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Element C1A: Creation Proposal

**The Proposed Creative And Compositional
Approach Behind “The Yes Man”**

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INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

The outbreak of Coronavirus in the United Kingdom in March 2020, and the dramatic cultural and social shift that accompanied it, changed my artistic perspective profusely. Instead of relying on other performers to get the best out of my work (as my musical projects at the time revolved around in-person rehearsals and discussions), I needed to rely on myself to be composer, performer, and producer. Such a sudden shift to digital learning and collaboration, according to Professor Riccardo Schulz, resulted in the role of the sound engineer shifting to primarily resolving DAW issues for those ‘not tech-minded’ or unable to make ‘sonically-acceptable recordings on their own’, myself included (Zaremba, 2020). But with tutelage grew independence, and the newfound knowledge that many artists had learned germinated a renaissance in grassroots music-making through the rise of the DIY studio, and subsequently in Lo-fi music-making (MasterClass, 2021). Rolling stone reports on how, in just the first few weeks of the UK’s initial national lockdown, Google searches for Apple’s DAW GarageBand increased by 55%, and year-on-year searches for people purchasing MIDI keyboards rose by 171% in 2020 (Hisson, 2020). Commensurately, according to Google Analytics, the rise in people listening to, and quickly indulging in jazz chords and hip-hop beats, has never been higher globally (meaning that a gap in the market still remains to be exploited) (Google Trends, 2022)¹. “‘Out of crisis,” Rob Jaczko reminds us, “artists rise to the occasion”” (Zaremba, 2020).

Underpinned by Wendy Fonarow, *Lower-Fidelity* music-making explores the authentic experience of music creation, its sonic imperfections ‘protested... against the church of mainstream music’ (2006, p.28). This is a sentiment also expressed by British Torch Song writer Eloise Alexandra Lamb (Eloise), being separated from her producer Bruno Major while quarantining in the south of France². Eloise laments how that only ‘when the world ground to a halt’, and mainstream music-making was out on hold, did she have ‘enough time to sit with the feelings and indulge in them’ (Michael Bialis, 2021). With this in mind, and as a vocalist myself, I began developing my beat-making, jazz standards and topline writing, synthesising them into what would become my artistic USP. Part of my

¹ Data has been gathered from a year before the United Kingdom’s implementation of the first national lockdown, to compare levels of listenership in Lo-Fi Music pre, during and post-COVID. Though listenership has shown signs of plateauing since March of this year, with a downwards trajectory projected, the fact remains that listenership has never been higher than in 2022, compared to 2019, 2020 and 2021.

² Merriam-Webster defines “Torch Song” as ‘a popular sentimental song of unrequited love’.

Foundation term portfolio tested how well I had implemented this thesis. The subsequent track in question – *Vicinity* (top lined by alto Gemma Barnes) – was widely applauded, being praised for ‘[e]verything from the vocal styling and mixing, production and instrumentation choice... Not only [did] it work in regard to the references provided... it could stand alongside the references in regard to song writing and composition’ (Moodle, 2022). The success of this track, both in an academic and creative sense, gave me the necessary drive to continue in this field, expanding it into my own work as an independent artist, rather than merely a producer. In this essay, therefore, I aim to detail the goals, objectives, and methodology behind the approach (both creatively and compositionally) to my debut EP “The Yes Man”.

“The Yes Man” (a seven track EP acting as my debut release on worldwide streaming services) will function as my Creation Term final project, with a soundscape directly inspired by London Lo-Fi and Torch Singers including Tom Misch, Eloise and Major. The collection will contain 6 original track and a single cover, with the cover being based off of Nat King Cole’s “A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square” (Spotify, 1961). Not only were jazz standards a large part of my vocal background when growing up, but precedent still exists for contemporaries to include a cover in their breakthrough work. For example, Major’s “A Song For Every Moon” includes a cover of the jazz standard *Like Someone In Love*, and Misch’s “Geography” contained a reduced cover of Stevie Wonder’s *Isn’t (sic) She Lovely* (Major: 2017; Misch, 2018). In the case of the latter, “Pop Matters” goes as far as to argue that, covering your influences ‘in-plain-sight’ showed perception and wisdom ‘beyond [Misch’s] years’ (Schiller, 2018); a recognisable song in the public’s conscience helps to ground said album in relevancy, allowing the audience to compare the new stylings of performance and composition to the old directly.

Though the project will holistically retain the key Lo-Fi traits previously mentioned, variation will be brought into the project with the inclusion of two purely piano-based ballads, *A Change Of View* and *I Really Hope You’re Happy*. Throughout the process I will be releasing demo versions of the seven proposed tracks on SoundCloud, to gauge feedback from not only the public, but to send off to Tileyard-based producers, marketers and A&R heads met throughout the duration of my masters. This process has already begun, with early builds of both aforementioned tracks up on SoundCloud: available for public consumption and commentary.

OBJECTIVES AND BENCHMARKS FOR SUCCESS

Having clear objectives in knowing what I want to achieve from this project will be vital, especially as said project pertains to my future artistic and career-based goals. Therefore, any delineations for the success of “The Yes Man” made in this section must be considered through the guise of an already agreed upon Personal Development Programme (PDP) for myself as an artist, a quantifiably proven benefit in students when doing any form of large-scale project (Davis et al, 2011). A SWOT analysis of my areas of both praise and development, including an already undertaken PDP with Tileyard Education pastoral lead Oli Fisher can be found in Appendix A1 and A2. A pairing of the two allows for quantifiable benefits to be made from qualitative self-analysis (Helms 2010). The most important factor for my own development when going into this project, qualitatively at least, will be maintaining a sense of perspective throughout its duration. Perfectionism has always been a struggle for me, and one of the primary reasons why I have not formally released any music for mainstream listening purposes. Taking on a harmonically based Lo-Fi project such as this one, however, may work to alleviating this weakness. The appeal towards, and the comfort in, producing and writing for a genre that (from its own definition) demands imperfection and challenges the conventional status quo, alleviates those preconceptions immediately. Due to its foundation in Jazz, originally a fully-improvised medium going back to its routes, any wrong chords – any sense of “amateurism” can also be merely considered ‘performance imperfections’ (Harper, 2014).

Though this project will allow me to develop as an artist and force me to take that first step out of my comfort zone, clear quantitative markers for success still need to be made for “The Yes Man” to aspire to. To that extent, when finishing my application for the second round of the NextGen Youth Fund pool at the start of 2022, I was required to give at least four markers for achievement for this project upon its completion. Though unsuccessful in gaining funding from them on this occasion, conducting this exercise allowed me to hone in on quantifiable benchmarks for success both in the short and long term, even when this project was in its germination phase. These include but are not limited to: providing a platform for myself beyond that of live performances; amassing ten thousand streams in the first six months; provide me with performance opportunities; and will allow me to look for full-time management representation. Though beyond the word count of this essay to do, more detail about how I will achieve these objectives can be found in my accompanying

application videos linked in Appendices B1 and B2. Furthermore, a preliminary timeline outlining how I will complete this project in, and a following timeline outlining the way in which I will promote the EP can be analysed in Appendices C1 and C2³.

³ As the project fully unfolds, these timelines are indubitably going to experience change. The timeline presented in C2 was initially created back in January 2022 and was made before the knowledge of our creative term deadlines. I have tried my best to accommodate both timelines into one concurrent narrative.

CONTEMPORARY REVIEW AND PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Other than in track production, in which I must produce the outright majority for the purpose of the assessment, questions are raised about the creative decisions I will make in the development of this project. Upon analysing both my contemporaries and my sonic inspirations, two opposing schools of thought and approach to composition took shape: that of fully independent artists, and that of artists based around collaboration, including in label representation. Major and Eloise primarily sit in the first of these two dichotomies. Major himself, in an interview with Pickup Music, acknowledges that the level of individuality and independence given in performance and composition must also be given off stage:

‘You have to do everything yourself... I was always looking for my Robert Plant to my Jimmy page... I never found that guy. I realised that if I wanted to be a musician... I was gonna (sic) have to do it myself. I started writing the songs myself, I started singing myself... produced it myself... you’ll have to find your thing because no one else is going to do it for you’ (2:49-3:42)

In keeping with this statement, the majority of his first studio album “A Song For Every Moon” credits Major as the principle or sole producer, performer or writer (Spotify, 2017)⁴. Major’s consistent release through AWAL (Artists Without A Label) and the founding of his own management company in 2020 (“Harbour Artists & Music”) resolidifies Major’s drive for independence. With that said, the workload needed to execute all these factors remains high and, when considering the timeframe for this project, may be too much on my own, although Dennis Beentjes (2021) claims that the modern music producer works on several activities, in multiple different mediums, simultaneously. More subjectively, however, doing this project myself (with no assistance in either song writing or production) may merely exacerbate some of my weaknesses mentioned in my SWOT analysis. While the weaker of the two approaches in my opinion, the benefits in holding creative control – and all the potential monetary benefits – are appealing.

⁴ The only exception to this is aforementioned over of *Like Someone In Love*, but even in this example Major is the sole performer and the principle producer. Spotify will be used throughout this essay when giving credit details, as it is the largest and most widely used music streaming company to disclose them.

By contrast, contemporaries such as Conor Albert and Canadian progressive jazz pianist Nico Dupuis (henceforth referred to by his stage name Anomalie) rely on maximum collaboration to complete their personal musician projects in. Albert, a multi-instrumentalist and producer, regularly relies on singers to top line over his beats to bring them to life, and though Albert retains a less profitable share of the track's income (having to share credits with his topliners), this break up in workload has allowed him to be comparatively more competitive and productive than his contemporaries. From 2020 to 2022, Albert released double the track count than Major did on tracks that he was the primary artist on (twenty, to Major's 10 [Spotify, 2022]). This was most recently heard in Albert and James Smith's single *Crescent Moon*, in which Wordplay Magazine incidentally praised it for its 'stunning amalgamations of contrasting song writing styles', and noted as one of Albert's 'most soulful moments to date' (Lindsay, 2021). Meanwhile, Anomalie goes so far as to advertise not only his complete list of gear used in recordings on his website but allows fans and budding producers to purchase a list of his custom-made synths. For example, the first of two lead-single (*Dribble*) for his most recent album "Galerie" clearly uses custom OB-Xd patches to create the tracks melody line, custom patches which are available on his website for \$9.99, to keep both fans and budding musicians retained and engaged with his work (Anomalie, n.d.).

These interconnections between artists however, on top of the means to possess the budget necessary for home recording on such a professional scale, only came along with the artists signing with a record label: as of 2021 and 2022 respectively, Albert is now an artist with Young Poet, and Anomalie is provided for by Netzwerk Records, boosting their budgets and collaborative reach considerably (Record of the day, 2021; Putnam, 2022). Not only is the budget to access such equipment outside of the suggested remits of this Creative Term project, but is higher than any budget that would be expected for an unsigned musicians debut set of works, a clear advantage to label representation (Rory Taylor, 2010). A commensurately larger budget, moreover, brings their projects further and further away from the Lo-Fi DIY roots in which they started from. If a similar collaborative approach is taken then, especially when releasing my debut work, it would need to be on a significantly lower budget, harkening back to the functional roots of Lo-Fi itself.

With an analysis of both approaches in mind, the methodology behind the creation of "The Yes Man" will act as a synthesis in approaches: a simplistic and consistent soundscape

will be kept throughout the EP (brought in part by a constricted budget), but collaboration will be required in areas that I am knowingly weaker in, and advice will be sought after by all industry professionals that I have met at Tileyard (to take advantage of the connections while I have them). For example, songwriters such as Rachel Hill, who I have written with in the past, and is knowingly lyrically erudite, will be brought on to help germinate lyrical idea for me to top line. A combination of my skills in advanced harmony and Hill's in lyricism compliment perfectly, remedying not only one of the weaknesses I highlighted in my SWOT report, but achieving multiple focused objectives set out in my PDP targets.

Diaphragm condenser microphones such as the Warm Audio 87 will be used for top line vocals, to cut through the predominantly bass-heavy nature of typical Lo-Fi backing tracks. These will be double-tracked, pitch shifted and panned with subtle latency (techniques that Major uses most clearly on his track *Easily*), and strong esses will be deliberately kept in the vocals, in a nod to the DIY recording values underpinned by this project. Backing vocals will be recorded on a Shure SM7B, functioning as a harmonic pad that homorhythm piano chords and solo lines will be playing over the top of. Community pages – such as the Reddit page “r/DrumKits” – will be used to source drum samples, in the style of traditional Lo-Fi artists, though required drum sounds not available on public forums will be recorded in Tileyard's underground studio (Reddit, n.d.). Demos of songs will not only be available online for people who follow my social media accounts to listen to and comment on early, but also made available to my industry mentor Goetz Botzenhardt, who has been profusely helpful with mixing and general production advice. Additionally, while money is tight (as highlighted previously) applications have been made to three separate financing pools to help both studio costs and promotional costs incurred throughout this project's creation. With the help of resident Tileyard producer Sean Hargreaves, group Piano and String Quartet recording sessions have been made with students who require similar technical services in the main studio to minimise cost for all involved. Fianlly, personal connections have been made in the last year with Woods Lodge Studios in Battlesbridge, with the lead producer admiring my social media presence and being ‘always happy to offer deals’ on mixing and mastering costs. Taking this opportunity would quell another weakness present in my SWOT analysis and would ring down costs further on mixing and mastering individual tracks.

CONCLUSIONS:

When comparing the scope of this project to the precedent for success I have had as a masters student in this genre already, I am more than confident in my ability to not only replicate the style of my contemporaries, but excel in promoting myself and my own music for the first time. The scope of the project that I have set out to do is both manageable and achievable, given the extent by which I have already described my musical stylings to Tileyard residents and potential investors. Additionally, the project is flexible enough that – if delays in the timetable did occur, promotion for the project could be shifted back to accommodate for the delay. This is, after all, my first set of releases: there is no expectation for more music, as this project is an audience's initial engagement with my music.

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