

Production
Assignment
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Tileyard Education,
University of Wales Trinity Saint David

The 'Legendary' Project

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CREATION ELEMENT C2B -
REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY

INTRODUCTION

In the following reflective commentary I will synthesise the research I have conducted in order to develop my final body of work for the Ma Commercial Music Producer at Tileyard Education and explain how I have applied the knowledge accumulated throughout the course and during my personal academic research. I will carry on formulating observations made during the process and developing ideas that have improved my professional expertise as a music producer. Beyond my technical abilities which will be demonstrated through my actual work, it is essential to state that the intentions of my final work have a deeper meaning and that they aim to be legendary through the statements that the songs are making.

THE 'LEGENDARY' INTENTION

The intention of my final project called 'Legendary' was to create a series of songs that would each have a very clear intention. Whether they are a political statement, pushing gender or genre boundaries or blending unexpected elements together, the 'Legendary' project aims to spark joy and instigate a 'feel good' state. Every song has a carefully tailored aim and they are as follows:

'Virtual Girl'

Written by fellow student Becca James, the song is inspired by an online relationship that never got to be consumed in real life. The performer becomes a digital nymph who remains stuck in a virtual form but achieves great power from haunting their lover. I managed to musically translate this story through using Splice (Aimonetti and Martocci, 2013) samples that have a heavily inspired digital provenance. Eg: iPhone sounds, robot sounds, soundscape samples. The main purpose of the song from a genre perspective is to show a more synthetic side of the artist Becca James' future discography and to expand her fanbase.

'Hot Enough'

Is the first song I have ever written with artist and fellow student Darcy Poole (artist name Darcy Blu) when we first ever worked together. The intention was to create a pop song that was radio friendly.

'The word 'hook' is an important one in the vocabulary of either a songwriter or a radio executive because it summarizes the goal of each. Radio and the songs it plays are all about hooking and keeping the listeners' attention. To a songwriter, the hook is the most memorable musical and lyrical element of a song. It is the thesis statement – that one-phrase summary of the whole creation – that line you want the listener to be singing long after the song is over.' (SaskMusic, 2009)

'Hot Enough' is a hook based song who is titled after the lyrical hook and is inspired by 'Good Ones' a synth wave pop track by artist Charli XCX. 'Hot Enough' has an '80s feel but has few organic and real instrument s like string and guitar samples incorporated in the production. (Charli XCX, 2021). During one of my feedback session with writer Sean Hargreaves, I was encouraged to write more with Darcy Blu, based on the feedback, in the words of Sean Hargreaves: "*This is gold!*". Therefore Darcy and I continued working together and this is how the next song was born.

'Think Of Me'

Is a eurodance (Wikipedia, 2022) inspired track, who aims to also be radio friendly but has, I believe a stronger identity than 'Hot Enough'. Both songs are part of a series of songs than Darcy and I have in the making and in the future we will focus on pitching them to record labels as we believe they will perform well based on the feedback received from peers and listeners.

'SPUNK!'

Is a pop club track that has been heavily inspired by the East London raving scene and is deeply rooted in a genre called Gabber (Muggs, 2020). It was written with fashion designer and East London icon Chema Diaz and will be Chema's second release. Chema has quite a large following through his clothing brand that is inspired by rave culture, immigrants and the East London scene.

'YOUR LIFE'

Is not necessarily a commercial piece like the previous ones. The original intention was to create a club track and this can be seen when looking at the tempo of 125 bmp, however the original main intention was to combine the gospel vocals of a 9 members choir who usually have a very spiritual approach in their lyrics with a music genre that was born in the 1980's called 'Vogueing' (Nast, 2021) and to therefore create a new sub-genre through something that on a personal level I am unaware has been done before. Of course artists like *Madonna* or *Beyoncé*, have featured gospel vocals on club tracks before (Vogue, 1990), but a main choir vogue hasn't been historically placed at the forefront of a vogue track.

'Slavic Beat'

Is a club track that will serve Polka Dot, a polish drag performer in her club and festival performances lip-sync performances. The main intention is to have this as her first ever music release. We wanted to stay true to her heritage but at the same time we wanted to make sure that people would want to dance hence the reason why the tempo was kept to a 125bp.

THE PROCESS

WORKING WITH THE CHOIR

The most ambitious part of working on 'The Legendary' project was by far recording the FTCC choir. My original idea was to do it in the main studio in TYE, but very quickly more colleagues showed interest in working with the choir and using them on their recordings. Therefore the project drifted to another level and scale and more aspects had to be taken into consideration when it came to organising the session which now was going to take place in 'The Gallery' at Tileyard. Which is a venue that can hold up to 300 people.

When preparing for recording the choir a very clear budget had to be put into place to cover for: day rate for choir members, catering, wireless headphones etc. I had never previously worked on budgets, but fellow student and collaborator Becca James was very helpful when it came to doing all the paper work and calculating the expenses. A lot of incredible support came from Sean Hargreaves who was as excited as I was to work with a gospel choir. Sean not only liaised with Harry Leckstein and Ciaran Robinson from Tileyard Education and managed to ensure that the recording space will be offered free of charge, but he also made sure that the budgeting was correct. Sean was also willing to provide us with the recording hardware used for the session (free of charge) and also with future free tokens for his high standard studio in the future to be used by the choir members. Eventually the cost per students became slightly unaffordable and unfortunately other certain complications intervened on some sides. In the end, the choir recording did not take place in the Tileyard Gallery. As a personal note I am happy that was the case, because I believe considering the choir was not prepared up to the standard the session would have been incredibly delayed.

Based on my first ever experience of working with a larger group of people it is fair to say that when it comes to being put in the same position again, there are a few things that I would do differently. The first and probably most important aspect, is making sure that the choir has rehearsed and knows their parts prior to recording. This time around, because I have a friendly relationship with the choir directors, I presumed that mutual respect was going to be showed and that the choir members would turn therefore up knowing the parts and knowing what they had to achieve on the day.

Secondly, I would change would have to be my attitude throughout the session. This obviously implies being respectful, but at the same time it requires a stricter attitude on my side and making sure that I exude confidence and I am somewhat more serious throughout the session. I imagine this can be achieved by possibly holding a little speech at the beginning of the session, setting the intention and some ground rules eg: waiting for a few seconds before they can talk after a take, communicating only through their leader what is needed from the sound engineer or whether any of the choir members have any requirements, etc.

An idea for the course, that was discussed with Ned Roberts, sound engineer at Tileyard Education, was to introduce as part of a model a real recording session simulation or even

a real recording session using more than just one artist, possibly a four piece band or higher number of members to help improve the organisational skills of students and to make sure that as producers, we students are able to develop not only their technical skills but also their interpersonal and leader abilities when it comes to holding the space for industry standard recording sessions.

CHOIR VOCALS

Because the choir was not as prepared as I was expecting them to be, some for the final recording turned out to be out of pitch, this is why, some of the vocals were layered with new recordings done by a few members individually in a separate recording session. Another reason why this session was important was to record parts that were never recorded due to lack of time.

SOFTWARE USED

In a 2 hour session with Weronika Gabryelczyk aka Veira, former student on the course and future lecturer at Tileyard Education, we covered the importance and the standard of vocals on a pop track in the current commercial music industry climate. During our zoom session, Viera stressed and demonstrated the importance of a few aspects of current vocal processing, but the most crucial ones were: parallel compression, double pitching and vocal alignment of dubs and harmonies.

When it comes to double pitching, the reason why I agree that this technique has incredible results, is because software like Antares - autotune or Waves Autotune, do not react naturally with vocal chromatic glides and often give the vocals a very robotic effect and make the vocals sound quite unnatural. If that is not an aesthetic of choice, this can easily compromise the quality of the vocals. Therefore my ideal process and the one used on all the tracks on the 'Legendary EP' is to double pitch correct the vocals. Stage one of this process is to use Logic Pro's flex pitching or Melodyne in order to manually pitch correct the vocals. Stage two is to apply Antares Autotune on all vocals to finesse the pitch throughout.

Another incredible plug in that has played a big part in my vocal processing was 'Vocallign'

SAMPLING and REFERENCING

'YOUR LIFE'

Sampling existing music has played a great part in some of the tracks on the 'LEGENDARY' ep and it always had a strong connection with the artist that I was working with and with the purpose of the track.

The song 'Your Life' started with my vision of making a club track that somehow incorporated a choir. It was destiny that brought myself and Isaac Oluwatobi Cristy Obisanya a half Nigerian half Romanian singer and choir director at For The Culture Collective together. Thus the idea of 'Your Life' started to take shape.

We knew 'YOUR LIFE' would have to somehow be a nod to both Nigerian and Romanian heritages. This is where Sampling came in. The track includes samples of 'The Lonely Shepard' by James Last and performed by Romanian pan-flutist Gheorghe Zamfir (Last and Zamfir, 1977). It has been famously used before as a soundtrack for Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill Volume 1. The track's leading instrument is a traditional Romanian instrument called 'nai' (pan flute) and has a folklore sound but at the same time a very cinematic ethereal and time travelling character to it. We thought this was perfect for our composition as the tracks lyrical idea is heavily inspired by ancestry.

When it came to the mixing process, an event that was incredibly helpful for me was the track being performed live at 'Fierce Festival' in Birmingham - a voguing queer festival that took place in July 2021. I therefore had to mix the track for being for a sound system that would play in a 500 people capacity hall. As I could not be there in person, when watching back the videos I realised that when played in larger venues the bass heavy kick that I originally used in the production created a lot of resonance on large powerful speakers and that it need to be replaces with something lighter as it was overpowering the rest of the production and was almost covering up the live vocals. At the same time, I had to make sure that the beat of the track was present enough since one of the main focuses of the track is to make people dance.

'SLAVIC BEAT'

Even though 'Slavic Beat' is a fun dance track, we wanted to give the shallow dance song a bit of substance. Since Polka Dot, is a performer who likes to make political statements and is a proud Polish immigrant and member of the queer community, we thought a good idea was to sample a song that had lot of meaning and symbolism. We chose 'Dwa Serduszka', (Two Hearts) - a song performed live in a film by Pawel Pawlikowski about the Cold War. The plot follows a love story that sparks between a Polish soldier and a young woman during the Cold War in Poland, (Pawlikowski, 2018). The moral of the song is that love wins even during war. Metaphorically, our intention with 'Slavic Beat' was to convey the message that, despite the latest banning of gay rights in Poland In 2018 and 2019 love will always shine through.

The use of the song goes beyond the message of love and positive outcomes. The song used in the Oscar nominated film itself, is a traditional song and contributes to the juxtaposition of genres, between folklore and dance music and also between the idea of a non-liberal country and a drag performer.

‘HOT ENOUGH’

After the first line of the song *‘You might say that I’m a little bit toxic’* the production features a synth that replicates the famous main string motif in Britney Spear’s song ‘Toxic’ (Toxic, 2009). When inserting this reference fellow student and cowriter of the song Darcy Poole and I saw it as an epic nod to pop culture and thought possibly listeners would enjoy that. However in a feedback session with composer Sean Hargreaves, I was told the song has great radio potential and that it would be worth removing the Britney Spears reference to avoid a plagiarism lawsuit in case the song faces considerable success.

THE STRATEGY

One of my main focuses when choosing who to work with on the ‘LEGENDARY’ project was making sure that my collaborators would have an already existing fan base or were deeply rooted in a scene and that their intentions were very clear when it came to the audience that wanted to cater to. On a professional level , working with people that are already established was a conscious choice. This would eventually help me ensure that the tracks would have an existing platform to reach and at the same time, increase the chances of more people wanting to collaborate with me as a writer and producer in the future.

MICING and RECORDING

PIANO with George Bone

The mics we used for piano recording fellow student and extremely talented pianist George Bone were a Schoeps positioned bottom right for the resonance of the higher keys and bottom box, a Neumann U87 for the piano top box to get the brighter resonances of the sound and two Neumann KM184 as a spaced pair to serve as room mics.

The main purpose of recording piano for the track ‘Virtual Girl’ was to give the production a slight organic touch. Because the production is quite experimental, abstract and heavily electronic, it was agreed that the soundscape of the song could benefit from the addition of live recorded instruments. The idea of also recording live drums for the song, as Becca was already involved with doing that for her final project, was also considered at one point, but due to my lack of time and experience with mixing live drums, this idea unfortunately hasn’t come to life yet.

Whilst in the studio with artist and writer and fellow student Becca James, we also recorded an acoustic piano version of our song 'Virtual Girl'. This is not included in the 'Legendary' project submission. This will be released after the single. Because the genre of 'Virtual Girl' is slightly far from the music Becca usually makes, we thought an acoustic version of the song would be more appropriate for her already existing fanbase and that it would also cater to the people who enjoy the new genre that she will be tapping into. The importance of acoustic versions is highlighted by Caleb Murphy under the statement that '*it gives your fans something new to enjoy*' (Murphy, 2020). As a younger aspiring musician, I can state that in retrospect I fell in love with my favourite artists after watching them do a live acoustic rendition of their electronically produced hits. On an emotional level acoustic versions strip away the electronic elements and allow the brain to focus on organic sounds played live, rather than digitally programmed productions.

CHOIR with For The Culture Collective

When it came to recording the choir, Ned Roberts mic-ed up the Main Studio Live Room as follows: Schoeps CMC 6U with Mk4 capsules in an ORTF arrangement in the centre and with a spaced pair of Schoeps CMC 6U with Mk 2H capsules for the sides. This mixing technique offered the recording quite a wide stereo image and when it came to mixing the song, after layering the choir - which only had 8 members, I kept the panning to a minimal, as I could easily accomplish and translate the choir effect I desired for this track only by layering several takes, aligning them and using parallel compression to glue them together.

Balancing out the voices and obtaining the perfect blend of voices was achieved by moving the choir members around, as Casey Van Wensem suggests in his article, (Wensem, 2017). Another technique to achieve thickness was to have all choir members sing specific tenor or alto parts all together. These were later layered together.

Because the sopranos were on the right hand side, the altos were on the left and the tenors and baritones in the middle, it was very easy to determine if someone was singing out of pitch and where they were standing based on what mic the sound was coming from. This positioning of the mic gave me the opportunity to select between different mic singles from one specific take and layer them in with other good takes from other corresponding mics to create combinations of takes that had a good performance.

ROOM NOISE - with Darcy Poole

The main vocals for 'Think Of Me' were recorded on a Shure SM7B. I used this mic when previously recording Darcy's voice and I specifically liked how well the mic works with Darcy's warm tone. However in this instance, we were not recording in Writing Room 4, we were in Tileyard X's Control Room using the Focusrite preamps. I am still not quite sure why, but the final vocals for this song ended up having a lot of room noise. There are a few reasons that come to mind when it comes to why there was so much hiss on the recordings. One of them may have been the air conditioning or maybe I turned up the gain on the Focusrite amp way too high wishing to have a healthy signal that I can work with.

The one partial fix I applied to these vocals, without great success is Izotope - RX8 - noise reduction, and set the threshold to a 30db. However on the final recording there you can still hear a very prominent hiss, even though I tried to remove it with multiple EQs and due to lack of time we did not have time to rerecord the vocals. Because Sean Hargreaves believes in my material with Darcy, we will rerecord the vocals for this song and get them up to industry standards and make sure we maximise the opportunities on this song.

POPPERS BOTTLE OPENING - with Chema Diaz

Because we wanted to stay true to the identity of 'SPUNK!', which is heavily based and inspired by East London rave culture and 90s techno, we thought it would be a good idea to record a few live sounds that came from opening bottles of poppers. In a session with the artist I prepared five different poppers bottles, but when trying to open them, it turned out that we couldn't accomplish the sound that we originally imagined the packaging would make when ripping it. What I learned from this experience is that not all ideas will translate into reality the same way you initially imagine they would.

MAKING A NON-SINGER SING - with POLKA DOT

The main challenge I encountered when working Polka Dot, an East London Polish Drag queen, who is a busy Eastern European gay rights activist and performer, was getting them to sing on pitch with correct rhythm, diction and phrasing. During our first writing sessions, we would always write intricate toplines and when it came to recording them, it turned out that Polka wasn't a very good singer. It was after the first few demos when I realised that the more elaborate the melodies were, the harder it was for Polka to perform them correctly. Therefore the conscious decision of writing something as simple as a nursery rhyme was the winning topline which also ended up on 'Slavic Beat'.

SHOCK VALUE

As referenced before when it came to building my instrument 'Plushy's Diltar' - shock value has always been something that I want to achieve with my work. It is not something I rely on, but it does play a big part when making creative decisions. (Ulaby, 2010)

Shock value came into place when choosing the lyrics for 'SPUNK!' when collaborating with Chema Diaz.

*'He came in my mouth
I felt it in my heart
I'm a sucker for love
Who really loves to suck'*

It came into place when we chose to push the boundaries of Gospel and take it from church into the London ballrooms and create almost a new genre. It played a big part when we chose a traditional war song to incorporate in a club track performed by a drag

queen. It played a big part when taking two artists out of their comfort zone and pushing them into areas where they could flourish and discover new sides of themselves.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The process of making the 'Legendary' project has improved my skills as a producer tremendously and I believe I have grown incredibly from a technical point of view when it comes to analysing my craft and abilities in retrospective. Beyond the technical expertise that I have gained from being on this masters course and from a more personally significant perspective, I have learned a lot when it comes to my interpersonal relationship skills in a professional environment. I initially wanted to apply for the Singer Songwriter course, but after nearly 12 months of working and surrounding myself with such talented people, I realised that I bring out the best in people more as a producer rather than as an artist and this genuinely brings me so much happiness. I learned that I am able to encourage people to challenge themselves as writers and singers and to always strive to be and do better. This has not only taught me that I want to excel as a producer and writer, but I also want to continue helping my colleagues achieve high levels of work.

I have learned that when it comes to choosing, I should choose to work with people that make me feel good about my skills and who help me to bring my best input to a session. I have learned to listen to people and make sure that they are comfortable when it comes to recording, whether it is singing or playing. I have learned that I have to hold the space correctly and in the most comfortable way when I work with people who do not necessarily have a lot of experience when it comes to professional music studio environments. And last but not least I have learned that I should find the balance between creating a fun but productive and efficient work environment when working with larger teams.

CONCLUSION

Making the "LEGENDARY" project has allowed me to achieve my wildest dreams as a producer. Throughout the process I have experienced a lot of situations with no precedent. It was my first time working and recording with a gospel choir. It was my first time mixing and producing group recordings. It was my first time working on music with a fashion designer. It was my first time working with someone who isn't a singer. It was my first time working with a drag queen. It was my first time recording and mixing real piano. It was my first time working with artists used to do a particular genre and pushing them into areas and genres that they had never previously experimented with. I hope that my final body of work will prove my identity as a producer and that in the history of Tileyard and hopefully the world, it will stay legendary.

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