, delegative, transactional and transformative that can be used in different situations and environments, recognising individuals will have a preferred approach. In my experience working as a producer my leadership style is more relaxed, not too intrusive and participative. I want the

artist to be at their best, therefore, it's my job to create the appropriate environment. "It feels like my job is to support people. I support artists. When I worked with a symphony, I sat in the third chair, not the first chair" – Nile Rodgers

A summary of these goals includes:

1-6 months:

- Continue to develop my AV sound and light engineering expertise working as a freelance professional.
 - Develop as a pro tools expert to add a further income stream capability.
 - Create event opportunities for Crowd Control Collective to showcase a new album and increase live performance expertise.
 - Continue to expand my networks and contacts utilise industry and alumni opportunities.

6 months – 2 yrs:

- Gain commercial success with one recording as a producer working with multiple artists.
- Gain experience in film scoring to extend my freelance working capability.
- Continue to deepen my song writing skills and experience.
- Become fully self-employed as a music producer working freelance in the music industry.

I am also keen to continue to benefit from the support of a mentor and will utilise the Tileyard alumni together with contacts I have already made working freelance in the AV engineering sector. In addition to this I am also looking for freelance work at a studio to build up my experience engineering and running commercial sessions.

8. Discuss your development in terms of knowledge and skill

This project has enabled me to grow and develop as a producer, in both my knowledge and skills gained. I have been able to gain useful insight into how to create a specific project or body of work similar to an EP or Album. This has covered all aspects from start to finish, such as research, development, planning an organising, writing, recording and mixing and mastering. Some areas of the project have been more developmental due my pre-existing competence levels.

A key area has been creating specific bodies of work using certain styles or genres and working within these conventions. The project has enabled me to not only focus on working on a project with a specific overall style, but also how to then make each track sound cohesive and not just a collection of different tracks. To achieve this, I have had to think about the overall end goal a lot more and make creative decision to support desired end result.

As complexity builds in future projects, I will benefit from more formal training in project management methods to better inform the commercial bid stage as well as delivery, to ensure a project is set up for success and can be delivered.

9. Evaluate work against industry Practitioners

Part of the research for this project was to use reference tracks taken from other artists in the industry. As well as researching the artists and the producers process for making music, I was able to experiment with their techniques for further inspiration. I was also able to evaluate my work against theirs and use it as a benchmark for a successful track and project.

Each track on the portfolio benefited from at least one reference track or an established producer. The two tracks with Reema went in a more EDM, house direction, this was influenced by 'Sam Gellaitry' for the first track and 'Kaytrnada' for the second track. The two tracks with Lilwii were influenced by the two artists/ producers 'The 1975' and 'Willow Kayne'. For these two tracks I wanted to achieve a fresh experimental sound which would align to the Alt-pop genre. For Tia's two tracks I used '9th Wonder' and 'SZA' as inspiration. These tracks were more of a modern RnB style with old school Hip-hop influences. Finally, for the two tracks with Gabby I used 'Justin Timberlake & The Neptune's' and 'Kenny Beats & Rico Nasty' as influences. For these two I wanted to create a sound similar to early 2000's pop, when pop was heavily infused with Hip-hop.

By using specific producers to reference for each track I was able to gain a better understanding of what I wanted the overall sonic qualities to be and how I was going to approach achieving this sound. Listening through producers' catalogues and using interviews and blogs provided an excellent source of reference.

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