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Introduction

In my dissertation project proposal, I posited taking a new approach to the process of creating music by experimenting with my “artistic persona.” As a performer, songwriter and producer (both solo and as part of a band) I already have several active artistic identities- which are often in flux, but also sometimes impose limitations on the music that I create by establishing specific ‘rulesets’ within my mind. Therefore my project aimed to explore non-judgemental creation through the use of new artistic personas and to explore new creative processes that this could develop. Ultimately, by doing this, my goal was to open up opportunities for myself to work previously unattainable and exciting new ways.

In order to draw the best comparisons possible between the success of these and any new artistic personas created in the course of this project, I will outline some of my research and the concepts that informed my work. I’ll then use these concepts to discuss the tracks that I have submitted, which are split into two collections. The first collection was made with my band *The Steady Letters* and therefore I will outline the artistic identity of the band and the decisions that this informed in the creation process. The second collection is a group of tracks created using several different and new artistic identities such as soundtrack composer, rapper, and pop producer.

First we need to establish the research and concepts which have shaped this dissertation and the analysis of the works created. After all, what is an artistic persona? In *“Hey Man, What's Your Style?” Persona Creation, Closet Humanism and Artistic Legitimation in Lou Reed's 1970s Work*”, Christophe Lebold discusses Lou Reed’s surprisingly direct engagement with the concept of an artistic “persona” - the so-called “Rock and Roll Animal” that Reed created (Lebold, 2018). Reed used a carefully constructed persona as a multi-purpose tool: to achieve a “double legitimacy” by combining his “rock” and “literary” ideals, something which was uncommon at the time; and as a way of deflecting people from his true self- specifically his underlying humanist values.

Reed’s development of a carefully curated artistic persona was a way of selling the ‘legitimacy’ of his message. The success of such an approach relies upon the “self-congruity” effect of music wherein we see “the perceived persona of artists and the personalities of their fans [are] highly correlated” (Greenberg, 2020). A well-controlled artist persona can demonstrably be an asset when trying to connect with different audiences. Record labels, for example, would not amalgamate all of the different artistic values of their signed acts into one entity delivering what would undoubtedly be a garbled and watered-down artistic message. Instead they maintain separate and consistent brands for each of their artists.

It’s clear that artistic personas are incredibly complex and in order to discuss them in the context of music and music creation, we need slightly sharper tools to distinguish the type of personas that might be at play. In *Transparent and Opaque Performance Personas* we are offered an in-depth analysis of two specific types of a performer’s persona (Cray, 2019). This study refers specifically to on-stage personas of singers performing in public but the concept is incredibly useful when discussing the roles of an artist- be they a writer, performer or producer. As the names suggest, a transparent persona refers to an artist performing more or less as themselves whereas an opaque persona is one where an artist effectively plays a fictional character.

The ‘transparency’ of a persona refers to how much congruity that we perceive between the performer (or artist) and the message they’re delivering. If, for example, a famous American east-coast Hip Hop artist were to appear on stage donning sneakers, sunglasses and tracksuit, but playing guitar and singing Wonderwall- we might make different assumptions about his motives than if we saw Oasis themselves singing it. A large disparity between our perception of the artist and the song could lead us to draw much deeper and more complex meanings when we see Jay-Z performing the song at Glastonbury- perhaps that it was a jibe at Noel Gallagher for panning his headline slot (Walker, 2008).

Collection One- The Steady Letters

Tracks: Paradise, Ribbons, Make You Sweat, The Blue

When songwriting for The Steady Letters, as it is a four-piece rock band, there are certain aspects of the musical 'identity' or sound of the band which are established by the conventions of the genre. The songs for this EP primarily started life as singular guitar riffs or as chord sequences written on a guitar with a vocal hook. This is because the focus of songwriting and production for rock music is often shared between these two instruments.

Famous guitar riffs are lauded and become singable melodies in their own right. Such is the prevalence of 'Seven Nation Army' as an anthem for sporting events around the world (Karr, 2018). The titular lyrics appear at the beginning of the song, in the second line, but they aren't repeated- and in the chorus (instead of vocals) the guitar riff is the main feature, thus being given far more importance. In general The White Stripes lean into the simplicity and rawness of their setup, of just one guitar and vocals, without producing overly-polished recordings- the band's music didn't even feature a bass guitar until their fifth studio album 'Get Behind Me Satan' in 2005 (Middle 8, 2018). Instead they used an octave pedal to bolster the low end of the electric guitars.

One of the most important and successful parts of creating new music for the band was recording and mixing acoustic drums from start to finish. For this to work, I used the majority of my time in the commercial studio to record the drums for all four tracks and dedicated significant time and energy to researching drum mixing techniques including mic selection, phase assessment, group comping and editing, parallel buss compression and mix buss routing. Two of the tracks feature sections with several layers of drums and in order to 'sell' the authenticity of the band I knew that 'big' sounding drums would play a crucial role.

For example, the track *The Blue* features a long instrumental breakdown with heavy emphasis on the impact of the drums. In terms of the band's artistic 'persona' - the choices made when writing these long instrumentals sections were informed by the physical space that the songs will eventually be performed in. In 'How Music Works,' David Byrne of Talking Heads fame identifies the ways in which the identity of an artist and their output can be shaped by the physical spaces that their music will eventually be performed in.

"We unconsciously and instinctively make work to fit preexisting formats[...] That holds true for the other arts as well: pictures are created that fit and look good on white walls in galleries."

We can pinpoint the result of this approach by examining Nirvana's MTV Unplugged performance- a live set which substituted electric guitars, upon which rests much of the identity of the band, for acoustic ones and a far less aggressive drum performance from Dave Grohl. As opposed to their usually aggressive 'fortissimo' live performances, a less dynamically intense 'sotto voce' performance dictates to the audience the expectations of the venue and their level of interaction. The atmosphere is very quiet and attentive in comparison, although there is still an understanding that the audience will be able to interact with Cobain in loud and informal ways.

We see other examples of this with the rise the sub-genres "stadium rock" or "arena rock" (Joyner, 2008). The band Muse have tracks which are transformed when they are performed live- for example, the track *Knights of Cydonia* live at Rome Olympic Stadium. The guitar riff at the beginning of the song is sung just as enthusiastically as the vocals, perhaps more so, by the crowd and this kind of experience becomes a large part of the band's draw and they are often lauded as one of the best live bands in the world (Anderson, 2012).

Understanding how a live crowd will interact with a particular artist or piece of music adds new dimensions to the 'rules' within which the songs are written. It also leaves room to experiment and expand upon the existing material. The steady build of the bridge section in *The Blue* is therefore designed to be toyed with in a live setting, in order to play upon the energy and expectations of the audience.

In general, my inspiration for this collection of songs was drawn from commercial rock bands such as The Black Keys, White Stripes, Arctic Monkeys, Kings of Leon or Muse. The aim was to produce guitar-driven rock music with a chaotic sound but a polished production. This could be

compared to the change in production from The Black Keys' early albums such as 'Thickfreakness' which had a very 'live' sound. Instruments on tracks such as 'Have Love Will Travel' seem to be less 'controlled' or compressed in their sound, being large in dynamic range and therefore messier overall.

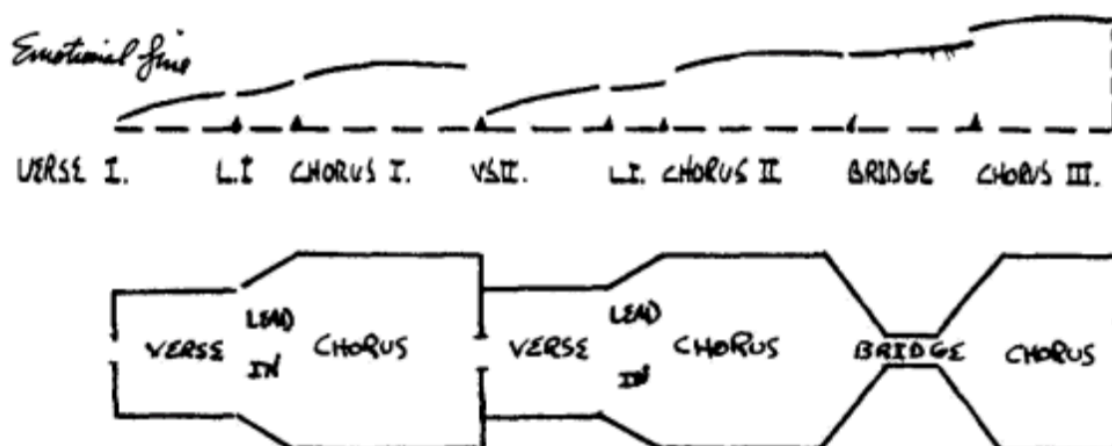
In comparison their later, 'posher' production on the album *El Camino* has a far cleaner sound- the instruments on the track 'Gold On The Ceiling' are well-defined, 'cut-and-dried' in their individual places, with seemingly topped-and-tailed or perhaps noise-gated recordings- removing much of the chaos of their earlier efforts. On this track they include a chorus of female backing vocals, demonstrating more carefully considered arrangements, and in general higher production values. The identity of such a band was first wrapped up in their wilful resistance to 'playing by the rules,' focusing more on the attitude of the sound rather than the aesthetics. It was unabashed and revelled in the chaos of the mix. The change in production sound can have an unconscious effect on how the band are perceived- large-scale productions, with complex layers and rich-sounding processing, tells us that they have become a band with a position of power and the resources that come with it.

In order to control audience expectations I decided that if these tracks are released as an EP in future then the opening song should be Paradise, as it starts with all four band instruments at once (lead & rhythm guitars, bass guitar and drums) to immediately place the 'garage rock' genre within the audience's mind. The identity of the band is constructed with features like distorted guitar tones, an allegro tempo of 150bpm, aggressive drumming and a delay effect on the lead guitar riff giving a feeling of 'controlled chaos'.

The bass and rhythm guitar start on the first offbeat of the song, the second quaver, to give the song a lurching feel and to sit at odds with the lead guitar line that begins on the first beat. Both rhythm and lead follow a 'minor pentatonic' scale, one of the most commonly used scales in rock music, using only 5 notes per octave of the natural minor. By dropping the 2nd and 6th intervals of the typical natural minor scale there is less tension and release in a minor pentatonic scale than its full-scale counterpart, and no two notes are closer than a tone apart.

When writing these songs I often found myself eschewing musical choices that would have been too 'alternative' and embracing the simplicity of the rock sound. There is less nuance to consider when writing minor pentatonic melodies over chords which are diatonic to the key, as is the case in this track. There are certainly bands in rock music that pioneered the alt-rock sound such as Radiohead, or Muse who used the more 'exotic' sound of the harmonic minor scale for the main guitar riff on Plug In Baby. However, bands such as Arctic Monkeys made successful a more simplistic approach which balanced commercial viability and rebelliousness- simplistic and seemingly "unpretentious and aware of their lot" (Porter, 2007) which has more relevance to The Steady Letters in arrangement and production.

The structure of this track and others in The Steady Letters' collection is also dictated by the possibility of reaching a broad audience and the potential for future commercial success i.e. radio play or Spotify playlisting. In the most basic sense, the structure of a song aiming for commercial success is a long-established format (P.119, [Tunesmith](#)):



“If you can’t say what you need or want to say with a verse/chorus/verse/chorus/bridge and *another* chorus, perhaps you should admit to yourself you are working on an experimental song” (Webb, 1998).

This structure has been slowly refined over time, with physical formats such as vinyl and commercial formats such as radio, dictating the appropriate length of a “single.” As Vox state in their video *Why Disco Made Pop Songs Longer*: “From the 1970s through the 1980s, the average length of No.1 pop songs nearly doubled and the 12” single probably had a lot to do with it” (Vox, 2019).

So the structure relates to the traditional format, and Paradise is the most appropriate selection for a first single from this collection because of the length and structure. It will also allow us to break expectations if this the first track- they must first be built, establishing the pillars which can later be swapped out for a different approach. The ‘breakdown’ section of this song quietens the dynamics of the instruments in order to effect a greater intensity for the guitar solo. This practice of ‘breaking it down’ instrumentally has been present in rock music for a long time. For example, in Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” there is a long instrumental section which as listeners takes us meandering away from the typical ‘space’ of the song into a reverb-drenched alternate dimension, before we find our way back to a rollicking guitar solo and final chorus.

The next track aims to challenge this beginning and expand the artistic identity of the band to include a more experimental edge. On the track *Ribbons* this is done through use of modal interchange and brief moments of heavy dissonance. The main guitar riff is written in D natural minor until the final note which drops to the $\flat 6$ borrowed from D harmonic minor. This brief visitation to D harmonic minor is an unexpected turn and brings with it an unsettling feeling- especially when coupled with the sustained D Minor chord from the rhythm guitar, coupling D and D $\flat$ together to create a minor second interval. It’s a highly tense and uncomfortable moment which makes use of a ‘pedal tone’- a sustained note which continues to play under a new chord, creating a foreign harmony.

A similar device is employed again in the verses when the chord progression moves from a Gm to a B $\flat$ but the bass guitar plays an A- effectively creating a B $\flat$ /A chord underneath the lyrics:

“There’s a shadow passing over,
And it takes me side to side.”

The lyrics and music combine to impart a disconcerting feeling onto the listener.

The final track *Make You Sweat* is an opportunity to speak about the process of adapting a song from one ‘artist identity’ to another. This was a fully-fledged song in its own right which I had written as a solo artist before being taken under the ‘umbrella’ of The Steady Letters. It necessitated a few changes, mainly combining the electronic sound of the bass and drums with recordings of live drums and bass guitar performances.

It’s certainly true that songs can be close to the sound ‘identity’ of an artist but have unknown obstacles to achieving the final sound. In a similar fashion- *Over and Over and Over* by Jack White was a song which he had written 13 years before release and trialled with Jay-Z and The Raconteurs before it clicked into place many years later (Doyle, 2018).

The drums and bass on *Make You Sweat* had previously been programmed and quantised using MIDI and so were not successfully capturing the live energy of a band performance. The sound of the acoustic drums gave the song a much more ‘human’ feel while still allowing me to trigger the samples that I had previously used on this track, turning it into something of a cyborg creation. For the bass guitar, equally, I kept the performance from the bass player but processed the sound using an autotuner, LFO, side-chain compression to produce erratic vibrato, and kept the ‘sub’ frequencies of the original bass in the track.

These decisions were informed by the expectations of the listener and to avoid the potentially jarring experience of hearing electronic and perfectly ‘on-the-beat’ instruments on tracks from a

band that had previously not used any at all. With its fairly traditional rock ideals and prescriptive goals for what could or could not be considered the 'sound' of the band, this collection of tracks for *The Steady Letters* became a good basis for comparison when considering the difference in the creative process for the rest of the project.

Collection Two

The first two tracks of the second collection were tracks composed for a short film. This is something that I might previously have been hesitant about attempting but in fact it presented the perfect opportunity to develop for this project and discuss the difference in my identity as a composer when creating soundtrack for film.

In general, film composition gives far less consideration to the live performance of the music. Although the act of going to the cinema is often part of the excitement of the movie-goers' experience- leading to significant investment in 5.1 and 7.1 Dolby surround systems (Roberts, 2019) in order to facilitate the best audiovisual replication of the creator's works- it rarely extends to live performances of the music featured. As it's far less likely to be performed 'live' at any point, there is lesser need to consider the practicalities of reproducing the sound at a later point.

Therefore one of the first decisions I made regarding my persona of a 'composer' was to not include any guitars, typically my main instrument, so as to alter my mindset. By establishing a new set of compositional 'rules' I was able to make otherwise intimidating decisions to compose for an orchestra of up to 18 different instruments and make bold musical choices, for example far more frequent modulation than would be acceptable in a commercial music setting.

The 'identity' of a composer is one able to bring together disparate parts into one piece of music or one overall soundtrack. It's also one that can sit alongside a band or artist project. Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood, Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder, and Nine Inch Nail's Trent Reznor, have all worked on movie soundtracks that allow them to step further outside of their typical roles. The title track from Greenwood's "There Will Be Blood" score is a brooding orchestral score which shares none of the similarities to Radiohead's alternative, math-rock fare.

The anonymity afforded to me as the composer of this soundtrack removed much of the artifice and the preconceptions that the film audience may, or may not, already have about my music creation. It has been proposed that listeners experience the emotional content of music without the need for a specific persona to be attached to it (Cochrane, 2010).

Therefore, as a composer, I dedicated myself to augmenting the emotional content present in a scene without needing to first establish any position whatsoever as an artistic entity. I have likely seen hundreds of films without knowing anything about the provenance of the soundtrack and the identity of its composer. This was ideal for the opening track *All Dressed Up* which required a score combining in-scene footage of a Betty Boop cartoon with 'kitchen sink' drama.

The need for diegetic music gave me the opportunity to blur the lines between the characters' experiences and the 'non-diegetic' soundtrack of the scene, and this became a complex but satisfying achievement. Blurring the lines between the two required me to first take on the mindset of the composer of the original score. I watched the Betty Boop Cinderella cartoon in its entirety and, by establishing the tropes of the music, I was able to create an 'original' soundtrack that could then be woven in and out of the rest of the scene.

In order to capture an authentic feel, I made several musical choices that would draw the audience into accepting the 'authenticity' of the cartoon soundtrack. I made the decision to use simple orchestral instrumentation- relying primarily on violins or trumpets, as well as some basic orchestral percussion. During Betty Boop's Cinderella 'transformation' at 0:44 I used the auxiliary augmented scale (also known as the whole tone scale) which is often recognisable as a classic "dream sequence" or "magic" motif.

This is just one example of my attempt to use more radical and genre-hopping musical moves. In this instance, it was bolstered by the director's far-reaching influences for the movie and his open-minded approach to the soundtrack. The vision of the director was one of the first and foremost

considerations. He has no formal music education but has a seasoned ear for film scores as well as classical and contemporary music, and was able to compile a playlist of unique references. These included existing film compositions, from traditional to contemporary, and artist albums and singles. In this sense I was also tasked with discarding the role of the traditional “artist” and instead became a “translator” for the director- of non-musical ideas into musical ones.

Casting off the limitations of genre meant freedom to explore non-traditional instruments for the track *Idle Hands*. I was able to draw upon new ideas of instrument creation (some of which I have been able to develop at Tileyard). When watching and interpreting the characters of the movie, the villain Fluff became the focus of more experimental techniques. I sampled different types of ‘foley’ based upon my impressions of the character- banging metal objects like fences, handles, railings and scraping strings or abrasive surfaces. By listening to these sounds, and chopping and changing their length or position, I was able to turn them into a sampled ‘drum kit’ to provide rhythm to the track, as well using the more melodic sounds for ambience.

This also tied in with the director’s reference of Kanye West’s *Yeezus* album which features a lot of highly experimental, harsh, industrial-sounding and distorted rhythms. It also involves vocal manipulation and I was inspired by the track “I Am A God” (a typically understated title for Kanye West to choose) and its use of pitch-shifted vocals. I decided to use the Soundtoys’ ‘Alterboy’ on a vocal pre-amp in order to shift my own vocals down by an octave and use this as inspiration to explore the mindset of the villain in a performative way.

The vocal refrains that I settled upon made use of the natural and harmonic minor scales to create sinister and imposing sounds. I was able to combine all of these elements into a track which felt like a unique representation of a character and something that I had never been able to achieve previously. Using these tools in such a way would have been impossible when writing material as a solo artist or for my band and it has afforded me the opportunity to create unique new sounds.

Conversely, for the dream-pop track *Cold Night*, I decided to cross certain artistic ‘boundaries’ that I had previously set for myself as a solo artist- namely, merging guitar-driven music with samples and electronic artefacts. With ‘The Steady Letters’ much of the identity is rooted in traditional rock values- electric guitars, an acoustic drum kit, and a reasonably live sound. In *Cold Night* I made use of tighter, electronic drum samples and backwards guitar samples which introduce the song and also feature in the chorus. Although I could have ostensibly made these sounds myself, I ended up leaving space in the song for samples- something which I hadn’t done before- and thus changing the genetic makeup of my artistic identity.

I also decided to include foley that I had recorded of a soft drinks can opening and fizzing drinks being poured into a glass. I made this decision by exploring the collection of samples and voice notes that I have accumulated over time by sampling ‘in the moment’ and then leaving the seeds of ideas to return to later. In this way, I was almost collaborating with myself on the track. Ezra Koenig of *Vampire Weekend* details a similar writing process for the track *Harmony Hall*. The song was conceived as a voice note on his phone 8 years before the final release. It went through several iterations and was re-written over time, for example into a ‘Baroque piano piece,’ before he finally realised he’d arrived at the correct place (Koenig, 2019)

Old School was by far the most experimental track of this collection because of just how far it pushed me outside of my comfort zone. In order to create this track successfully, I chose to create a far more ‘opaque’ than any of the others. It led me to decide that the song would not need to be released or shared with others but should in fact be used as an experiment in becoming a different performer “in the booth.” Although it strays dangerously towards parody (in my opinion) it was liberating to experience non-judgemental creation and to play with the boundaries of my self-identification as an artist.

There were several things which helped in this regard. I took a far more aggressive approach to production on this track with the use of a heavy 808 to drive the beat, as well as heavily distorted djembes, distancing it from the other genres in this collection. In order to successfully create a convincing track I combine the rap vocals with a soul or RNB-type chorus and again found myself pushing much further into new areas than ever before.

The final track, *You Never Know*, offered the opportunity to experiment with completely new aspects of music creation. Besides removing my own artistic ideals and writing to Ronnie's vision of the track, I was forced to use several elements which I hadn't experimented with before. The artist requested birdsong for the induction of the track and had also mentioned the desire to include a spoken word section at the end of the song, introducing her album. A recording session in the studio presented the perfect opportunity to spontaneously interview her about her vision for the album and what it represented.

I knew that I had to wear several 'hats' for this process. As well as needing to ask questions which would be able to good insight and emotional content, at the same time I had the editing and production process in my mind. It became my role to steer the questions in a direction that would make sense in terms of narrative and I had to keep these pieces in motion in my head whilst doing so. Ultimately, it was a new experience and later when producing the track I had the new task of working this 'spoken word' section into the track. Without opening myself up to collaboration, I would not have gained these skills and it forced me to completely embody the vision of the artist and allow that to inform such decisions in the creation process.

Personal Development and Reflection

The vision of this project was ultimately to create music that sat well outside of my typical comfort zone in terms of audience, genre, instrumentation, production and most importantly to challenge my self-perception as an 'artist.' The exploration of different artistic identities truly pushed my production skills to adapt to a multitude of outcomes.

My main strength when approaching this project was having the ability and opportunity to work on tracks in a multitude of different ways being an artist, songwriter, performer, producer and composer. This gave me an opportunity to explore my artistic identities, and I was able to use these strengths to explore new approaches and produce a varied collection of tracks.

One of the largest areas of development was gaining the skills necessary to record and mix drums from start to finish, which has been a goal of mine for a long time and will allow me to continue to work in this way in the future. I am able to record and mix a full drum kit from start to finish, including: phase assessment of drums, comping, parallel compression, drum track doubling using triggers and samples, and understanding the frequency makeup of different drum sounds.

The biggest opportunity when approaching the project was the chance to open up a huge number of new possibilities: in working with others, in adding new production techniques to my process, in removing mental barriers that limited my creation of music, and ultimately become a more well-rounded musician and producer.

Overall I think this project in developing and pursuing new 'artistic identities' has been a success. I have forced myself to take on opportunities which I previously would have not considered myself to be able to complete. I have learnt an incredibly broad number of new skills including writing for orchestra, recording rap vocals, working spoken word sections into a song, producing live drums from start to finish, and allowing other creatives to dictate my creation process.

Through the development of my musical identity, music production skills, songwriting skills, by collaborating with others, exploring new forms or artistic inspiration, and by drawing upon previously unexplored genres, I have been able to successfully create my most eclectic and challenging collection of music so far.

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