

Commercial Music Producer

Creation, ADAD7004_LON

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Intro

Continuing from my proposal, I would say that my planning was a success. I completed the concept album with Cojo - who was extremely happy with the result - and I was able to hit the majority of my targets and areas of development. Sadly, in some songs I had more input in mixing rather than recording due to distance as well as Covid restrictions, however for the most part I had admission in the production as well as the mixing and mastering.

For this essay I wrote my personal development plan before anything else in order for me to have set goals for the totality of the project. I will start with the personal development plan, followed by a brief touch on the writing process of each song and the meanings behind them; then I will go further into detail about technical approaches and methods for producing, mixing and mastering the album. Finally, I shall end this paper with a conclusion on how the approaches that I have studied increased my skills and enhanced my knowledge; highlighting any evaluations where necessary.

Personal development

My first target is something that I've wanted to do ever since I started creating music and that is to produce a concept album from scratch. Normally in my career so far I have produced and mixed only singles for artists, or only mixed small EPs instead of dealing with the writing process, pre and post-production. This time around I want to have a large role in both sides of production so that I can influence an innovative body of work. Rather than this goal having a set time, it will be more so throughout the entirety of the project. For example, when coming to working with Cojo face to face in Romania (in May/June) I will be making the beats myself and then I shall be mixing and mastering the album at home (in July). Challenges that I could face with this would be for example me producing, as well as mixing a whole album. Professionally this doesn't happen a lot, normally there would be one or more producers and then the mixing engineer to mix - possibly another engineer to master as well. Despite this I still wanted to challenge myself for the project so I could learn more about all of the elements of

production. Something I've put in place to make sure that I'm on the right track and am not overwhelmed will be to have another producer/engineer working on the album as well, just in case I make any anomalies in the mixing/mastering side of things. He will be based in Romania and will have full access to the studios in which Cojo and I will be working at and also will be working closely alongside Cojo for anything that needs to be done when I'm in the UK.

Another goal which I wanted to achieve was to have a contrast of highly detailed production behind certain songs in the album, along with more of a minimalistic approach to other tracks; where it will focus on the vocals rather than the beat itself. At first I saw it as a simple task, but then I didn't think about obstacles such as Cojo's opinion and if what he will want will be similar to the ideas in which I produce. Communication skills will be on top form for us both in order to understand each other and so that I can perceive what would work best for his vision of every song. Due to the tracks being rapped, it makes my target easy in a sense because, for example, some songs will only need looped drums and one or two synthesizers just to keep the beat going. Cojo's style is unique and also he can speak quite fast at times, meaning that there is going to be space needed for his vocals anyway. Similar to most of these goals, they will be set throughout the making of the album.

I wish to learn and study more in depth producing methods in post-production such as parallel compression. I'm aware that this example is used to glue all of the elements together and have used this technique before, but I would like to revisit this amongst many other techniques in the latter of production to see if going over methods in greater detail will help to make my mix clearer in any way. The only issue I'll have with this target is time because the songs need to be finished before I can start mixing/mastering. Being as my aim is to have everything written, recorded and ready for mixing for the start of July, I'll only have three weeks to further my knowledge in the skills of my choosing (which takes time and dedication), as well as mixing and mastering the album. Time management will help me to stick to this target.

Following on from production methods, I also want to experiment more with different plugins and effects. I feel as though this concept album is going to have songs that require an abstract and heavy influence that match Cojo's style. For this I know already that I am going to use effects such as distortion, chorus and flanging to create dark and interesting soundscapes. Applying these effects to the album in great numbers may lose the commercial aspect of certain songs, however I don't think as though Cojo is looking for major success at this point in time with this album. Saying that however, not every song will have the same amount of experimenting done to the production, so the singles may very well be left as they are, but of course it depends on what Cojo wants. Experimenting with plugins will be something that I do in the sessions to design instrumentation and in mixing I shall use it to enhance the sounds that they create.

Vocal production is something that I know I will have to touch on. Mainly because I want Cojo's voice to sound as best as possible and due to his low, aggressive tone, I am going to have study what mics to use for his type of timbre. I intend to research bands from the heavy metal/death metal scene and see the approach that engineers go about when recording the vocalists. This will be done as soon as possible in order for me to be well prepared for my first session of the album this coming month. The only difficulties from this target will be deciding on one mic that we like the sound of, and hopefully having access to one in the studio in which we record in. Solving this matter would simply be finding the most perfect microphone that suits Cojo's voice - which my research will cover - as well as communicating with the other producer which microphones we will have access to, so that we don't waste time.

Attributable to this project being an entire album full of Cojo's influences, I want to learn different styles of production to match his diverse skill in rapping. This will come from me researching new genres such as UK Grime, Garage, Dub-Step and Drum and Bass. Like with my knowledge on microphones and vocal production, I will need to examine these styles before my first session with Cojo. Learning off of other producers/artists will be beneficial not only for this target, but it will also enhance my production skills as a whole. I will attempt to find videos

and interviews from successful producers, or even just listen to music, which will aid me to achieve this goal. Troubles I may face would be clash of ideas in songs, but like the majority of these targets, good communication with the artist and the other producer will help us to create an amazing piece of art. Similarly to this, I will also be learning from well renowned producers/engineers (including YouTube-famous engineers) and using their style/techniques for post-production skills that will demonstrate the depth of research and improved skill behind my work.

Meanings Behind Songs and the Writing Process

The album covers a wide range of themes. From serious songs about problems that people face in their daily lives, to love songs, to comedic 'diss tracks', to personal songs about Cojo's life. Understanding the meanings behind each track I felt would help my production to correspond with his ideas. This could range from choice of instrumentation, to choice of certain effects used (such as distortion), for example, a more aggressive tone. Diving in as deep as this was fundamental in my opinion because I wanted to delve into Cojo's world as much as possible, so that I could enhance his vision.

1. Assault:

During the first session with Cojo, I found myself already practising new ways in which to beat-make and communicate with artists. After watching Timbaland's Masterclass (masterclass.com, 2021) on the flight, I asked Cojo how he imagined the first song (which he'd already written lyrics for) would sound and asked him to beatbox his perception of 'Assault'. I recorded him mouthing the sounds and then built the instrumentation up from there, filling his recorded, mouthed beat with proper drums throughout the session. This method was a perfect way in which we communicated in order to achieve the best outcome for his vision. He practically had the song already written, I simply just put the track on paper and then added my own style to the instrumentation to make an overall successful song for the project. Due to the intensity of the song, I was inspired by Slipknot (Spotify, 2021) to create some heavy textures and production for the beat whilst maintaining the

Grime influence in this track. Matching the style from 'Eyeless' but replacing the heavy, distorted guitars with a bass highlighted this influence. I wanted to get the same level of aggressiveness in my instrumental because I knew it would suit Cojo's voice perfectly. Considering that this would be the first track in the song we wanted the listener to be taken by surprise from the start, resulting in them being intrigued to listening to the rest of the project.

Originally the beat itself was slightly repetitive, meaning that I had to add elements every other 8 bars in the intro and verses to create variation. Introducing this approach resulted 'Assault' in being one of the most interesting tracks production and beat-wise. I also changed key from the intro into the rest of the song to highlight the drop when Cojo starts rapping. Here I took inspiration from 'rockstar' (Spotify, 2021) by Post Malone where the intro to the song does the exact same thing. The transition is emphasised even more with the help of the 808 glide right before the first chorus. Decisions were made regarding the unusual structure due to the verse section of this song being 32 bars long. Not including a second verse we felt was okay due to the first verse basically being double the amount of any normal rap section (16 bars). Another inspiration I studied from was Illangelo's sound selection on The Weeknd's 'The Hills' (Spotify, 2021). Right at the start there is a loud, distorted bass which inspired me to have the same sort of opening to this song. Again, this was done not only as an epic opening to the project but also as a foreshadowing of the tone of the track. Particularly in this field of music, I found the heavily distorted bass was an excellent way to build tension and anticipation for the drop. After listening and studying Illangelo's production I can safely say that his work influenced the process of writing this project.

2. Abrasive:

Similarly to the first song, this track is very aggressive but is more minimalistic in the instrumental. Purposefully, I did this so that the listener can pay attention to the lyrics - which is a call and response between Cojo and people who express hatred towards his music for being out of the ordinary. Specifically in this song he wanted people to listen to what he was saying, this is why I kept the beat simplistic and undeviating.

This song doesn't really have a structure, it just flows from one section of the track to the other. No two sections repeat the exact same way and there is no chorus. Inspired by Illangelo again, I used his quote: "Don't look at things so structurally. You want to feel like you're in this world...captivated." (Mix with the Masters, 2021) in order to justify my choice of not really having a structure. I did what just felt right and Cojo was happy with the result.

3. Block the Noise:

In contrast with the previous track, 'Block the Noise' is a very serious song addressing severe issues such as family abuse, rape, discrimination and other intense topics. Musically, this was represented through very dark sounding instruments (such as the low pitched vocals and muffled synths). Not surprisingly there was an influence in this track from Heavy Metal too. I utilised guitars and automated the volume of the repeated baseline to give an almost mantra, but also Jaws Theme-type feel to disturb the listener. Equivalently to 'Abrasive', the beat is kept conservative for the purpose of leaving space for the listener to focus on the lyrics. Saying this however, certain sound effects that morph between vocal screams and synthesisers appear every now and then to keep the listener enticed to the song. FINNEAS' production on 'bury a friend' (YouTube, 2020) influenced this, as well as to have a constant kick with side-chain on to keep a pulse within the rhythm. I wanted this track to feel very "close" to the headphones, especially the vocals just like in the Bille Eilish's number one hit. I kept the vocals dry and copied the sinister production, such as using screeches, to underline the dark topics which Cojo was referring to. Without the inspiration from FINNEAS I would never have created this song. His effective way of keeping things minimalistic whilst maintaining a groove and real bounce stimulated the making of Abrasive, not to mention the sound effect ideas. When writing songs that cover a certain darkness I will definitely use this production/writing technique again.

4. Andante

Andante was interesting because we wanted to remake the song Sleaze (Shades, Ivy Lab, Alix Perez and Eprom) with added lyrics. We loved the instrumental but

wanted to make it our own. With inspiration from the song Supersonic (Spotify, 2021), I wanted to have a similar rhythmic beat with further DubStep characteristics. The production elements are similar to the first track due to the highly aggressive nature of Cojo's voice.

Admittedly with 'Andante', after listening now, there is a major flaw in the song... It is too harsh-sounding. Everything is too crisp and it seems as if the instruments are fighting to be heard. The over cluttered sounds make it my least favourite track. If I would have had more time to go back and mix this then I would have, unfortunately there just wasn't enough time to revisit the song. Researching this issue further on how to avoid the problem for next time will help me for the future. It is apparent that my time management skills could have been better in terms of mixing and mastering for this song.

When coming to writing a track like this again (which I most certainly intend on doing) I will explore thoroughly more techniques for creating DubStep. After listening to this genre for a fair few hours I noticed that the mixing of the drums, bass and vocals are immaculate. Everything sounds crisp but in the most perfect way possible. This I feel will be my next big step in learning how to develop my mixing skills further due to the quality of the sonic elements in these styles of songs.

5. The Cult One, 6 - The Bear and The Glis & 7. No Sleep

Unfortunately, due to me being in the UK for the sessions of these songs, I was not able to record the female rapper for track 5, nor Cojo for any of songs 5-7 and wasn't a large part of the writing process either. I did however have input with the instrumentation and drum selection due to Cojo wanting these tracks to be UK-sounding. Here I took influence from Maxsta (YouTube, 2019) and learned that how he produced Grime drums was firstly starting with samples from Native Instruments. After that he would add different harmonic sections with percussive elements in order for the beat to keep that bounce which Grime tracks have, whilst providing extra flavour to the loops of the song. The expansion packs from Native Instruments such as London Grit and Lockdown Grind enhanced my ability to replicate these UK genres and using effects such as Torque from Waves allowed me to craft the original grime sound and shift the tone into something that

was completely my own, and further more fitted in perfectly with each song. Starting from the inspiration from Maxsta and listening to music from artists such as Wiley (Spotify, 2021), Skepta (Spotify, 2021) and Kano deepened my understanding of Grime and pushed me even more into Cojo's vision. You hear these continued influences even in, for example, the bass on track 6 where there is a heavily Grime-infused bass to feed the listener with pure nostalgia.

8. Transformers

This song is probably the most repetitive beat wise. As a result of this, in post production I had to ensure that different effects, such as filters, were added to bring diversity to the track. Drum breaks were included and cutting the beat out at times were made for emphasis of the lyrics - as well as making the track not sounding like an endless loop. Production wise I would say that this is one of my least favourite tracks just due to it not really having a lot of movement, nor variation in the instrumentation. This was done purposefully because Cojo wanted it to sound like that, so I could not argue with him.

9. 6 AM & 10. I Keep Holding Back

Both of these songs are more melodic than the rest due to their slower pace and emotional vocal topics. They both talk about love which meant that there was a much less aggressive tone to the whole production. Once again, I took note from Illangelo, when producing The Weeknd's Starboy album (Spotify, 2021), because the album starts with aggressive songs and slowly develop into happier numbers, offering new sounds and an interesting contrast. My project does the same, however, rather than being happy, the songs at the end more so have a change in tone, pace and possess a personal touch from Cojo lyrically.

Mixing/Mastering

Kicks

My favourite EQs to use for the kick drum are the PuigTec EQP1A and the PuigTec MEQ5 from Waves, where in both the user can really shape the sonics of the kick. Particularly, I like how the PuigTec EQP1A affects the low-end, especially

in the 30 to 60Hz range and when using the 'boost' knob in combination with the 'attenuation' knob, I manage to obtain a very unique curve that helps me achieve a well defined low-end. When using this plugin, I watched producer Sean Divine (YouTube, 2019) explain how to add more punch to a kick drum and give it more clarity by using the PuigTec EQs from Waves. I incorporated his techniques directly into the mixing for these songs, even more so where the kicks needed further punch in - for example the aggressive songs like Abrasive. This trick gave such a clear improvement to the "umph" of the kick and I am going to continue using this method in my future projects. Sometimes I gave the kicks extra power by utilising the Supercharger GT from Native Instruments. It allows an extension of three different types of compression, saturation and character that enables me to sculpt the sound in so many different ways until I have the right balance for my track.

Additionally, incorporating transient shapers increased my mix of the kick drum to either make it slam harder, or to make it more gentle. Studying Focus' implementation of SmackAttack from Waves (Youtube, 2018) demonstrated the amount of control that this plugin offers me; whether that be from choosing the duration and shape of the attack and release, to deciding the sensitivity of the effect. With SmackAttack I looked over Dave Darlington's (YouTube, 2018) tutorial which really helped me to achieve the healthy balance of getting my kick to cut through the mix very nicely, without it being too piercing.

Occasionally I added a limiter as well in order to give my kick drum even more strength. Usually, I gravitate towards using the L1+ Ultramaximizer from Waves because it allows me to choose the domain. For example, if I would like my kick to sound very harsh, I would select the digital option, whereas if I would like it to sound slightly warmer, I would pick the analog one instead. Lastly, I almost always make use of parallel compression whenever I want my kick to be really punchy. My go-to option for parallel compression is the CLA-76 compressor from Waves because of its unique 'all' ratio function. Using that option enables me to obtain a "brickwall" type compression, which makes the click of the kick stand out in the mix more.

Snare

I used the Renaissance Axx compressor from Waves often when mixing the snares in this project to make them brighter and more present. Devon Terrell's video (YouTube, 2018) helped me an exceedingly large amount when I wanted to adjust the brightness of all the snares and percussion. When using reverb for snares my favourites are: Raum from Native Instruments, Pro-R from FabFilter and Valhalla Room from Valhalla DSP. I usually go with medium size reverb for snares, however sometimes I like snares or claps completely dry (for example in "The Cult One" or "Transformers" songs).

Hi-Hats

The Pro-Q 3 EQ from FabFilter was used when mixing to isolate the frequencies that I wanted to keep, as well as impinging filters to remove certain frequencies that were unnecessary. Usually with hi-hats everything that is below 700Hz to 1kHz is completely unneeded and by removing those frequencies I could carve out some space for the other instruments to provide me with more capacity in the mix.

Bass

I mostly used bass sounds from Massive and Massive X because I like the futuristic, dark sounds that they provide which coincides perfectly with the atmosphere of this project. Occasionally, I downloaded bass samples from Splice and I put them in a sampler as well to obtain a modern, industry standard production. In terms of processing, I frequently added the Imager from iZotope just to ensure that my low end is in mono (everything below 140Hz). After this process, I would then use compression to sustain the sound a little bit more. Usually, if I have a medium attack and a fast release, I will end up with a nicely sustained tail from each individual bass note. Additionally with the snares and percussion I also used the Renaissance Bass from Waves to increase the low end of my bass by adding harmonics to it. Alternatively, I sometimes preferred LoAir from Waves instead, especially when I tried adding harmonics below 90Hz due to its unique 'align' feature - which aligns the original sound signal with the new artificially created one - that subsequently results in having a very warm and smooth sub bass sound. At times I supplemented with the Bass Rider plugin from

Waves to ensure that all of the bass notes were equally loud without having to automate them manually. This proved most useful when I was running out of time in the last week to finish the songs.

After I completed editing the sounds for each bass, I sent the signal to an aux track where I applied further processing. The reason why I did this is because it offers me more control when coming to blending the two sound sources. On the aux track I used the EQ to get rid of the low end. Generally, I only keep the low mids and everything that is above that frequency, then apply a slight amount of distortion to it. This helps to enhance the mid frequencies of my bass, making it audible on normal speakers that are unable to play back low information (for example laptop speakers, phone speakers.) Finally, I added a utility Gain plugin to invert the phase of the signal, which makes my bass sound extremely wide. In the end, I'd combine the signal from the aux track with the original one and then tweak it to my taste.

Instrumentation

Exciters like Infected Mushroom Pusher from Waves & the Ozone 9 Exciter from iZotope and Neutron 3 Exciter from iZotope were all used on different instruments in the songs to make them sound brighter and more present and upfront in the mix. I also incorporated stereo spreading from the plugins S1 from Waves, Imager from iZotope and Vitamin from Waves in order to keep low information close to mono, and for the high information to spread admirably. I was taught by Yoad Nevo (YouTube, 2014) to use stereo spreading plugins on instrumentation to also leave room in the middle for the main elements of the song, such as the lead vocals, kick, snare and bass.

Gullfoss from Soundtheory (dynamic EQ) was used to obtain the most clear sound with four easy controls: recover, tame, bias and brighten. Automatically, it adjusts where and how much it needs to cut or boost frequencies in order to achieve the desired outcome. After revising the In The Mix video (YouTube, 2020), I was amazed and inspired to work with this particular equaliser due to its immense clarity and easy use. Practising the methods as shown helped to bring out the perfect frequencies of a sound that I had perhaps lost, or overlooked whilst covering the poor sounding ones.

Effects:

1. Distortion - The main three distortion plugins which I used for this project were Thermal from Output, Dirt from Native Instruments and Decapitator from Soundtoys. All of the aggressive tones required at least one if not more of these effects to construct the heavy sonic elements in the mix. Thermal is extremely complex and it can do a lot more than just distortion. Throughout the songs, I found myself adding effects such as chorus, flangers and phasers to make certain instruments unique, while at the same time giving a lot of depth to them. In 'Assault' I used Thermal from Output on the main lead synth in the chorus to saturate it to the extreme and to make the instrument sound dirty and aggressive. Another thing I like about Thermal is that it has the 'stages' function. Adding saturation with this unique feature to only certain frequencies helps to require the sound that was to my taste. Decapitator I use mostly when I want to strengthen any instruments.
2. Sequencers - Experimenting with Step FX allowed certain drums and instruments in my tracks to completely become new, eccentric, rhythmic patterns and filtered sounds with just two clicks. This was done in the verse section of 'Assault'. The main synth in 'Assault' was originally a violin from the Native Instruments Symphony Series, which I processed using various effects such as Drip from Kyle Beats (so that it sounded like a synth) to give it a rhythmic pattern.
3. Filters - I used these to cut out certain frequencies (again, for example the verse section of 'Assault') in order to have contrasting sections so that the loops would sound less repetitive (masterclass.com, 2021). On occasion, the filter was also used to create a dampened sound and then when the chorus kicks back in, it's bright again.
4. MicroShift from Soundtoys - This allowed my sounds to feel wider whilst adding a slight chorus effect (which was great for guitars). I took influence from another tutorial (puremix.net, 2021) which demonstrated how to correctly operate this method.

Conclusion

When in reference to the start of this project, I will say that the concept album was mostly a success. As previously explained in the introduction, Cojo was happy with the end result and was glad to have my input throughout his vision. My targets more or less were all hit, I have improved myself as a producer and also know where I have gone wrong in certain aspects of my work in this assignment. Goals in my personal development plan not only gave me a chance to improve and refine individual sets of skills in my production, but it also provided me with guidance and a reference to revert back to during the production processes; in order for me to gain what I truly wanted to achieve, whilst making music that I love.

As with any work there were still improvements to be done and things that I'd change for next time. One of these matters was out of my hands due to Covid-19 restrictions. It wasn't easy to return to Romania for more sessions with Cojo, which regrettably, resulted in me not being able to be a part of every session. This had a knock on effect when post-producing mainly because the process in which Cojo's voice was recorded wasn't done to my standards. Small things which could have been avoided, such as sorting the proximity effect on some of the vocal tracks, delayed my time for songs to be revised and adjusted in further depth as I'd have hoped. Despite me blaming the Covid restrictions, I am still to blame partially as well for not organising my time to a better degree. One thing that I need to focus on when having another deadline for a project will be my time management. Perhaps having a calendar with goals for each week will aid me in the future.

Regardless to some of these issues that I had, the main two parts that I'll take from the project are that the the work I was producing for was well received and I learned lots of my own craft along the way.

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