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Introduction

Whilst the creation proposal aimed to map out the nature and objectives of my portfolio, this reflection will be an expression of how the project unfolded and how I began to discover my true strengths and weaknesses as a music producer. I will aim to explain how I went about the project and the issues I encountered along the way, whilst also reflecting on the feedback given to me by my peers and mentors at Tileyard, and then putting this feedback into good practice. It has been a long and arduous task of recruiting and working with other musicians and artists, which have all in their own way influenced the way in which I now produce. Let's begin by discussing the research methodology, and how this has informed my decision-making throughout the process of recording, mixing, and mastering.

Research and Discussion

In the main, collaboration is and should be a part of the songwriting process, whether it be at the start of a chord progression or in the finalising of a musical product. That said, is anybody entirely sure where to start a song idea? As I experienced in previous projects, sometimes it 'just happened', there was chemistry between two or three people in a room and we began bouncing ideas around, and suddenly we had a spark! Throughout my research though, I have discovered several parallels between various artists and their producers and their working relationships within their respective genres.

Perhaps one of the biggest collaborations of all time was when Quincy Jones produced the USA for Africa recording in 1985, where he brought 46 artists together to record *We Are The World* (1985) in aid of African deprivation. This was first initiated and inspired by the previously recorded and released *Feed The World* (1984), a large British-based collaboration between the best of British pop artists, led by Midge Ure and Bob Geldof. However, in the DVD box set of the recording session for the USA for Africa, there are several archival out-takes where the first songwriting and arranging session took place.

This session is key to the whole production process, and you can see the songwriting and collaborating unfolding as Michael Jackson, Lionel Richie and Stevie Wonder arrange the song with pianist Greg Phillinganes. I took inspiration from this and began to write some demo

tracks on my iPhone and iPad, whereby another artist could listen to this and begin to interpret the song in their own style.

In the second and third parts of my portfolio, the research informed my decision-making process when it came to the production of the remixes and cover version songs. First, I identified with Sam Malta's (2022) "The 5 stages of an electronic music producer: initiation, exponential learning, the dip, proficiency and mastery". In terms of my learning curve for the project, I found myself going through all these stages, each time I began a new track. Firstly, I initiated an idea, then tried to grow that idea exponentially, learned to adapt to issues arising along the way, then finally became proficient and mastered it. The thought processes behind my remixes and covers stemmed from what I had heard that day or that week on Spotify or even on the radio, which perked my interest. I asked myself, what would it take to re-produce an RnB track such as Rhianna's *Wild Thoughts*, in the style of House or EDM? Or, how do I change the feel and complexity of Adele's *When We Were Young* yet still maintain its integrity?

Issues Encountered

Original Songs

The Future Pop track *Love Yourself* was a genre-specific track that featured two singers. I generated these by using the LoopCloud plugin, whereby I could build the track with different vocalists (from different samples) who were difficult to find in person. It was a challenge to mesh these vocals together and have them sit well in the arrangement, let alone the mixing and mastering obstacles of interconnecting female and male vocals in the same track. It's a song that is not really a duet, but more a futuristic take on how a duet could be perceived in the music of the future. Overall, I used lots of pitch shifting/autotune to create the ethereal vibe and feel of this track.

When producing the Latino Pop original, I had contracted a collaborator/vocalist and friend (SamJ) from Miami, who had listened to my rough sketch, followed by a zoom meeting to discuss the pre-production of the vocals. He brought some ideas to the table lyrically in Spanish, whilst I sketched out a melody for the chorus and verse. I originally wanted this track to have Italian lyrics (since that is my heritage) and whilst SamJ is not an Italian national, he informed me of some reference tracks including Italo-Pop songs which turned out to be quite useful for melodic and instrumental themes.

He also made me aware of how the sonority of the track should maintain a minimal posture, and not overcrowd the vocal, as this would seem too dated, and less effective as a commercial product. Therefore, I decided to leave the instrumentation as it was in the first rough sketch, with the reggaeton feel of syncopated chord stabs, accenting the off-beats of 2 and 4. This worked out well as there was now lots of space for the vocals to sit in the mix, as they take up a lot of real estate in the track. I extended the timbre further in a later mixed version, with more Latino-style percussion such as claves, bongos, congas, timbales etc, to fill in the gaps, rhythmically speaking.

When the vocals were recorded, I then had to decide what the song needed, to feel more finished, commercial and complete. This entailed referencing the newest commercial Latino pop songs on Spotify, iTunes and Amazon Music. I discovered that 95% of the songs that I reviewed and analysed featured a considerable amount of autotune on the vocals. The timbre of this genre is largely based on this autotuned sound, which has become quite iconic. However, I wanted to expand on the instrumentation but still leave room in the song for the vocals. This was extremely difficult to do, so I began to place instruments within a frequency range between 350-450 Hz, or utilising the upper mids around 800 Hz, and then again at around 1-2 kHz. This allows the vocal to still cut through as well as let the instruments contribute to the stereo image.

Cover songs

Regarding the selection of the cover songs, I decided to allow the vocalists to choose which cover they'd prefer to record from a list that I had put together based on my Spotify playlists. Initially, I had started working on a cover version of *Tears Dry On Their Own* (2009) by Amy Winehouse, however, I encountered several musical stumbling blocks during this endeavour. Firstly, I discovered that the song and the music are too iconic and memorable in their original format. It became troublesome to deviate away from such a classic chord progression. So, an alternative approach was to change the song entirely and go with something more modern, and more malleable.

As a side note, Huff (2016) suggests that you should learn the cover song of your choice note-for-note first before trying to emulate it. I went through the arduous process of learning all of the covers songs (including the abandoned *Tears Dry On Their Own*), before attempting to change the arrangement, structure and overall direction for each piece. This is where the

collaborator (Emma) and I had the idea of Adele's *When We Were Young* (2015) since it had minimal parts to it that could be rearranged and covered in a different context.

My version uses more traditional instrumentation, including the gospel vibe of the Hammond organ in the bridge, as well as the trumpet and brass swells leading the listener out of the bridge section. These decisions were all made after the vocal recording took place. I had seen the programme *Amazing Grace* (1972) (featuring Aretha Franklin) which inspired me to include a choir-pad, and Hammond organ as well as some hints of brass instruments such as trumpet and sax sections. Hopefully, the intention was to maintain the song's integrity from a lyrical perspective but also take it to another level, production-wise.

The Tate McCrae cover *That Way* (2020) was originally intended to be the Ariana Grande cover *You'll Never Know* (2013), but since the recording process did not take shape, Charlotte (the vocalist) and I decided to use a more stripped-back song to cover. This meant that the arrangement had more adaptability and could be developed further with the experimental use of timbre. The decision to use more sound design for this track was to experiment with placing pop music in a cinematic scenario, using atmospheric effects to support the backdrop and panorama of the stereo image. Charlotte's voice has been treated meticulously in this production, whereby the dry/wet signal of the reverb and delay are automated between sections. This brings the vocals towards the listener in the verses and brings the instrumentation closer in the choruses.

Remixes

In this module, I have challenged myself to more adventurous tasks, such as remixing existing commercial tracks. This was where I came up with the ideas for remixing songs that were not originally House music, but then I could manipulate them and change them from the ground up to work within this genre. Swindali (2020) suggests that "typically when remixing, you go with the key elements of the song such as the vocal or lead melody".

This is exactly what I did with the 3 remixes. *You'll Never Know* was the furthest one away from the House genre, since it has an RnB-Pop feel and a melody that you might not consider to be suitable for House. However, with some time stretching and polyphonic flex time in Logic Pro, this was easily achieved. As Swindali (2020) states, you need to try to keep the fidelity of the recording when you time stretch, as it can introduce unwanted artefacts in the audio.

Swindali (2020) suggests that you keep to a minimum of 10 BPM difference, faster or slower. However, I changed the BPM of Wild Thoughts from 99 to 122 BPM. I was able to do this since I extracted the vocals from a version that was already remixed to something a little closer to my target BPM. In other words, I actually remixed a remix!

Achievements and Successes

Each song in my portfolio went through many different sketches and mixdowns before they were finally committed to a master. Although not always easy to locate the success of the songs, it was a case of playing them for my peers and mentor within the Tileyard Education community. Comments made by my peers have led to some minor changes in the structural elements of the songs. For instance, in the Future Pop original *Love Yourself*, I had originally arranged verse 2 straight after chorus 1, followed by the bridge. However, it was noted that this does not allow enough anticipation in chorus 2 that follows. Also, the bridge would have had more impact straight after the chorus section as opposed to after the verse section.

The choice to go down this route is two-fold. Firstly, it provides more variation in the structure overall, and secondly, it proposes a different tonality and mood for the bridge section. The bridge itself utilises a half-time feel, putting more emphasis on beat 3 with the backbeat. This technique has been used widely in the genre of trap music, from which I borrowed the idea. My mentor (Brendan Cox) also commented and advised me to use more sound effects here, as in atmospheres, textures and risers. This would allow for even more suspense and tension leading into the main chorus section.

Mixing and Mastering

Oltheten explains his perspective on mixing and balance:

“Creating a balance is about continually assessing sounds based on their loudness. But the outcome of this assessment depends on the type of sound, on other sounds that you hear at the same time, but also on the monitors you use and their level. The frequency response of your auditory system depends on the intensity of the sound you are listening to” (p.27, 2018)

I would take this one step further and argue that the music you are mixing needs to be understood on an emotional as well as a technical level. The song needs to be conveyed through its lyrical content and story, and then the instruments and music support that emotional content with a foundation of timbre, arrangement, dynamics, and expression. On the contrary, Sarafin (2020) states that we as mixers are operating within a four-dimensional domain, which comprises an illusion of the 3D space, as well as the fact that music changes over time; and time is the fourth dimension.

My approach to mixing for this project was stem-mixing, where I routed all of the subgroups in Pro Tools or Logic Pro to the outputs that fed to the mixing console in stereo pairs. This way the automation could be controlled via the software, and the final mix could be done as a mixdown on the desk which was then printed back into the DAW to be mastered.

My workflow has been this way for some time now and I felt very confident and comfortable mixing the portfolio of tracks in this manner. The majority of the songs lend themselves to this approach, whereby the groups of instruments can be processed using outboard compression and equalisation, as well as effects. That said, I decided to use all DAW compression and equalisation, as well as the use of effects processors from third-party plugins.

In particular, I have made use of the following plugins from the Plugin Alliance catalogue to determine and maintain a balanced mix throughout the portfolio:

- Elysia Museq Mix and Master (for extra clarity and sparkle in the vocals either on the subgroup, individual channel and/or on the master bus)
- Shadow Hills Compressor (to compress the subgroups before the mixing console fader rides)
- Millenia NES2 (a broadband parametric EQ designed for the overall tonal balance of subgroups)

All of this is in addition to the subtractive and corrective EQ that was processed on the individual channels. Of course, all of this happened independently of send effects processing.

I intended to start with the most complex track of all and strip it down to its main core, such as the vocals and a keyboard, or synth keys and vocals. When making choices about where to start, it's often the broad balance of things that matters the most. However, as Oltheten (2018) states there is not much music that works in such a way that every instrument stays equal to another and so on.

Music is more of a living thing; it breathes, grows in intensity, and releases energy at different points in the song. That is exactly what I was aiming for in the mixing stage of these tracks. For example, in *When We Were Young*, I wanted to allow the vocals to dominate at times, but then the piano would take over, then the percussion would dominate at some point, or make way for the trumpet to be featured just for one lick. This is more akin to live mixing engineering in a sense, where the engineer would react to the crowd and pay attention to the audience's response.

Dynamics

In his interview for *Mix With The Masters* (2021), Michael Brauer reflects on his use of the “Brauerise” mixing technique. This approach allows him to send vocal and instrumental channel information into his multi-bus processing setup. That is, sending each of the tracks into compression off the send and return busses and blending these back into the stereo bus. Whilst this technique can work well in the analogue world, it is much easier to implement in the digital realm.

However, I did try to emulate his technique, but I found that working in such a way would suit certain genres more than others. Therefore, I maintained my stem mixing approach since I do not have enough channels on my Soundcraft Ghost console to mix all of the individual tracks. If I wanted to gain even more level though through gain staging, then this could be achieved by sending the stems to the subgroups on the mixing desk, and then back into Pro Tools or Logic Pro.

Equalisation

In terms of controlling the tonal balance of the instruments, it was approached with a sense of relativity, since all instruments should be equalised in relation to each other. When asked about equalisation on *Pensado's Place* (2013), recording engineer Al Smidt stated that he doesn't even use EQ, except for when he is mixing a song recorded by someone other than

himself. Instead, he relies on microphone selection and placement to gauge the best possible tonal balance for the recording of any given instrument. Granted, he is the main engineer at Capital Records (alongside Steve Genewick) where the microphones and facilities are highly sought after, in comparison to most budget studios.

That said though, the notion of not using EQ unless necessary is quite daunting. It can be so tempting to use the best-sounding EQ you have or the most expensive plugin version of a real hardware tube EQ, just because other engineers are using it. However, EQ is often overused in mixing and engineers tend to apply it without thinking of its actual function or effect on the music itself. In my case though, when referencing against the original covers and remixes I could hear that there needed to be a considerable amount of EQ application (or subtraction) to make my songs cut through and be competitive. I decided to use a parametric EQ in most cases for subtractive surgical processing, then a broader parametric bandwidth setting for more musical EQ applications.

On the mastering front, it was a case of referencing against songs in those genres, and maintaining a level of objectivity about how much EQ to apply and when without compromising the overall mix. This is where A-B came into its own, as I was able to switch seamlessly on the mixing console between the dry and wet signal, as well as between the reference tracks and my masters.

Reverbs and Delays

When it came to reverb and delay, I only wanted to hear it when there's a need to hear it. If I can get away with adding a reverb or delay and the listener doesn't notice it, then that is the aim. In some cases, I applied this effect in more extreme circumstances than I usually would. For instance, to add a dramatic feel and character to the cover song *That Way*, I drenched the vocal in the bridge with lots of reverb and delay, which hopefully takes the listener to another place, in the grand scheme of things.

For the most part, my intention for reverb was to place the instruments in the sound stage, according to the vocal delivery, emotion and arrangement of the music. A typical example of where I went against this notion was in the remix of *Wild Thoughts* (2017). There's a section just before the sax solo begins, where I wanted to build intensity, and give the illusion that the sax was playing from quite far away and getting closer and closer in each measure. To do this,

I needed to select the correct reverb for the job, in this instance, I opted for the Valhalla Vintage Verb (huge spaces pre-set). To support this concept, Sarafin (2020) states that “it’s not enough to think about how a part sounds in a mix...think about how the parts affect the mix, both in terms of the moment and in terms of what’s coming next”, (p.96).

Feedback

Since the project had taken me to places I had never been before, production-wise, I needed to rely on the feedback of my mentor Brendan Cox at Tileyard. This feedback would prove invaluable as he gave me direction and ideas for where I could take the pieces of music, yet still portray the styles with validity. I originally sat with Brendan at the mixing and production masterclass and began to realise that he and I shared the same workflow patterns, and mixing techniques. Firstly, he assessed the way I was producing the tracks and the instrumentation and advised that the rough sketches ought to be free of complexity, and leave some room for imagination in the songwriter or collaborator:

“Try to leave space and room for the singer to improvise their parts, and not dictate the melody too much. The vocalist you are working with needs to be able to stamp their authority on the track and not be led by a specific melodic pattern in the music”. (Zoom call, 5 Sept 2022)

I quickly realised that this was the hardest thing to do since the melody can sometimes be hard to resist when you’re laying down instrumental parts for a backing track. Once I had made the tracks and sent them to the collaborators, it was clear that there was a big hole in the arrangement which the vocals would eventually occupy. Once the mixdowns for each track were recorded, Brendan gave me yet more advice on the mixing stage:

“You should start the mix with whatever feels natural to you. I always tend to start with the drums and process the rest of the tracks from there, but dealing with the vocal as early on in the process as possible”. (Zoom call, 28 Sept 2022)

I took the advice from Brendan and began each mix with the element that jumped out at me in the song, perhaps the lyrical content also led me to mix the songs in the way that I did. If I had started the mixes, say with the drums, then the overall tonal balance might have been subject

to change, especially in the upper mids and highs. Sarafin (2020) suggests that the frequency response of one instrument is often masked by another, and it's all about equalising the instruments relative to each other. He often implies that a bright mix is not necessarily a clear mix.

For example, if I were to make the vocals brighter overall by pushing 4-8 kHz, (to make them clearer), then the instruments around the vocals are going to sound even duller relative to them. Cox (2022) suggested that you don't use a high pass filter on all instruments, except the bass and kick drum, since there are often lows and low-mids in instruments that have undertones as well as overtones beyond their fundamental. This means that a guitar or piano (depending on the range) would sound more natural not being high-pass filtered unless there are artefacts in the low frequencies that need to be cleared out.

Areas For Improvement

As it happened, I relied on some of my peers for the task of songwriting in the early stages of the project, but they became too busy in their endeavours, so I needed to look elsewhere for the right collaborators. Of course, songwriters are prevalent online, and so this is where I focused my search for the right people, using the platforms Fiverr, Verse-chorus and SoundBetter. In hindsight, I wish I had done this earlier on in the assignment, as it might have led to better results, and I may have found even better musicians and songwriters with whom to collaborate.

On the collaboration front, I gained so much experience from working with such diverse artists and musicians. The most obvious area for improvement though is the communication between myself and the collaborator. We would disagree sometimes and the vocalist would say that their voice needs to be a certain way in the recording. I needed to do better and better each time when it came to reassuring the vocalists about their singing and supporting their efforts with more compliments. For the most part, they took the criticism well, but I need to learn to be more diplomatic when conveying my thoughts on the recorded results, in future, which will lead to a better working collaboration, and get the best out of the vocalists.

What I Have Learned From This Project

All the tracks in my portfolio have been through many stages of development. With regards to the remixes, I could have taken the opportunity to use existing remix competitions which I had explored before, but instead, I chose to remix already released songs. This was problematic as I would need to have sourced the a cappella and instrumental versions for these tracks. However, I experimented at first with importing the original full mixes into Logic Pro and by applying a series of radical EQ filtering techniques, began to see where my parts could fit into the remix, to try to adapt the arrangement and sonority. This did not work out well, since there was too much bleed from unwanted frequencies from the original track, which clashed with my newly added remixed instrumental parts.

Therefore, this approach was a disaster at first and I needed to find a way of cleaning up the tracks so that I could access the a cappella successfully which could then be manipulated into a newly developed remix for a different genre. This is what happened with *Kiss and Tell*, *You'll Never Know* and *Wild Thoughts*. I had been searching for a plugin or software that could extract the vocals and instrumental parts from existing stereo tracks. I stumbled upon an online VI known as lalal.ai. which is a stem-splitting technology available for online use only, using commercially produced stereo recordings. It is worth mentioning here that the software does struggle to separate the vocals from the drums with older recorded mono sources, say, from the 1940s to 1960s.

Personal Development Plan

Following the MA degree, I would intend to go on to be a freelance music producer, and that ideal would be any producer's wish, of course! However, a more realistic approach would be to maintain a sense of perspective over the music industry as a whole and work on each project with true diligence and professionalism. This is what I will do in the first instance, to build my contacts and online presence. Below is an overview of my aims and action plan as a producer over the course of 2023 and beyond.

Personal Development Plan – 2023-2025

Aims and Targets	Actions	Measurements of Success	Resources	Timescales
1. To develop and expand my network of contacts in the music industry	Contact industry executives, cold email or cold call 5 record companies per week in different territories, advertising myself as a freelance music producer, mixer and mastering engineer.	Record companies and industry A & R scouts email or respond with offers for paid or unpaid contracts, in the first instance until my profile and portfolio is larger.	Computer, iPad, iPhone, professional email address, web-links to previous work on YouTube, a pro YouTube channel, SoundCloud Pro profile. Pre-released material on Spotify or iTunes.	6-12 months
2. To learn more complex music production techniques for House and Pop music	Subscribe and sign up to online masterclasses with leading industry professionals from Sound on Sound, Music Tech magazine, BBC maestro, Masterclass, Virtuoso etc.	Completion of courses. Use of music production techniques learned embedded into the songs produced. Produce more commercially viable music and reach more Spotify streams and/or YouTube views.	Computer, iPad, iPhone, professional email address, web-links to previous work on YouTube, a pro YouTube channel, SoundCloud Pro profile. Pre-released material on Spotify or iTunes.	9-12 months
3. To develop my mixing techniques and listening skills as a producer, in these genres	Subscribe to Mix With the Masters (again) and gain an understanding of more fundamental mixing techniques used by pro mix engineers. Attend more seminars and workshops in London where I could gain hands on experience.	Use newly learned mixing techniques in music productions, particularly for House and Pop music.	Computer, iPad, iPhone, professional email address, web-links to previous work on YouTube, a pro YouTube channel, SoundCloud Pro profile. Pre-released material on Spotify or iTunes.	1 -12 months

4. To develop a broader understanding and technical knowledge of mastering audio in these styles	Contact Mazen Murad at Metropolis in London as well as Mandy Parnell, and request a workshop or masterclass in mastering audio for House and Pop music. Send these mastering engineers my masters to get feedback on.	Integrate these techniques as identified by Mazen and Mandy, and check whether these have made a different by sending them the mastered and un-mastered versions. Release work on Spotify to generate more streams as a result of a better mastering technique.	Computer, iPad, iPhone, professional email address, web-links to previous work on YouTube, a pro YouTube channel, SoundCloud Pro profile. Pre-released material on Spotify or iTunes.	6-12 months
5. To become a full-time freelance music producer, specialising in House and Pop music	Discover new platforms such as Fiverr, Kompoz and Soundbetter, and pay into a subscription on these sites, to build a profile of material that can be used to promote myself as a producer, mixer or mastering engineer. Set up the profile with a professional photo by a pro photographer.	More and more clients use these sites to hire me as their producer, mixer or mastering engineer. I could start to charge money for my services, but not be too overpriced as this will not be wise in the beginning. My day job would still remain and start off as a part-time freelancer, when the paid work becomes more frequent, I could then begin to work only part-time as a school head of department, and part-time as a freelancer.	Computer, iPad, iPhone, professional email address, web-links to previous work on YouTube, a pro YouTube channel, SoundCloud Pro profile. Pre-released material on Spotify or iTunes.	12-24 months

Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have grown to work with others in a compromising way. Ordinarily, as the producer, I would lead the session more and determine the direction of the song. But this time I have learned, developed my craft (as a co-songwriter and co-producer) and come to realise that it's a team effort and all of the opinions of others really count towards the finished product. For future reference, I would definitely need to identify the songs and their styles way in advance, as this is what cost me a lot of time during this assignment. Then, to try and find the correct people to work with, was even more time-consuming. The musicians I have worked with are now a part of my co-producing music network, and they will be the key to my success following the MA degree. Naturally, I would want to branch out even further and reach other producers and songwriters from other territories. This is where online connections will come into place for me in the next five to ten years. Lockdown made it more and more possible to connect and co-produce with others online without the need for face-to-face interaction.

I have discovered several really useful websites throughout this degree. The top three websites that I will use for future co-productions and to build a career in freelancing are: Fiverr, SoundBetter and Kompoz. These online collaboration sites have allowed me to find and reach musicians from across the world, from Europe to America. If this way of collaborating is a natural progression for freelance music producers, then that is the way I intend to go. I will build an online profile on these sites, and then market myself as a particular kind of producer and musician, based on my previous work, including that of the MA portfolio. To that end, I originally proposed to work in many different styles to identify my preferred genre, so that I know which direction to take in the music industry. Now, I feel confident enough to know that ultimately my strength in terms of music production lies in House and Pop music, as well as mixing and mastering audio for these styles.

I feel that these are my strengths, and I should pursue these areas of the music industry further. Perhaps branching out to sub-genres of House, such as a Future House, Electro, Deep, Funky and Disco House. These styles would be challenging enough in themselves and would enable me to grow as a producer. They would also lend themselves to collaboration with other vocalists, musicians and co-producers from around the world, at least that's the plan anyway!

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Appendix 1: Stem Mixing workflow on Soundcraft Ghost console.





Appendix 2: Mastering in Logic Pro





Appendix 3: Mixing in Logic

