



# Phobosphear Production Reflection Commentary

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## Index:

1. Introduction
2. My Portfolio
3. Working with Song writers
4. Research
  - a. Luke Vellar Influences – Sam Smith
  - b. Arron Lewis Welch Influences
  - c. Daisy Ballard Influences
  - d. Hybrid production Techniques
  - e. Vocal effect and processing
  - f. Side Chaining
  - g. Hardware Vs Software
5. Reflection
  - a. Issues Encounter
  - b. What I have achieved
6. Phobosphear Production future
7. Conclusion
8. References

## Introduction

For my final project my original proposal consisted of three goals these were:

1. Fully establish Phobosphear Productions as a music production company
2. Create a showreel of music written to commercial advertisements
3. Create and develop a five track Extended Play (EP) to coincide with the full launch of Phobosphear Productions

After I had submitted my proposal and receiving feedback from my tutor I was made aware that my project was ambitious, and it would be clear that the goals set would not be attainable with the level of high quality that I expect of myself. With this latest feedback I decided to concentrate on the showreel and a three Song EP. With the goal to establish Phobosphear Productions fully, and to release my EP I intended to use a website called Distrokid.com, this way I would be able to get my music into most of the online streaming platforms and social media.

After carrying out my research the best way to release my work would be to create a waterfall release, in which each month a song would be uploaded through Distrokid thus creating a waterfall (Knopper, 2018) effect. This in theory gives time for the listener to enjoy the music as released, and then the next release should rebolster interest in its predecessor.

In the month of September, I was approached by several song writers who were looking to create their own music, with the intention of releasing into the public forum themselves. As I aspire to become a producer with my own company, I concluded it would be better to show the different styles of music that I can adapt my skills to. This directly linked back to advice given by my Mentor (James from Lazy Habits) who suggested that I needed to showcase my work not only in my own personal style, but also the full array of abilities, thus widening my appeal when networking and diversifying my content online. With all this in mind, I realised that I could show case myself and my abilities, if I acknowledge the advice given and altered my project. In this new direction I finalised on the idea of creating a production portfolio for project instead of the original three goals.

A production portfolio in this manner shows my talent across the spectrum of music, as well as being a great starting point from which I can further continue my development of Phobosphear Productions and my career as a music producer beyond this course.

## My Portfolio

My portfolio will consist of the production work I have undertaken for three of the artists who have approach me:

1. Aaron Lewis Welch
2. Luke Vella
3. Daisy Ballard

I shall also include two of my own songs to further demonstrate my skills as a producer and the different styles and genres that I can adapt my work to.

When working with Aaron Lewis Welch, we together created four key songs which form part of the portfolio, the completed four songs, as well as instrumentals.

- Intro (Project 004)
- Project 3 Stay
- Project 007 On my Way
- Project 009 Do Better

With Luke Vellar, I have kept one song within the portfolio.

- Real Time

Finally, in my work with Daisy Ballard, again I have kept one song for the portfolio.

- Falling softly

In addition to the works completed with the above artists, I have included two of my own creations for which I wrote the music and produced:

- Distant Shores
- Death to Truth

For Death to Truth, which in the main track features vocals from Aaron Lewis Welch; to explore differences in the music and the feelings it portrays I have also explored an alternative version with vocals from Sarah Ballard, who I have known and worked with previously.

## Working with Songwriters

There was a time that when an artist wanted to write a song for release, they would need to go to a studio and work with a mixing engineer. Indeed, it was always a dream of mine to sit in the control room of a music studio being surrounded by all the outboard music equipment, mixing desks and patch bays. You only need to look at Steve Lacy (2017), a producer and musician who has worked with some of the biggest names in the industry, such as Frack Ocean, Kendrick Lamar and Calvin Harris. While there is still a need for big studios, it is also possible to write and produce audio work entirely from home.

As I am an online student at Tileyard it was very difficult to get to the studios in London, and so with today's technology I was able to produce with the artist solely online. As I already have a professional career as a Music teacher, I already had access to some software, as well as making use of my own home studio, which consists of Apple Mac Mini pro with Cubase 12 Pro and an array of virtual and physical instruments at my disposal. One of the tools that would be vital to the smooth online production that I had to do, is Microsoft Teams where I was able to screen share all my sessions and listen and feedback in real time.

Having the studio and the means to communicate with my colleagues was simply the first part of this process, collaborating with them in this was part of the new experience of music production for me, working on music that was brought to me and a stylistic direction that would not have been my normal approach, and creating something that met all requirements, while also remaining faithful to myself as a producer.

It's clear that the way to successfully create a track over the internet is going to need more than just equipment and software. Artists and producers constantly communicate, providing feedback to each other, this collaboration is essential for refining the creation process and ensuring that it aligns with the artist's vision. Effective communication was going to be the main staple to success, but also key was to build an understanding of the artist you're going to work with – understand their musical direction and be creative and adaptive to each individual artist. A way to look at this from a business perspective is that the artist is your customer, it there therefore essential for you to understand their requirements, as well as the changes that may occur through the process (Mann, 2021). Both parties need to compromise at times. Artists might have strong convictions about their work, while producers bring experience and technical expertise. Finding the right balance is key to a successful collaboration.

## **Research**

### **Luke Vella's musical influence – Sam Smith**

The key to understanding Luke's vision, was to realise that he admired the styles and production of the artist Sam Smith. Like Sam Smith, Luke's lyrics seemed to be rooted in soul and R&B traditions but also incorporated modern electronic elements. This might include subtle electronic beats, synthesizers, and vocal processing effects like reverb and delay to add a contemporary touch to the sound. One of the song references was 'Lose You' it was clear that the instrumentation was going to be more traditional with focuses on minimalist arrangements that highlighted the vocals and the song's emotional content. Simple piano chords, subtle string arrangements, and gentle percussion are common elements in the music. The simplicity of the arrangements allows the focus to remain on the lyrics and the vocal delivery.

Jimmy Napes was one of the producers who had worked with Sam Smith, Napes preferred to use live instruments due to his upbringing in a musical family (Cliff, 2018). Napes often incorporates live instruments into his productions, including pianos, guitars, and strings. This adds an organic and authentic feel to the music, enhancing the emotional impact of the songs. Napes also pays careful attention to vocal production, ensuring that the lead vocals are capturing the emotional nuances of the performance. This is key when it comes to Luke's song 'Real Time'.

Another song that Luke referenced was 'Desire' which was produced with Calvin Harris. Harris's music style has evolved over the years, ranging from electro house, synth-pop to funk-infused and tropical house elements. His ability to adapt to changing trends while maintaining a distinctive sound has contributed to his enduring popularity. One of the key elements in 'Desire' is the nostalgic 90s rave feel to the song which seems to blend with modern production techniques. The trance inspired (Bedward, 2023) sound is something I wanted to incorporate with Luke's song along with real instrumentation. With this in mind I combined electronic music which heavily relies on synthesized sounds with live instruments, such as orchestral instruments and pianos, into this production. This fusion of electronic and organic elements will add depth and a human touch.

### **Aaron Lewis Welch Musical Influences**

In my conversations with Aaron, building that working relationship I wanted to understand him more on a personal level, as his song writing reflected a very deep personal story. Aaron's songs showed a strong themes of love and relationships, but also a strong mental health aspect of improving oneself and being better, which can be found in the songs I produced for him. This is typical of modern day R&B which holds its roots to the 1940's (Sound of Life).

One of the many artists Aaron referenced was Ne-Yo. Ne-Yo incorporates elements from various musical genres into his work, including R&B, pop, hip-hop, and dance. This eclectic approach allows him to appeal to a broad audience while keeping his music fresh and

innovative. His smooth and soulful voice is a key element of his music. He pays careful attention to his vocal delivery, infusing emotion and charisma into his performances.

One of the producers came to light from my research was Stargate a Norwegian production duo consisting of Mikkel Eriksen and Tor Erik Hermansen, who are renowned for their work with numerous successful artists in the pop and R&B genres. They focus on simple arrangements and old-fashioned qualities (Tingen, 2023) of traditional instruments and chord progressions. Stargate is also known for their strong focus on melodies. They are skilled at crafting catchy and memorable hooks, which are often the centrepiece of their productions. Their attention to song writing ensures that the tracks they produce are not only musically appealing but also lyrically engaging. Stargate uses a variety of synthesizers and samples to create unique sounds in their productions. They experiment with different virtual instruments and sound libraries to add depth and complexity to their tracks. Their fusion of organic and digital sounds creates a rich and textured sonic landscape in their music.

### **Daisy Ballard Musical Influences**

I met Daisy through my colleague and artist Sarah Ballard, who is her mother. Daisy came across as an inspiring young person with a strong musical background and varied musical taste in with a slant towards more folk and Jazz styles of music. One of the artists she was influenced by is Laufey.

Laufey is a musician, singer and songwriter; her style of writing is clear when you listen to her music, with a jazz sound and often heartrending songs (Knopper, 2018). She is known for her soulful voice, emotive songwriting, and jazz-influenced music style. Laufey's music often combines elements of jazz, blues, and R&B, showcasing her impressive vocal range and musicality. As I was unable to find many details of Laufey and her production style, I decided to research Bossa Nova and production techniques.

Producing jazz songs with female vocals involves a high level of technical expertise, "The key is to keep the chords light and short, leaving plenty of room for the bass, percussion and melody to come through." (UJAM, 2021). Carefully arranging the instruments to complement the vocals.

Jazz arrangements often include a variety of instruments such as piano, double bass and drums. Jazz vocals are known for their dynamic range. I was able to work with Daisy to capture the subtle nuances, from soft, intimate moments to powerful, soaring phrases. Using techniques like compression and automation helped control the dynamics and ensure a balanced performance.

Jazz recordings often benefit from a touch of reverb or other ambient effects. Reverb can add a sense of space and intimacy, enhancing the overall atmosphere of the recording. As Daisy is an accomplished singer, we were able to experiment with vocal layering and harmonies to add depth to the sound to enrich the overall texture of the song. Finally, it came down to subtle amounts of EQ to carve out space for each element in the mix to ensure that vocals are clear with proper panning and stereo placement.

## Hybrid Production Techniques

For my two EP songs I wanted to turn to the sounds of British band Hybrid (H y b r i D (no date) H Y B R I D. Available at: <https://www.hybridband.com/>). Since 1995 the electronic duo have been making breakbeat progressive house with a cinematic feel and there all time classic "Finished Symphony" was released in 1999 (2023). Formed in Swansea, Wales, by Mike Truman and Chris Healings. They initially gained recognition for their remix work for artists like Alanis Morissette, Jean-Michel Jarre, and BT, showcasing their talent for reinterpreting existing tracks in their distinctive style.

One of Hybrid's defining features is their cinematic sound. They often incorporate orchestral elements, including strings and choirs, into their electronic compositions, creating a grand and immersive listening experience. This fusion of electronic and orchestral music sets them apart in the electronic music scene.

Its clear reading blogs on <https://gearspace.com>. (Toybox) that the use of Hybrid's equipment and virtual plugin was going to be extensive. As I would be unable to match the equipment that Hybrid use, I took influence from the tone of their songs and applied it to mine "Death to Truth". Other than interviews and blogs not much is known about the production techniques of Hybrid. But listening through the album "Disappear Hear" I was able to get a sense of what might be involved.

Hybrid is known for their meticulous sound design. They would have used a combination of synthesizers, software plugins, and hardware equipment to create unique and diverse sounds. Experimentation with different synth patches, effects, and modulations helped in crafting the distinctive textures heard throughout the album. An interview that I watched explains some of the sounds they were able to create (Hybrid Interview, 2021).

Electronic drums and percussion are fundamental in Hybrid's music. They likely used drum machines, sample libraries, and possibly recorded live drums to create intricate and dynamic rhythms. Paying attention to the nuances of drum programming is crucial for achieving the desired energy in electronic music.

In addition to instruments they would also have applied various vocal processing techniques such as pitch correction, harmonies, reverbs, and delays to enhance the vocal tracks. Creative vocal effects can add character and ambiance to the songs. Finally, Hybrid would have utilized techniques like EQ, compression, spatial effects (such as reverb and delay), and panning to give each element its space in the mix. Creating a sense of depth and movement through automation and effects contributes to the album's overall atmosphere.

## Vocal Effect and Processing

In 'Death to Truth' there is a lot of vocal processing and effects, which required much prior research. In a YouTube video on Tremolo and Auto Pan Mixing with on Vocals (2016), I found one of the effects used is Cubase Tremolo on the vocals which is to modulate the amplitude which start of 0.1Hz and then is increased to 10Hz.

The tremolo effect is a modulation effect that rhythmically varies the amplitude (volume) of a sound wave. When applied to vocals, the tremolo effect creates a regular, pulsating change in volume, making the vocal sound as if it's trembling or oscillating in intensity. This effect can add a sense of movement, texture, and dynamics to the performance, enhancing the emotional impact of the lyrics and adding a unique character to the sound. It's important to note that the intensity and speed of the tremolo effect, as well as its synchronization with the rhythm of the music can significantly impact how it shapes the vocals.

In addition to the Tremolo effect I also used Auto Pan alongside. This effect performs an automatic repeating pattern (Hack Audio, 2017). Auto Pan is an audio effect commonly used in music production to create a sense of movement and stereo width in a sound. When applied to vocals, the Auto Pan effect rhythmically pans the sound between the left and right channels, creating a sensation of the sound source moving from one side to the other, this creates a dynamic stereo movement, making the vocals feel wider and more spatial within the stereo field. This effect can add energy and liveliness to the vocal performance, making it more engaging to the listener. I was able to experiment with different Auto Pan settings, such as varying the pan rate, depth, and shape of the panning motion.

Finally in finish of this effect I used a Ping Pong Delay this delays the signal (Wikipedia, 2023). Unlike a regular delay, where the repeated audio signal is sent to a single output, ping pong delay alternates the delayed audio signal between the left and right stereo channels. This back-and-forth motion creates a dynamic and spatial effect, making the sound "ping pong" between the speakers as it repeats. Ping pong delay is particularly popular in electronic music, dance music, and other genres where creating a sense of space and movement is important. It can make a sound appear wider, adding depth and dimension to the mix. When used subtly, ping pong delay enhances the stereo image of the audio, creating an immersive listening experience. In more extreme settings, it can create dramatic and psychedelic effects.

## The Side Chain Technique

It was in the 1930s there was a man called Douglas Shearer made significant contributions to the development of sound technology in films. But the 1930's were hardly the years of EDM music for heavy kick drums fighting for sound with bass lines. In fact it was a 'Douglas Shearer who coined the term when he created a compression that used a "side" signal' (Connaghan, 2021). Shearer's innovative techniques and advancements in sound recording and editing helped shape the way films were made during the early days of the movie industry.

As for side chain compression, it is a technique used in audio processing, particularly in music production and sound engineering. Compression is a method employed to control the dynamic range of an audio signal, reducing the volume of loud sounds and increasing the volume of softer sounds. Side chain compression involves using the level of one audio signal (the side chain) to control the compression applied to another signal (the main signal).

'Pumping is one of the iconic techniques in EDM music' (Connaghan, 2021). In the context of music production, side chain compression is often used in electronic dance music (EDM) and other genres to create a "pumping" or "breathing" effect. For example, in a dance track, side chain compression can be applied to the bassline triggered by the kick drum. When the kick drum hits, it triggers the compression on the bassline, causing it to momentarily decrease in volume, creating a rhythmic pulsating effect that is commonly heard in many electronic music tracks. This technique was used in Luke song "Real time" and also my own songs "Death to Truth" and "Distant Shores".

For "Real Time" the kick drum was used as the trigger for the sidechain compression. The compressor is set to respond to the kick's amplitude. The threshold was set so that the compressor is activated when the kick drum hits. This means the compression kicks in when the kick drum's volume exceeds a certain level additionally a ratio of 4:1 was used to make the effect more pronounced.

For "Death to Truth" is more of a progressive house and so the sidechain effect was triggered by more than just the kick drum. Other elements such as the snare drum was also used and to achieve a different quality of sound compare with "Real Time" I experimented with variable release times. The reason for this experimentation is because shorter releases can create a rapid, staccato effect, while longer releases result in a smoother, more flowing rhythm.

## Hardware Vs Software

When I first started at Tileyard I only had a midi controller and my computer, I barely processed any synths or other hardware. I soon started to acquire various bits of equipment to add to my home studio. It does bring into question though, is hardware better than software synths? In my opinion the answer is yes, and it has been through being able to have hands on control and freedom of design of the sound that has made this choice for me. However, I can't deny that, having the iconic Blade Runner sound generated by 'iconic' (Reverb Machine, 2022) Yamaha CS-80, and being as easy to access as a VST plugin, I found this to be particularly fun to play with! In most of the songs that I have submitted there is a hardware synth or drum machine used. It is down to personal choice whether you are to use hardware or software synths but there are certain factors to consider.

- **Cost:** 'premium synths cost anything from £1500 to pushing £8000' (Beattie, 2021). To date, I have probably spent in the region of £1500 and I am looking to buy more hardware. This is in comparison to the software that I have where I could have just stuck with the software synths on Cubase Pro costing £480. Software synths are generally more affordable than hardware counterparts. There is a vast range of software synthesizers available, often at a fraction of the cost of a single hardware unit.
- **Sound Quality:** 'Many will argue that the sound of a hardware synthesizer will always be superior' (Beattie, 2021) Hardware synths often have a unique sound and character that many producers find appealing. Analog hardware synths are known for their warmth and rich harmonic content. Some musicians prefer the organic and unpredictable nature of analogue circuitry.
- **Update and upgrades:** As I have learnt with starting my masters at Tileyard software synths are only as good as the computer that is running them. I found I needed to upgrade to a faster machine, as my original computer was unable to complete the tasks I needed from it, after consideration I chose the MacMini M2 Pro. Hardware synths have no requirements for upgrades, once you have made your purchase it will work regardless of its age, so long as you look after your equipment.

Ultimately, the choice between hardware and software synths depends on the individual musician's preferences, budget, workflow, and specific musical requirements. Many contemporary producers use a combination of both hardware and software synths to leverage the unique strengths of each option and create diverse and inspiring music.

## Reflection

### Issues Encountered

One of the fundamental issues I encountered was the time that I had allocated myself to undertake my project. What I had underestimated was the processes required to write a substantial EP in combination of researching commercial TV adverts to fit with my music.

In addition to these undertakings, I needed to learn the intricacies of how to edit film and sync music to certain key points in those commercials. In a way, my goal is to become a freelance producer working with multiple artists. Constantly expanding on the styles and genres of music that I can work on. It was then fortuitous that Aaron, Luke, and Daisy came forward wanting to produce their own EP, and for me to gain the necessary experience and skills as their producer.

One of the advantages of being an online student, with a full-time paid job, is that I can financially afford professional equipment required to give these artists professional audio produced by myself. Through the advances of technology and the Internet that I can communicate to these artists over Zoom and Microsoft Teams and collaborate without having to book studio time and travel to London incurring other travel related costs. However, there are also limitations to collaborating over the Internet. In the case of working with Luke, it was evident that he did not have the technical knowledge of producing a musical piece, and when it came to recording vocals for his song, I was very much reliant on Lukes own equipment and IT skills. The quality of the vocals he recorded while excellent, could have been tightened up further had we been able to work directly together in the studio. The main issue sat with the timing of the vocals when placed side -by-side with the song; we overcame this with some editing of the vocals stems, and in some cases stretching the audio. I was careful around trying to ensure that the voice did not become too electronic sounding, though I felt they did have very digital synthesise quality to them.

Another issue that I encountered working with Luke, was the communication aspect in trying to understand his requirements for his song. Initially, Luke wanted to have a song that has a drum and bass style. We had chosen several samples from splice.com, which were combined with some of the hardware I possessed here in my home studio, initially both were happy with the resulting sound. It was only after a few days, in which I had been re-listening to the instrumental track created as our starting point, that I felt that this was not hitting the brief that Luke originally set out to me. This was initially based on the influences of Sam Smith and Calvin Harris. The style of the instrumental track that we had produced was not reflective of these two artists, and so I took time to re-write the instrumental track; keeping some of the nuances of the drum and bass track, for example Luke very much enjoyed the filter effects that I had applied to the percussion sounds and had also liked the chord sequence that I came up for his song. If I had more time, I would've liked to have met Luke in recording studio, so that I could real time produce his vocal and give him direction on phrasing and inflection.

Some of the other issues that I encountered was down to the use of new technology, such as the plug-in effects that use artificial intelligence to change the settings that are applied to

the sound. The plugin is Sonible Smart EQ2 (Sonible, 2021). It appears clear that artificial intelligence is going to have a big impact on the way that we work, not just in music production, but in every industry. The smart EQ plug-in analyses the track that you are applying it to, and then based on the type of profile that you select whether it be piano, guitar, vocals, ect it applies what it defines as the right setting for that sound. While there is space for this type of technology, I felt that the sound was quite generic and didn't allow for personal preference. AI assisted plug-ins will speed up the creative process, but in terms of using this tool to craft a specific sound is not really adequate for that purpose.

Had I known in August that my final project would've been an audio portfolio instead of an ambitious project to create an EP, a commercial TV show real and to launch and develop my own personal website in addition the social media side to go with it; I would've taken a different approach to this project.

I think it's been good to challenge myself with different genres of music and this has been primarily down to the three clients I have worked with on this project. I would've never had the experience to produce a modern-day R&B song alongside a jazz/bossa nova style song with female vocals. It has made me realise that I can also adapt my skills to other genres, which makes me a more versatile producer and therefore in a better position to gain further work for the future.

Had I carried out this project as initially planned, I would have been forced to take on more clients and thus bring in someone else to undertake the mastering side of the process, while it is not uncommon for a mixing engineer to be brought into projects, reworking my final project as I have has allowed me to gain this experience for myself. 'When someone masters an entire album, the engineer also adjusts silent spaces and decides on title orders, allowing the album to flow as a whole.' (Sundin), this could have resulted in a slightly different sound ultimately, though I do recognise that it could have been advantageous to have someone new to listen to the productions and offer a fresh perspective on them.

### **What I have achieved**

Whilst my original project would have included a video show reel that demonstrated my music in sync with a TV commercial, which may have meant I could have sent this to various sync agencies in the hope of daily work for myself. My goals have now changed. I've seen the potential of benefiting from gaining clients as a music producer. I have already been in contact with new potential clients, through my work with Daisy Ballard and Aaron Lewis-Welch. In addition to this, I have been offered opportunities to work as a producer on a theatre production, on the strength of the music that I have already produced. Furthermore, Aaron has already expressed an interest to continue working with me and with a hope of releasing some of his material into the public domain. I would also say that I have achieved success in understanding of the role of the music producer in collaboration with the artist. It's evident when working with Luke, I achieved a professional standard which I am incredibly proud of.

*"I have loved working with you and on my track. You understood my vision of what I wanted to achieve I think we can experiment with future projects and both grow"* Luke Vellar

## **Phobosphear Productions and the Future**

Since starting this process, I've started to consider some of my objectives for the future of my production company and what I want to do. One of the key aims is that I would like to be a full-time freelance producer. However, I am aware that I am entering an industry which is very competitive. It may take some time before I am reaping the financial benefits as well as the merit. I already have a brand, which I can develop further and with my website being live on the Internet I can develop my portfolio further and upload more content. In terms of facilities and research and resources, I've already started to establish a home studio here in Norfolk and have already looked at the possibilities of studio hire with such companies like TYX studios. I hope that the clients that I've worked with, will start to release the songs that I have produced for them, from which I will start to get credits which will inevitably push my name and career further.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, despite changing my project several times throughout this process and focusing on a production portfolio. I am hoping this will change my career for the better.

I am fortunate that I still have a stable career working as a music teacher within the education sector. And I still intend to pursue my teaching career further, however, I shall also be pursuing Phobosphear Production and actively trying to gain more clients and continue working with the existing network base that I already have.

I still intend to write and release my own music, but this is a project which I can take some time with, and for now I can focus my efforts on being a producer. Throughout this year, I've learnt a lot from my masters degree and expanded my horizons and new possibilities in new ventures. I look forward to the future and what it may bring.

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If it's choice you want, you'll be aiming higher – premium synths cost anything from £1500 to pushing £8000.

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