

ELEMENT 2B

REFLECTIVE COMENTARY

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2007841

To submit a 5000-word reflective commentary that details and reflects upon the research, discussion, work, and feedback conducted in the creation of the portfolio.

INTRODUCTION:

Hello, my name is Steve Phillips. This is intended to give you the reader an insight into this journey that has brought me to undertake this Commercial Producer Online Blended MA at Tileyard. Thank you taking the time to read it.

My journey as musician began aged 9, playing guitar in church. From an early age I knew that being a musician or creating music is what I wanted to be able to do for a profession. I started my own band 14 with friends from church and have continued playing ever since. Aged 18 my parents were unable to fathom how playing the guitar or anything music related could become a sustainable career, and I was guided into an alternative career firstly as a tailor and then later in social work.

Despite of this, music remained my passion and I would seek to play my guitar at every opportunity. Aged 25 I took the decision to move from my hometown Nottingham to live in London. This is where my career in music really began to happen in a way that I had always dreamt about. A close friend had recently made the same move, and this gave me the confidence to follow suite. From there as the saying goes, the rest is history and my true musical journey as a paid session bass player began, with gigs and recording sessions with artists and bands in and around London. In the early 90's I was fortunate enough to have also worked and lived in France for two years, under the auspices of a French production company, that took me under their wing. This experience created a series of lasting and fun memories, with coupled with a small collection of lifelong friendships. Here my skills, understanding and knowledge as a musician and bass player also significantly enhanced by this experience. This was great time playing with many of Frances elite.

Now many years and several life changes and experiences later, the musical landscape and scope now looks like a very different place to me than previous. Having lost (through the effects of divorce) a successful commercial recording studio and business, I found myself in later years having to start all over again, not only regarding the studio but also in life, love, and work. For many reasons, the world for a period became a very dark place for me, and I often wondered how was I going to survive? Yet, my love for music and my ability to still find work and still have the desire to play provided the platform by which to pick myself up, reposition myself and find my true self again. The current place that I live is significantly smaller than the previous and I have difficulty fitting in all my accumulated studio equipment and artifacts collected over the years. Given recent developments, there is now a plan in place to incorporate the collection into a working studio. More about this later.

As the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic began to take hold I witnessed my regular work as a gigging musician dry up, turning the last 12 months into an incredible journey of perseverance, soul searching and endurance. For me it has been a period of isolation in a manner that could never have been predicted. Limited access to of face-face and physical human interaction became an unfathomable concept. Industries overnight shifted operations to online and working from home. Technology companies supplied innovative solutions to enable collaboration. Tools like Zoom,

Audio Movers, Teams, etc. all became the way in which my daily communications with friends, collaborators, and other musicians in creating or sharing musical content. The seemingly sudden introduction of these platforms presented another layer of unpredicted and rapid learning that I initially found challenging and at times intimidating. As you read through this document, I will share my perspective and experiences of what, how, when, and importantly why I decided to take undertake this MA at Tileyard. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY:

Why did i invest in the Music Producer MA at Tileyard?

In 2018 I had considered doing a three-year degree in music production at Derby University but felt that the time was not right, partly due to having a busy diary, and decided that then was possibly not a good time to enter full-time education, or to in anyway disrupt my increasing schedule of gigs etc.

Through other work that I was doing at the time in artist management, I had become aware of Tileyard and had worked quite closely for a short while with John Saunderson (then head of publishing at Tileyard). Having attended several Thursday night showcase events at Tileyard, with my then artist, I began to understand more about the bigger picture vision and philosophy behind their plans to broaden into providing formal music education. It wasn't until a few years later whilst helping my son with his own research into music degree courses that I came across details of the MA at Tileyard.

Given my aspiration towards writing music for synch, the Online Blended MA immediately appealed, and the more I researched the subject the more it seemed like the right thing at the right time to undertake. I already felt confident in my abilities to perform basic tasks and roles within the studio (for example, micing drums or guitar cabs etc.) and felt doing this MA would be a positive move towards digging deeper into the world and techniques of production. This seemed like a good opportunity to obtain the knowledge that I felt I lacked in specific areas of production like mixing, mastering and sound design. Whilst having regularly performed these tasks I never quite felt that I had a good enough grasp on many of the other techniques, like sidechaining for example. All the knowledge gained thus far has been self-taught and learning from my mistakes. I hoped doing the MA would help to speed up and advance the learning process.

Some of that is about my lack of experience and understanding about sound design, some of that is understanding how to apply and effectively use plugins and effects. Up until then my experience of production were from a writing point of view, by that I mean arrangements, instrumentation, playability. I now realise I had not fully understood what music production was, and can now appreciate fully that by applying specific methods of music production (for example, editing, tuning), and having the right skill sets, a piece of music can be created that sounds polished even though it is not very well played or very well written...

When I looked at attending Tileyard and studying the masters in commercial music production, I looked at the options that were available, e.g., attending on site or

completing it via the Blended Online option. One of my reservations was the fact that typically when looking at any form of blended learning it tends to be a one-on-one relationship, meaning it is a relationship between yourself and the content, whereas on site provides the option of working collaboratively with others and increasing probabilities of learning from other people. It would have seemed optimal to have worked on-site given the hands-on nature to the way that I know I learn best. However, given other factors such as work, lifestyle, and that I live in Nottingham etc. the Blended Online option was the only way that I felt I could feasibly make the course work.

Being accepted to attend the Online Blended MA was a massive boost of confidence for me. Studying at master's level was something that I had not previously considered, or even thought possible. It also raised many questions for me about my own ability academically and would I be able to meet the standards and level of work required. I found the application process a little daunting, like having to answer some of the questions in an academic format. Working in this way was something I had not done in many years. I realised then that this was not just about music or my abilities as a musician and would have to become much more academically aware. This was going to demand a step-up discipline and attention to detail.

In my daily life It became important to set clear and achievable personal goals if I were to achieve the professional aims, or objectives that I had begun to set out for myself. Developing and organising myself became a key factor. In deciding to invest £10,000 in completing this master's I had to decide whether that was an investment I really could, should, or even wanted to make. If so, how was I going to achieve this? Was this what I really wanted to do? How was this course going to impact my life both now and for the future?

Having gone through that process and deciding that doing MA was right I set about creating a personal business plan, setting out what I thought the path may look like. This was aided by being asked to produce a mentorship statement in term 1. This was when I began to gain better clarity about what it was that I wanted for my myself. This provided a much clearer and structured thought process. I now had a mechanism by which to begin planning that would allow me to edge step-by-step closer towards my end goal of creating music for synch.

Throughout this master's there has been one individual (fellow student - Sam Crawford) that has stood out, that i started speaking to on a regular basis. It was during term 2 were working on the sound design module and creating an instrument artefact that the relationship really came together. Working alongside Sam and sharing in the learning process has hugely impacted a positive learning exchange and experience. I believe that Sam would also say the same. Without having this connection, this whole MA experience I feel would not have been as productive. We both bring differing skills in musical, business, and academic abilities, and experiences. We have found that we complement each other in the deployment of these skills and have created a positive and supportive team-work ethic. Through that relationship we have now started to build and further enhance a specific business model that is gaining status for the future post Tileyard Education.

Working collaboratively with Sam we identified that there would be a need to look at our collective systems and processes. Both of us have identified that we would be using Apple Mac computers. Having recently upgraded my DAW to Logic Pro X version 10, I set out to invest in a new Mac Mini (as my old laptop was proving incapable of providing the level of performance now required). I have chosen the Mac Mini as it offers better performance and room to upgrade. For software I chose Logic Pro X as it goes hand in hand with the Mac Mini and offers many recording features and easily handles the recording of multiple channels and can be used to mix a track without the need for a mixing desk.

To harmonise workflow and productivity, and to streamline these processes, we made the inevitable decision to come together in person. To carry out the systems mirroring operation we met at Sam's home studio in Northampton. One of the challenges faced during the first session is that Sam often creates works within Pro Tools, which is not yet loaded on my system, and a platform that I am less familiar with. Similarly, Sam is less experienced with Logic Pro X. The solution to this is that we have supported each other via guided tips and tricks. The need to do this was particularly highlighted during the recent remixing of the 'Tiësto' Anti-Dollar Business track. The fact that one of us did not have a particular plugin made a big difference to the processing of a particular instrument, and therefore caused some confusion. This became a challenge for the both of us as the difference in the understanding of musical theory/musical terms created a barrier in communication when explaining why the instrument sound was not playing back as intended. This issue was eventually resolved through processes of demonstration and explanation.

Setting up an infrastructure via satellite systems for Teams, Microsoft 365 has proved crucial to how we communicate and share information daily. The other challenge was to look at how we could utilise those investments made to existing and new subscriptions, perpetual licencing, and how to share those assets across our systems to deliver the right kinds of results for us both.

What made meeting Sam for the first time go so well? We spent the preceding weeks cataloguing and analysing our individual home studio setups. During the session, having previously agreed what we wanted to achieve meant we already had a clear thought process from the start and was not wasted. To say that we had not met in person before, there was no awkwardness between Sam and me. Immediately the positive connection began to feel solidified. Our communication was good and showed that we both had a clear understanding of what we had set out to achieve from the day. The first task in hand was to adjust the studio environment so that we could both fit in the room and effectively share the same space. When I think of previous projects that I have been involved in, it is taking the time to get to know somebody and understanding what their drivers are as well as their capabilities that really will drive success. Recognising that running a business, or music production, is not a one-person job and that it does require input from multiple sources and stakeholders.

Planning the studio layout and capability was another area for immediate consideration. For the monitoring of sound, we decided that the SSL 2 audio interface and the 'Adams' S range of speakers were the sound that both of us would be listening through, and substantial investments were individually made.

We discovered the accumulatively, Sam and I had a lot of disused outboard analogue studio equipment, some of which over time had become defuncted due the availability competitive digital alternatives. Potentially the second-hand market could produce no great yield and we decided that given the good spec all pieces were worth keeping and would be featured in the bigger studio planned for future development.

WORK AND FEEDBACK IN THE CREATION OF THE PORTFOLIO:

This final body of work is intended to bring together the insight I gained into the processes of song-writing, arrangement, mixing, sound design, editing, manipulation of sound and selecting and the effective use of effects. The intent of my original proposal was to look at how I could become a better and creative Commercial Music Producer working to synchronisation briefs. Writing the proposal reinforced that this was still my overarching aim and objective.

Along the way creating this portfolio presented several challenges mainly from malfunctioning equipment and significantly the impact of Covid-19 severely limited my access to a writing partner, singers, and artists to record and write with. This became an issue and I had to figure out a way of finishing existing tracks and how I was going to approach writing new material without the input of my usual vocalist/s. This then forced me to look at alternatives and to incorporate aspects that I would previously not have considered. It also resulted in having to sing parts myself and then spend time processing those parts sufficiently to be considered usable within a track. The other alternative was to sift through sample libraries looking for appropriate vocal samples to chop-up and manipulate etc... Using vocals samples and apple loops to create a track was a new perspective for me, and one that took a while getting used to. I remember it felt a less organic process, and as though I was somehow cheating. I have learnt that creating music organically with live instruments is what I mostly enjoyed.

When receiving feedback from my Proposal, I remember having a discussion with Sean Hargreaves about the merits of using loops and samples. Sean is the musical director at Tileyard London and has a wealth of experience in the music industry both as a musician, producer, and businessman. During the time I had with Sean Hargreaves, he provided his perspective, which was that I should focus on a narrower scope of work and to focus on what I do best. Sean's perspective was also to encourage the use of samples and loops where appropriate in the creation of tracks. I have taken Sean's advice and several of the submitted portfolio tracks contain combinations of sample-based tracks. Where possible I have tried to use live recordings to somehow add authentication to the track.

My perspective surrounding sample bank material is that often they already contain a certain level of processing, which is generally good. The challenge I then find is how to effectively recreate and match the types of effects and sound that is contained within the sample or loop. I have found this a particularly interesting aspect of producing new music as it challenges my own perceptions, skills and abilities when working with compressors, EQ, reverbs, and the like. A new discovery for me within Logic pro, is being able to convert audio-to-midi and then editing the midi information to create new parts within the track. This is now a function that I use regularly.

Having gone through this process I can now fully appreciate the benefits of working with loops and samples... and this is something that I will continue to do. Learning how use platforms such as LoopCloud has been beneficial in exploring a different approach and technique during the creative process of writing new material than I was previously accustomed. The prospect of generating new material in this way has overnight became a lesser consideration for me. The re-occurring challenge now is how to arrange, produce and edit sample packs so that they became unlike the original track.

When writing the initial proposal, I aspired to create a body of work depicting music for song, production, and media. My proposal was to cover all aspects and types of music e.g., orchestral, mood music, symphony, electronic and acoustic instrumentation. Music of contrasting styles and for varied purposes. Listening to the advice received from Sean Hargreaves during the proposal feedback, Sean suggested that perhaps I was being a little over ambitious in choosing such a wide scope. It was suggested that I focus instead on creating a much narrower band of music, concentrating on the areas that I felt i did best. In hindsight and having taken a slightly different approach with the use of loops and samples, I feel that Sean was perhaps right. Adopting this approach has certainly taken my writing into a different direction; however, I am still pleased with the overall outcome of the portfolio. I had suggested to Sean asking Beverly Knight (who is a friend) to sing on one of the tracks. Whilst considered a great idea it did not quite come together in the end as mentioned earlier.

Throughout this process I faced issues with getting several of the mixes right. This was partly due to the change in studio monitors and audio interface part way through the process. Mixes that I had previously listened to required processing differently as the speakers revealed indecencies within the mix. Having gone through the streamlining process with Sam, I had acquired a significant number of new plugins. This became a major distraction as I became like a child in a sweet shop and spent far too much time playing around and experimenting with unfamiliar effects. I was reminded that there are times when using tried and tested equipment is called for.

The developing portfolio started sometime prior to embarking on this MA at Tileyard. This body of work brings together an accumulative set of skills, tools, knowledge, and productivity which has been further aided and enhanced by my enrolment and active participation in the Online Blended Music Producer Master's Degree.

It was through further collaboration and detailed discussion that I set out with a fellow student (Sam Crawford) to create a production company which is a limited legal structure, as well as a set up a recording studio from the ground up. Sam and I came together having discovered that we both had similar goals and aspirations in mind. Together we strongly feel that this is fully achievable.

“Most “impossible” goals can be met simply by breaking them down into bite size chunks, writing them down, believing them, and then going full speed ahead as if they were routine.” – **Don Lancaster**

<https://everydaypower.com/goals-quotes/>

Throughout the course of this MA, I have had to be very disciplined and apply measures to regulate and prioritise my own self-directed learning. I found it much easier to maintain a regular routine and study programme in terms 1 and 2 where content was provided and briefs for working through the various elements were set. Access to tutors seemed were available and I had clear guidance and direction. My direction throughout term 3 required a very different approach to managing the work and it seemed like I had more time on my hands with a much-reduced timetable of events and lectures etc. I felt I was getting far less input than previously anticipated. Questions I asked myself included, was I getting value for money? How was I going to maintain my academic focus and at the same time remain musically productive?

This seemed like a good time for Sam and me to begin setting out and formally establishing our partnership, and for me to become actively in Street Level Music Group (a production company previously set up by Sam), which is a limited legal structure. The intention here is also to set up a recording studio from the ground up. We felt that it was important to create a business model and structure that would enable us to monetise our production skills and musicality to further to our long-term music production aspirations, aims and goals in writing music for synch and to a brief. We quickly devised a weekly timetable comprising of online learning and tuition in topics, methods, and techniques of music production. Having identified certain gaps in our knowledge, our aim became to advance our learning by absorbing as much relevant content as was possible to increase our understanding and throughput of knowledge.

I have also found mentoring session a good source of information and inspiration during this MA. Through speaking with my allocated mentor (James - Lazy Habits), James like myself is not a trained musician yet has made a successful career for himself by working with somebody else to be able to create work for briefs commercials advertising through synchronisation as well as to master recordings for record labels. Through some of the other mentoring sessions that we had, James shared his experiences and personal perspective on the importance of collaboration working with others to pull together different skill sets and points of view, all needed to deliver a rich commercial sound. During these sessions James and I manage to cover a large range of topics that often triggered for me a broader thought process. During the last mentoring session, we discussed in depth the principles of remote writing with a partner. James agreed to help Sam and I explore the existence of any platforms that would enable us to independently control each others computers remotely. The research into this continues.

Throughout this course I have come to recognise more the importance of knowing how to effectively use the tools of music production. With Logic pro I have begun digging deeper and exploring further the individual components, plugins, and processors. Alchemy, Sampler and Drummer are elements that I use regularly. This has led me to ask questions about the onboard plugin's verses third party plugins? How differently did the material sound with the newly updated studio equipment? I feel that choices made were taken with care and consideration and believe them to be the right choices. The overall sound quality of the studio is a good reflection of that and hope this is reflected in the improved quality of the portfolio mixes etc. Prior to carrying out the studio upgrade we had researched a list of well-known and recognised manufacturers, plugins, and the various purchase/subscription options

available, because we wanted to ensure we had up to date information. Why logic pro rules by (Chris V) I have found information like this a helpful tool and source of learning.

<https://courses.whyllogicprorules.com/mastering-breakthroughs-wlpr-exclusive>

Music Business World Newsletter: Music Business Worldwide - News, jobs and analysis for the global music industry

Music Connection Weekly Bulletin: Digital | Music Connection Magazine
Musi production resources and techniques and learning (sidechaining)

Keeping up to date with online tutorials and newsletters received via email:
Production Expert

<https://youtu.be/FYyo1zZ6bTw> - Studio Acoustics, a starting point.

Through accessing these resources, I feel I have a better grasp and knowledge of the music industry and the various eco systems that drive it, alongside technological understanding, obtained from lectures particularly in terms 1 & 2, for example, how to use Pro Tools with Ciaran Robinson, and Logic Pro X with Dove Waterman. For recap purposes I still revisit some of that information on a regular basis.

During lectures delivered by Harry Lecstien, he talked about the need to really look inwardly around the specific skills that each of us have, and how Elle Halle (Image Branding & the Creative Process) in her lectures talked about what gift we would be delivering through our music. As I reflect upon the final proposal and submission, these are some of the key themes and questions that I hold in mind. What the gift is, and why are we doing this?? Not for our own inward-looking perspective but what are we trying to establish. What I did not fully appreciate at the time was what those terms meant in specifics. It was clear through the very first term during Harry Lecstien's lecture that the music industry is a vast ecosystem all driving towards an endpoint that the consumer hears but is unaware of. Suddenly having to use academic research into familiar topics opened my eyes to the wealth of information that subliminally I was aware of but had not previously considered in any real depth or to its entirety.

Branding, marketing, self-promotion, coupled with self-awareness on how producers and artists alike deliver their gift to an audience, through their creations. The power of the image and how vital it is in today's world that is impacted by fast likes, clicks and lack of attention from the Social media generation. All of this has been further solidified through the academic research, my own skill development through applied learning techniques, and creativity with specific production techniques. It is safe to say that from my initial thoughts about what is involved in being a commercial music producer this entire experience has brought me up close and has further opened my consciousness and have stimulated a greater level of awareness within me.

THE IMPACT OF THIS REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY:

Writing this essay has enabled me a better understanding of myself, my perspectives, attitudes, skills, inadequacies, and some behaviours. One of the great things that I have really enjoyed learning is about my approach to music and how I can tangibly look to do something for real rather than from just an academic perspective.

Undertaking this master's degree is alone a single massive achievement for me and one that I had never previously considered possible, more so from an academic point of view. One of my initial anxieties was that because I had not been in formal education for a considerable amount of time i wondered if i could study at such a level. There were times on the course that I felt fully out of my depths and overwhelmed by some of the content. Being asked to produce an Instrument artefact was the hardest task of them all. I remember the perplexity that I felt in deciding even where I would begin. And whilst I had previous experience of the marketing and branding of an artist i never, never really felt that this module was of relevance to me in that way, and at this current point, as I do not consider myself to be an artist.

However, having reached term 3, I now feel that the connexions I have made and the plans for going forward in partnership and collaboration with Sam Crawford is an advancement from where I started at the beginning of this course. A significant positive to have come out of this is the connexion that I have made with Sam. I feel that we have established a mutually benefiting business arrangement and partnership that will carry on post Tileyard...

During term 1 I have enjoyed and have learnt a great deal from the Composing and Arranging, Contemporary Production Techniques and Recording Skills lectures. The aspect of digging deeper into the processes of music production and DAW operation was what I felt I was here for. I already had the musical knowledge and instrumentation knowhow and skills. The wider aspects of how to effectively manipulate the tools within the DAW sparked my interest. Whilst I feel that my learning has significantly elevated, I know that there is still much, much, more to further understand and learn. The systems for ongoing learning and development within the Street Level Music Group structure will further serve to support this.

For me personally, this required a whole set of in-depth learning of systems like Zoom, Teams etc. that I knew very little about. This meant that I quickly had to get up to speed if I was going to be part of something that that everyone else seemed to know more about and has now become the norm. Having accepted this challenge I can now fully appreciate the benefits of using and understanding this technology and the more that I engage with these platforms the better my understanding of their full capabilities have become.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN:

Doing this MA has identified areas in music production techniques and methods that I know still requires more knowledge and research. There are several online resources, books, videos and reading lists from term 1 that now form part of my information base. Sam and I have set up daily sessions whereby we share these platforms to learn and explore areas of weakness or gaps in our learning.

I have also devised a daily/weekly timetable that helps me to structure my days and control my workflow and through-put. The Tileyard online portal remains a source of information vital to my ongoing progression and will continue form part of the individual structured learning for as long as it remains accessible. Sam and I teach each other things when working in the studio or online. This supportive learning is beneficial as we begin to grow and develop in partnership together.

I have also increased the amount of time that I spend creating music. Practicing techniques and keeping up with my instrument work remains high priority. I hope to able to see and measure my growth via the results achieved from applying the learning and techniques that is taking place. The continued exercise of righting to brief also forms part of the ongoing development process.

CONCLUSION:

I think it is important when one sets out to start to look at self-reflection and to provide reflective commentary that the commentary being provided is not actually based upon just the final project because the entire experience has been part of the journey to get to this position, which as you have read through this document, is only the beginning. The future partnership and collaboration between Sam Crawford, me and Street Level Music Group is bright, and that has a lot to do with the structure that has been created largely by Sam and the SLMG structure. We hold a view that the remaining challenge for us is to begin generating an income from writing and production work. It would also be good to achieve a summer release, and this is something that we are currently working on. I look forward to what remains of this course and being able to get on campus to meet the other students on this course and to receive all the other benefits that have not yet been available due to lockdown etc. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Addicted Groove



Biography

Steve Phillips is a musician, songwriter, arranger, mix engineer and music producer that began his musical journey aged 9 playing the guitar in church. Aged 14 Steve formed his first band and began performing his own original songs and music at church conventions and events. From an early age Steve knew that creating music was what he wanted to do as his job. Aged 25 Steve moved to London and began working as a session bass and guitar player for bands and artistes in and around London. This led to Steve working with a French production company and lived and worked in France as session bass player for several years, playing alongside many French based bands, musicians, and artistes.

A regular face on the music scene of his hometown Nottingham, Steve has now joined forces with Sam Crawford at Street Level Music Group to create Seditious Mind and Addicted Groove. Having met Sam whilst the two of them were both studying an MA at Tileyard Education, Seditious Mind and Addicted Groove work collaboratively writing new music for Film, TV, Song and Production. The pair are working hard to have a release this summer.

Online

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