

MA Commercial music producer

Foundation

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Word count: 2936

For this work I decided to select three completely different projects, challenging to me on different levels but mostly interesting because of the variety of musical genres implied and, even more importantly, the different types of professional approaches required based on the clients' requests. For the first track I am going to discuss, I was asked by the songwriter to bring to life a very basic demo of a song idea, composing, structuring and producing the whole record. All the client had at the time was melody, harmony and most of the lyrics. The second part of this elaborate discusses a production born entirely from a commercial brief for which I worked hand in hand with two songwriters to get to the final stages of a record that respected very specific requirements and fell right into a given genre and market sector, all on a tight timeline. The last endeavor I am going to talk about is part of a larger body of work I am currently co-producing and, differently from the other two, begins with a very structured idea where the artist have a clear vision in mind but also needs help as he intends to incorporate extra musical and aesthetic elements and perfect the sound tightening it up and getting it closer to the reference he provides.

For the record ***Go with the motion***, the artist asked for an upbeat production with positive attitude and energetic atmosphere, citing the hit *Put your records on* (2006) by English singer-songwriter Coleen Bailey Rae as a main reference. Approaching the piano and vocals demo I was originally given, I recognized some bluesy/folk traits in the melody and timbre of the lead vocal part and more specifically swung feel and the predominance of tonic and subdominant notes in the harmony. Thinking of a modern blues release I was familiar with, I went back to an album called *The new basement tapes* (2014) written off of lost Bob Dylan's old demos and brought back to life by several producers and musicians as Williams (2014) recollects in his article on the Guardian. For that process they all came together improvising over the existing parts and the spontaneity of the arrangements and compositions and the interaction the musicians have during tracking is recognizable and tangible both through the sound and the performances, as it appears clearly in the dedicated documentary (*Lost Songs: The Basement Tapes*

Continued, 2014). Coming from a background as a musician much before aspiring producer and having always made music in bands, the process of creative connection and team workflow has always fascinated me, so I started picturing a production that gave life to this particular song replicating the spirit of a group of people playing music together in a room. Unfortunately this was not a situation in which I could organically reproduce this approach because of the unavailability of a proper recording studio or an actual group of musicians. So what I tried to do was impersonating a jam with myself using specific microphone and mixing techniques together with few strategies throughout the song to implement the effect. Being one musician only, I obviously had to overdub every single instrument but I experimented with audio leakages from the playback monitors to recreate a feeling of spontaneity. I borrowed this idea from *How music dies (or live)* by American producer Ian Brennan (2016), a chronicle of several journeys to Africa where he records people or artists making music in the streets in the most genuine, authentic and unfiltered ways. In these files imperfection is key to access the core of the performance. As he explicitly tells:

A good record should place you amid the musicians, as if they are there with you. It should bring you *there*. Not as if they are specimens pressed behind glass – taxidermy, to be appreciated only from a distance. To this end, microphones can be the equivalent of lenses for camera, narrowing or lengthening the field to create a more varied and enveloping experience. (2016, p. 116)

So using this exact concept, I started the record “from the distance”, simulating in the introduction an outer point of view for the listeners with the leakages and the sound of the environment overpowering any musical elements, all in order to emphasize the effect of surrounding when the song eventually starts.

Along the same lines, I placed numerous room microphones to print on each of the instruments natural reverbs from the room for a feel of imperfection and spontaneity. I stumbled across these recording techniques studying the Motown sound and the way engineers achieved it back in the 1960s, as illustrated by Fumo and Handley for Reverb.com (2019), material I arrived to thanks to an indirect suggestion by engineer Leslie Brathweite, who, breaking down his mix for *Happy* by

Pharrell Williams (2013), talks about Motown drum tones and timbre as an important backbone for that production (Brathweite, 2019). From the very beginning in fact, *Happy* has been on my mind as an important reference for the overall feel of the production. Even if pretty distant in characteristics of genre, the songwriter mentioned an uplifting and joyful intention and I considered it an excellent starting point.

I also used some vocal cueing to fake an improvisational approach and give the listener the impression of witnessing in real time the arrangement being laid down; the effect I wanted was a scenario in which anything is possible but also all could be wrong any minute, exactly as in a live performance. I took inspiration from a detail in the big hit *Sexyback* by Justin Timberlake (2006) where producer Timbaland uses structural cues as adlibs to tie different sections up and smooth the transitions. This ploy became a trademark of this record and surely contributed to the personality of the production. I tried to replicate it in my own fashion and immediately seemed to work well. Again, instead of tracking these moments as adlibs, I shouted the cues while playing guitar so that the vocals would be tied up in the same stem and the limitation of having to mix it with the same processing would eventually make it more truthful and credible. Citing sound designer Gus Nisbet:

[...] As producers, we're easily tempted into using [...] tools to eliminate every crackle, remove every pop, and quantize every hi-hat. And that's fine for music for shopping centers, or grandma's birthday. But often this leads to sterilized caricatures of what was originally intended. The original concept - the raw idea - becomes lost, hidden beneath computerized 'perfection'. (Nisbet, 2019)

Thinking back to the process, this last concept was probably the silver lining of the whole production and laid behind every decision along the way. I reversed the psychology and asked myself, what if I start from a potentially perfect recording setting with over-dubbing, grids, in-the-box mixing and so on, and then complicate my life with restrictions and limitations to imitate a real life musical situation?

The result is, in my opinion, far away from being truthful and authentic, as I lastly had to bounce the master on tape to add some typical hissing and get some glue from the analog compression, but still, experimenting with creative approaches to

face even the smallest task made it fun for me and less digital-sounding for the artist so I definitely learnt something here.

Seconds, hours is produced off a dance commercial brief. The main reference track is a 2019 single by Belgian Dj Yves V that also features Icona Pop and Afro Jack called *We got that cool*. Listening to the record, I immediately recognized some distinctive EDM characteristics but being this the first time I approached this musical world I decided to do some research to get insights on potential specific requirements and defining characteristics. I started investigating the peculiar traits of this tracks and while I found generic house music elements and production techniques like drops, filtering transitions, pitched and sliced vocals and so on, I also paid special attention to the lead vocals' hooks and the structure verse-chorus, classically pop as suggested by author Friedemann Findeisen:

I'm sure you've already used this particular structure (verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus). And if you haven't used it, you have heard it at least a couple thousand times on the radio. (2015, p IX)

Surely the songwriting by Swedish Duo and "electro-pop sensation" (Patel, 2012) Icona Pop helped shape out the melodic structure of the production. So that's how I decided to move. After setting a bpm within the range of the genre 145-150, I programmed a simple beat with four on the floor, hi-hats on the offbeat and snare on beat two and four as commonly used and gave it to the songwriters in the session who laid down a simple chord progression and came up with a few different hooks. I then organized the whole into a cohesive structure reiterating the arrangement of the reference. At this point I realized the hook was not effective enough and I was still missing a central element that could glue together the song. I went back to researching, scrolling through the most popular Spotify playlists and I remembered the 2019 super hit *One Kiss* by Dua Lipa and Calvin Harris where hyper processed vocal chops sit on top of a powerful semi-instrumental post-chorus that gives the effect of a dynamic buildup. Also, in the breakdown masterclass of Red, producer Paul Whalley suggests that a successful pop production should have "three distinct

hooks in each section” (2020) and uses a similar processing to a sliced lead vocal clip to create a signature sound that will eventually become a trademark of the record. I started jamming around this idea and, like they did, I used some of the vocals to extract chops and build a brand new section to transform into a new hooky part. Once I laid down the key elements, I layered different synth textures to create a soundscape in which the song could sit effectively. I referred to producer Finneas’ forthright approach to incorporate sounds that reference directly the lyrical content (Pitchfork, 2020) when I thought of an outro section with big, reverbed tribal drums almost soloing over the hook. Talking to the songwriters about the meaning behind the lyrics in fact, themes like youth, freedom and even recklessness came out and I immediately pictured a rave-type of environment in which the dance culture meets up with such energetic and carefree mindsets. I started implementing the production with acid and abrasive textures, like the most common popular techno sounds and it all started to come together.

Sierra November, last project I am going to discuss, is set in a very different professional situation as the songwriter sent a completely arranged and fully written song, part of an Ep he is putting together for which I had already produced another track. For this record, he asked me to make soundscape and textures more coherent with the rest of the material but also to take some elements from a big single recently released by American rapper Travis Scott featured on the last Christopher Nolan movie *Tenet* (2020) and try to incorporate them. On this production, most of the instrumental is based around a layered bass pattern that becomes the core element; exactly that was the part the artist asked me to take and bring on board. I started with reproducing accurately what is in *The plan* (that’s the name of the reference) and became immediately clear to me that the pattern was too specific and every variation I came up with was going to face one of two problems: too similar so that it became a rip-off, or too different so that it didn’t resemble enough the reference and would eventually disappoint the client. I started then changing the texture and playing the part with different instruments to try and have the same effect but making the citation subtler. The only result I was achieving, sadly, was muddying up the arrangement. The aggressiveness and the abrasive sound also

changed the whole feel of the song so at this stage I really did not see any way this could work and I felt like at a dead end. I thought of Brian Eno's Oblique card strategy and of what he says in an interview about creative block:

Under pressure you forget all your best ideas quite often [...]. You sort of get into a rut and you think 'I've got to get finished!' and the panic sort of pushes away your observation. You're not really paying attention to what's going on. (Kelly, 2017)

So what I decided to do was approach the production from another angle leaving aside the request matter for the very moment.

The first problem I pinpointed was in the chorus: I felt that placing the hooks on a higher dynamic level in the arrangement was an absolute necessity. In doing so, I brushed off mixing engineer Bobby Osinski's analysis method (2006), characterized by the distinction between five different architectural elements: foundation, pad, rhythm, lead and fills. In these optics the chorus was missing foundation (identified by the author commonly with drums and bass) and pad (synth or guitar textures) to sound like the more complete and full-on section of the record. I decided to keep the percussive layers of the original demo since I reckoned they made a good part of the personality of the song but I dug up the same drum sound pallet I used for the previous production I had worked on and started experimenting with programming. I had built a sample pack inspired by the hybrid percussive textures on *Blonde* by Frank Ocean (2016), an album I know very dear and close to the artist. Once I was happy with the general feel and the pulse of the new part, I introduced acoustic guitar, again, to recall the aesthetics of the other song and complete the arrangement architecture. At this point what I was now missing was the low end. I tried again with the Travis Scott bass pattern hoping this time in a better result, but again too complex configurations were just making everything confused. To make it easier and to keep the focus on the lead vocals I decided to use a linear bass sine wave, with lots of sub content but weak from the midrange onwards so that it only filled up the part of the spectrum I needed it to. Finally everything started to sound cohesive now so I built an intro and made some space in the verses to create dynamic contrast within the structure. At this point I wasn't satisfied with how the

song ended and finally I understood that the part I was desperately trying to fit in could be a section of its own that brought the song somewhere else. I worked hard on the transition to make it sound natural and organic, referencing a record by Frank Ocean named *Nights* (2016), again out of *Blonde*, where the use of reverbs, feedback and processed tails of the instruments create a limb that comforts and guide the listener into the radical change that is about to happen. I also started introducing new spaces through reverb and then worked with filters to enhance dynamic contrasts.

Only once the parts fell into each other effectively I started experimenting on the outro with sounds and synthetic textures. Like Grammy Award winning producer James Ryan Ho (better known as Malay) explains in a Mix with Masters workshop series (2020), ‘hiding’ a part, making the listener feel it more than hear it, prints it into the subconscious and becomes a strategy to ‘trick’ the listener into familiar sounding territory if brought back clearer. So to glue the whole record even more, I took the pattern in the outro and reimagined it for the first verse in terms of mixing, getting rid of the acid high end and only keeping the feel and presence of the lows. Now, when the new section kicks in during the outro it won’t give the impression of coming out of the blue anymore, but it will recall an unknown, buried memory from only a few minutes ago.

Having sorted out the main compositional concerns and having made sure the client was happy with my problem solving, I went on fixing the overall soundscape and the work left to be done was now in mixing.

During this written work, it has been very interesting to me to reflect on these three different experiences and realize how every project potentially requires a different flexibility in approach. As each one of them began from different production stages and with completely different aims and objectives, the challenges I encountered stimulated various areas within my skillset of producer, artist and also, I would say most importantly, collaborator. Even more than briefs, the person or people involved in the process influenced the way I proceeded and pretty much every single decision I made along the way. More than satisfying the requirements and indulging my personal taste, I was concerned with making the artists happy with

the final products and effective communication was absolute key in understanding the needs and clearing things out for and with them. As producer Kenny Beats says repeatedly in one of his popular weekly streams (2020), being a producer is about making the song better and everyone involved in the process is contributing to the exact same cause. It is important to acknowledge and respect the work the artists put in, even if sometimes this means working around problems and personal visions and ideas.

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