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Project Proposal - Artistic Personas

This project proposal will explore how, and why, musicians develop different artistic 'personas' and how this can affect an artist's creative output. It will consider the reasons that artists would choose to create a new persona besides their already established projects - whether as part of an ensemble or as individuals - and how this can affect their creative process or output.

As the lead singer of an indie rock band 'The Steady Letters,' but also a songwriter and producer of eclectic styles, I hope to use this project as a basis to explore new aspects of my artistic identity. I will address the barriers that might exist in my music-making process. Instead of thinking about music for a set purpose (such as writing for my already established band) I will investigate the freedom of creating without any end goal in mind.

For that reason I have decided to create and compare two separate 'EPs' of five tracks each- one EP for my band, and one EP of five tracks that will be chosen from new material I will write with the freedom to create as many or as few new artist projects as I would like, based solely on the musical output. I hope that this process will lead me to liberal creation, more collaboration, and a broader range of opportunities in future for songwriting, performance and production.

The ability to create and sustain separate artistic identities is a far-reaching practice in music, and across the creative spectrum altogether: Nicholas Cage was in fact born as a Coppola but eschewed the opportunities that family name could afford him (Brookes, 2013); Mary Ann Evans wrote her novels as George Eliot in order to access an industry dominated by men (BBC - History - George Eliot, 2014); by most reports - Doctor Dre isn't even a real doctor (Chiu, 2018). In fact, artists such as Banksy actively revel in their anonymity (Marshall, 2018). By de-centralizing the message, and turning any space into a potential canvas, he (or she) is able to detach it from any real person and allow it to be studied 'in vitro' - a sort of message in a vacuum, without the distraction of any creator's bias.

In this instance, we should first examine musicians who remain as anonymous as they possibly can. French electronic duo Daft Punk have done an admirable job of remaining incognito since their debut album in 1997- even accepting their 2014 Grammy award completely hidden by their signature robot helmets (Recording Academy / GRAMMYS, 2014).

The creation of their 'robot personas' has allowed them a multitude of freedoms that aren't always granted to global superstars: "Creating those robot personas allowed them to stay [...] completely free." (Beauvallet, 2015). They even negotiated their first record deal to allow them "complete artistic freedom and control of their image and everything else."

Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo and Thomas Bangalter were reportedly shy and of few words upon meeting record labels, so allowed their music to do the talking- and through their personas they removed distraction of being critically assessed in the public eye as people, rather than artists. In a French radio interview in 1997 Bangalter stated: "We're interested in the line between fiction and reality, creating these fictional personas that exist in real life." (Bangalter, 2013).

By projecting the identity of 'robot musicians,' and combining it with electronic music that has production techniques such as heavily vocoded vocals, Daft Punk assume the position of android-like outsiders speaking to the human race. With song titles like 'Robot Rock' and 'Human After All,' it's clear that they relish the opportunity to cultivate this image and make the message more consistent for their 'human' listeners. (de Homem-Christo and Bangalter, 2005).

"There is a real interaction between music and technology. In a way, we consider technology to be a part of the band." (Bangalter, 1996)

Technology as a part of the band was also a key component when Damon Albarn created virtual group Gorillaz, with each member represented by a cartoon avatar. Unfortunately creator Albarn didn't have the patience to remain anonymous, as he admitted in an interview, but still had the chance to explore what it meant to be hidden in plain sight:

“Gorillaz is an illusion. It doesn’t hide the illusion [like pop music does]. It is the illusion [...] I started off really being quite militant about the idea that they’d never find out it was me.” (Albarn, 2018).

There were still huge advantages to this new artistic persona for Albarn. After the lighthearted sensibilities of Blur, the Gorillaz song ‘Clint Eastwood’ (Albarn, Jones, 2001) allowed him to immediately dive into a darker sound and new genres without offending the already defined sensibilities of his Blur fanbase. The song vamps heavily on a D#m chord and passing E/B chord. This makes it waiver between the D Aeolian and B Phrygian modes which carry a much darker tone than, for example, the simple I-V-IV chord progression of the chorus in Blur’s *Parklife*. (James, Albarn, Rowntree, Coxon, 2000).

Gorillaz collaborated with artists outside of Albarn’s typical style by inviting rappers Trugoy The Dove and Del The Funky Homosapien - immediately establishing a new DNA. This opened the door for Albarn to hone a novel style, leading to the hugely successful single *Feel Good Inc.* which was certified platinum by the RIAA. (RIAA, 2020).

The combination of new collaborators, and the freedom of being ‘behind the curtain’ in this new setup, led to new processes in the studio too. As producer Tom Girling explains:

“I think the reason why we worked in a different way is because we’ve got this whole *Logic* thing going on, so instead of working in a linear world where you’re using tape, you’ve got a hell of a lot more flexibility. [...] where you haven’t necessarily got a specific goal you’re after.” (Girling, 2001)

Albarn and Gorillaz collaborator Jamie Hewlett were also free to tackle what they saw as new challenges which had arisen in the music industry since Albarn had entered it- such as the format in which listeners consumed music. “People stream the singles in advance, and then they have six or so songs that they’re familiar and they haven’t heard any of the other stuff.” (Hewlett, 2017)

They attempted to redress the new ‘direct-to-consumer’ model of the industry, behind the guise of a radically modern act. Something which perhaps would not have seemed as impactful if the message had continued in the same medium of Blur.

“Even though the concept of Gorillaz is a Millennial idea, the record itself is quite old-fashioned in its construct[...] People will only really understand this record and enjoy it fully if they listen that way.” (Albarn, 2017)

It’s important at this point to understand just how many different elements can feed into an artist’s ‘identity’ and how this can fuel new ideas. On his YouTube series *Holistic Songwriting*, Friedemann Findeisen starts his videos with an analysis of a band’s image, in order to better understand “why they make certain musical decisions.” (Findeisen, 2018).

In his analysis of Radiohead’s songwriting, he lists a few words that identify the band’s sound: British, creepy, ever-changing, counter-culturalist, contrarian, alienated, and ‘not belonging.’ Their image is intertwined with their ethos and their musical choices. For example, he goes on to show very complex and unintuitive changes happening in their music such as modal interchange, or unusual time signatures.

On the other hand, in his *Artists Series* analysis of Taylor Swift, Findeisen notes that she uses a lot of “one note melodies” on her album 1989 which leads her to appear more modern, ambiguous and unaccommodating. (Findeisen, 2017).

We can see from just a few examples that there is a mobius-like relationship between an artist’s music and their image. We could work backwards from an artist’s image to inform songwriting choices just as effectively as we could work forwards from a song to help create the artist’s image; or even start in the middle with their artistic values and broad sentiments, and work outwards to either (or both). This all demonstrates to prove just how much creative freedom I might find in my songwriting by starting at different points in the process and not labour to a specific end.

As my earlier analysis of Gorillaz demonstrated- artists with multiple projects have the opportunity to collaborate with a broad spectrum of other creators. Singer, songwriter and producer Pharrell Williams has a dizzying catalogue of songwriting credits to his name - to the extent that FactMag published an article back in 2014 titled '*The 50 Greatest Pharrell Tracks So Far.*' (Ravens et al., 2014). Williams has a cross-section of musical identities from the group N.E.R.D, to production team The Neptunes, and is credited in countless songs as performer, writer or producer Pharrell Williams. There are even tracks such as *Light Your Ass On Fire (feat. Pharrell) - Club Mix* where he is credited twice- as The Neptunes and as Pharrell Williams (Hugo et al., 2003).

In this way, Williams has become a great influence for my project in his approach to free-flowing and non-judgemental creation, as seen in conversation with producer Rick Ruben (Williams and Ruben, 2019):

Ruben: Do you make tracks regardless of thinking about where they're gonna go?

Williams: Sometimes I think about where they're gonna go to get them out [...] I have to channel. I'm always pretending I'm someone else in order to get it to come out [...] I'm like a mirror.

By disregarding any artistic identity I hope to find more collaborations and to create a songwriting space that allows me to write without self-censorship or artifice, following creative avenues to their conclusion before considering their merits.

Just as Pharrell Williams has worked on music from movie soundtracks to collaborations with countless acts, Jack White has equally moved from: the gritty garage rock of White Stripes; solo electronic or hiphop-influenced material; album tracks for Beyonce; a James Bond theme with Alicia Keys.

When beginning with The White Stripes, he chose to work from concepts like 'simplicity' and 'authenticity.' Showing how 'real' the White Stripes were meant "giving them an artifice of red, white and black[...] she's in pigtails, they have peppermints painted on everything." (White, 2013).

The music itself reflected this simple nature, with tracks such as *The Hardest Button To Button* comprised of raw guitar lines and lackadaisical drums. (White, 2003). When moving from a band to a 'solo' endeavour, there are obvious departures of style and White seems to lean into the change. On his second solo album *Boarding House Reach*, particularly on tracks such as *Corporation* or *Ice Station Zebra*, he moves much closer to hiphop and electronic music (White, 2018). Fast and repetitive instrumentals which don't make as much use of exotic modes or scales as White Stripes typically would, but rely more on creating a backbeat for his staccato and unusually atonal vocal delivery. On *Ice Station Zebra* even the haunting trill of the theremin is used to play a fairly uniform G minor pentatonic scale (White, 2018). The instruments play more as background elements, as opposed to a song like *Seven Nation Army* where the guitar riff is the most prevalent and memorable part of the song (White, 2003).

The ability to make such distinctions leads to asking questions about what effect the sound of a particular song might have on our perception of an artist, as listeners. In 'This Is Your Brain On Music,' Daniel Levitin states that listeners are able to identify a song even if it has been mangled beyond what we might consider reasonable parameters for recognition.

"At MIT in the early 1960s, Benjamin White [...] wondered how it is that a song is able to retain its identity in spite of transposition in pitch and time[...] He would alter pitch distances so that contour was preserved, but the interval sizes were shrunk or stretched. He played tunes backward and forward, and changed their rhythms. In almost every case, the deformed tune was recognised more often than chance could account for." (Levitin, 2019)

Much in the same way that Leonardo DiCaprio is able to appear in *Wolf of Wall Street* and *Django Unchained* as two entirely different but believable characters- musicians with multiple personas can appear in different projects but inevitably keep some of their artistic identity. Damon Albarn's voice is largely unchanged from *Blur* to *Gorillaz* and yet the final sound is far detached. The effect this has on an audience allows us to play with what an artist's "sound" is. We can easily create a particular sonic identity for an artist- or equally avoid using sounds that we know are strongly associated with certain acts.

The Black Keys, for example, are known for distorted electric guitars, loud rock drums and fuzz-heavy solos. When Dan Auerbach started his project as a solo act he chose to open his first album with an acoustic / country / folk track, *Trouble Weighs A Ton*, a gentler track of 65bpm with only acoustic guitar and vocals (Auerbach, 2009). In fact Auerbach's two most listened-to songs on Spotify as a solo artist are *Never In My Wildest Dreams* (Auerbach, 2017), a gentle acoustic track with brass accompaniment, and *Standing In The Rain* (Auerbach et al., 2016), a moody hip-hop collaboration with rapper Action Bronson and producer Mark Ronson.

Since joining Tileyard I have written songs 'to brief' for artists as broad as Paul Simon, Muse, John Legend, The Lumineers, Jacob Collier and The Strokes. I've have drawn on influences from film to prose, video games, publishing briefs, production techniques, podcasts and new experiences. My aim is to use this project to compare the output of a new Steady Letters EP to the best five new tracks that I'm able to write in a radically free manner, or using writing prompts outside of my comfort zones (for example a hip-hop brief).

Should I choose to take the argument 'ad absurdum,' I could even create a different artistic persona for every new track that I write, which hints at the possibility of having dozens of alternate identities that are waiting to emerge during the writing process.

The multitude of examples in this essay set out to prove that opening up to new artistic personas can provide the opportunity to explore creative ideas outside of an artist's established remit. The ease of opportunities to widely self-publish music, and the prospect of writing without an "end goal" in mind, should allow me to create and release music in any given genre, style, or under any alias, with far fewer barriers than ever before. I have purposefully kept this brief as open as possible and look forward to revisiting it when I perform an in-depth comparison of a new Steady Letters EP, to music written unattached to any specific artistic persona, and how my creative process will be affected - if at all.

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