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Element C2b - Reflective Commentary

Tile Yard Education

INTRO & PLANS FOR THE PROJECT

For my final creation project I set myself the challenge of writing, producing and mixing an album based around collaborations to a release standard in a time frame of 11 weeks. Based on my previous experience working on album projects, I was confident of completing the task at hand with minimal setbacks. I aimed to write 20 tracks with 10 of them making the final track listing, around half being collaborations, whether that be a featured vocal or help with writing.

In my proposal I set out a plan on how I would tackle the project, as I got into it I immediately realised how much I'd given myself to do within the first 20 days.

May 3rd – May 24th

- . Write and produce 20 songs*
- . 10 collaboration tracks*
- . Drum loop tracking session at Tile Yard studios*
- . Guitar re-amping session at Tile Yard studios*
- . Research and reach out to potential collaborators*

I knew I had to spread this out across the whole project as it was the main bulk of the creative work with a lot of pressure to be 'in the zone' consistently for 20 days, for me, that's a recipe for disaster! In the end it did take me until the end of June to complete everything on that list, managing to avoid any real burn out creatively. I then managed to work out mixing, getting feedback and writing this in the time I had remaining which was approximately 3 weeks. Although I gave myself a lot to do initially, I found I had paced myself through the project quite well, at no point did I feel overwhelmed by what I had left to do and ended up with enough music to submit a completely different 10 tracks.

COLLABORATING

I wanted to base my project around collaborations, in the same vain as Mura Masa or Jim E stack, I wanted to do this to work with other vocalists and be challenged by their ideas, incorporating their sound into what I do. As I started writing music It soon became clear that If I was to get people to 'topline' they needed to absolutely be the right artist for the song rather than just getting someone in for the sake of it. Because of this a handful of songs such as 'Flowers', 'Blinding' and 'My Head' I used my own voice and manipulated it, which I'll talk about later.

Interestingly a few collaborations worked out differently, firstly the only collaboration where I had the track down first was the song 'Blush' where I sent the instrumental and lyrics over to Lauran Hibberd and she sent back a folder of vocals for me to play with. I really like how the song came out and how I've blended my voice as a backing vocal but there was something really robotic and lifeless about how easy the process of doing it was. I would have liked to have been in the room and worked on every vocal take together but because she's based on the Isle of Wight it just wasn't possible given the time frame to get together, although it might be something we could look at doing post MA if we wanted to release the

song.

I did arrange sessions with a handful of artists to work on something together from scratch. Again, I was careful about the artists I chose to work with because I couldn't afford to waste time.

'Figure 8' and 'Shelter' were both written with vocalist / producer KillOwen who I'd met through Tile Yard Education. His vocal style is really well-spoken 'London Rap' similar to the likes of Loyle Carner or Little Simz. We'd been talking about collaborating for a long time and making something with a bit more edge, using electronic elements to take a sidestep from the tracks he'd been working on previously. We did 'Figure 8' at my home studio and it didn't take long for the whole thing to come together, we referenced the sound and energy of Doorman by Slowthai (Doorman, 2019), mixed with Nights by Frank Ocean (Ocean, 2016). We got the bassline down and I wanted to give it a real grit, to do this I dialled in a lot of Sound Toys Decapitator and switched on the punish mode, it gave the mid and high range of the bass a real fizz that stands out in the track. We wanted to try an unusual song structure with this because... why not? It's easy to do a traditional structure when you have the added pressure of having the artist in the room but Owen and I both felt confident trying something different here. We wanted to split the song up into two sides and make it feel like you'd been transported into another world before being pulled back into the mayhem. We did this with the Frank Ocean inspired middle section where the drums and the bass completely drop out, and the instrumentation changes to an acoustic guitar backed with a digital string section and a vocal sample to give the section some movement. The vocal style also completely changes from an aggressive spoken word rap to a catchy and intimate falsetto vocal. The two sections contradict themselves in energy, but I think that's why they work so well. I don't think it would have worked with a traditional verse, chorus, verse, chorus structure.

Because of how well we got on with 'Figure 8' we met up again a few weeks later this time at the underground studio at Tile Yard Education. The reason for this was because I wanted to try a collaboration in another setting and see if that made the artist any more or less creative, I also wanted to get more experience in the studio especially with it being newly built.

In this session we wrote 'Shelter'. With this Owen wanted something that was club inspired but had the emotion and nostalgia that you only get on a night out. We managed to get that feeling by using nice washy delays and reverbs over a solid groove with 90's inspired synth sounds. This track felt comfortable for Owen but slightly more challenging for me to get my sound on it, but I'm happy with how it ended up. One of the key things for me was implementing and balancing the live bass guitar in verse 2 with the 808's used in the choruses. I'm also especially proud of the lead melodic line in the chorus which I created from a random take of Owen doing backing vocals, I really squashed it with a compressor to make it smooth and then pitched it up and distorted it to give it a real edge. I didn't fine tune the vocal take because part of its character is how the notes bend because of the manipulation. For me it really stands out because the rest of the sounds and melodies are warm and welcoming, this really breathes new life into the track.

Owen and I have a great connection making music and I also feel the same about Cat Reynolds who featured on the track "Walk on Water" which we originally wrote over Zoom a few months ago in the winter lockdown, but sometimes collaborating doesn't always go to plan. I had a session with an artist called Joey Maxwell who I've worked with previously and we spent a few hours putting a track together that never got finished. Sometimes the vibe just isn't right, and things don't work out but that's something that's going to happen every so often. I can't always be at the top of my game, and neither can an artist. So even working with people that you trust and have good relationships with can sometimes end up being less productive than you want but it's still great experience and I'm a strong believer in that you must get through the bad songs to get to the good ones.

Going forward I think I'll stick to only trying to work with artists I either believe in or can contribute to what they're doing, financially in the long run it may be restricting but although money is an important factor, I find myself leaning towards personal fulfilment and creativity over taking on loads of work I won't always enjoy. It's important to find the right balance.

DRUM SAMPLES

Going into this I knew I wasn't going to have the time to record 10 drum tracks in a studio, so I had the idea of reaching out to drummer, Eddy Geach, from my band JAWS and getting him in the studio for an afternoon to record some drum samples and loops. The idea being that doing this would allow me to get a live drum sound and feel on the tracks it worked on. I let Eddy set up his kit and then built the mic set up around him in the least intrusive way to his playing style which is hard but like clockwork. I close mic'd most of the kit as well as setting up a Glyn Johns style set up (Pickford, 2018), and an extra room mic. This was because I wanted to have the options on the other side of recording when I was processing the samples.

We tracked 6 takes of single hits on each part of the drum kit in 3 different velocities to give a good range of realistic sounding one shots, as well as this we recorded multiple beat loops at 120 bpm, 140 bpm and 160 bpm doing straight beats and half time, with this we also recorded a selection of fills at the same tempos. I took this basic plan from a Sun house article however they recommended recording up to 30 hits per drum, we didn't do that for time keeping purposes. (How To Record Your Own Drum Samples, 2020). All in all, this whole process took us about 4 hours to set up and record, I think it was massively helped by how talented a drummer Eddy is and the past studio experience we have together. If I had more time, I know Eddy could have learnt and played every song I had and we could have spent a bit of time on making sure the drum sound for each track was perfect. However, the use of samples allowed me to manipulate the drum sound and make changes without having to worry about too much about that. I based my final sounds around what I got from the Glyn Johns set up which was an old school 1970s saturated sound that I was really happy with, I blended in some of the close mic signal on the kick, snare and hats for a slight bit of extra weight and bite. The sound I was aiming for was what you can hear in Haim's 'Gasoline' (Gasoline, 2021)

One problem with using samples is that they can begin to feel robotic as you start to place them on the grid, a good tip I picked up from Bob Cooper was to record one shots of ghost notes and to place them in throughout the track to make it feel like it's a drummer playing it rather than the sound of real drums. (Cooper, 2021)

I used these drum samples throughout the whole of my project, they feature on 'Flowers' and 'Blush' which do have a more band kind of feel to them, you'll also hear the drum fills throughout those tracks in particular but each track has either its kick, snare or element of percussion taken from the samples I recorded to give them a human touch.

One thing that I believe is key to "My sound" is a sampling technique I picked up from years of trial and error and messing around with samples. You'll hear in a couple of tracks like 'My Head' 'Walk On Water' and 'Shoulda Known' melodic, glitchy layers, really similar to the likes of Bon Iver. I achieve this by bouncing in place layers of music already taken from the song, so it doesn't feel too alien for the listener and manipulate it with either reversing, pitching, distortion and chopping. Sometimes all 4 to create unique patterns. I also used these as transitional parts to glue my verses and choruses together. Some of my feedback from previous projects was that some of my tracks felt disjointed so I made a conscious effort with a few of these tracks to make the sections flow nicely.

VOCALS

I've always been a big fan of remixes where a lead vocal has been manipulated in a way that gives the song a whole new energy, for example JIM-E Stacks remix of Old Bone by Wet (Old Bone (Jim E Stack Remix), 2019) The lead vocal has simply been pitched down. giving the lyrics a new warmth.

I took this simple idea and applied it to the lead vocal of my tracks rather than a remix version. For me as the singer of another band I found being able to manipulate my voice in this way was another avenue of expression, I knew I could say things I wouldn't normally say or sing because it felt like a new voice for me. One artist who does this so well and a huge influence on my sound is Frank Ocean. The first 3 minutes of the track 'Nikes' (Nikes, 2016) features a pitched-up version of Franks voice before the final two minutes in his original pitch. With a voice as good as Franks it makes total sense it's like having another artist feature on your song. At least to the average listener who might not be able to tell what's going on at a technical level.

I wanted to take this a little bit further and play with the formant, to not only change the pitch of my voice but completely change the sound, to make it sound like another person. One of the reasons I did this is because I knew I wanted a female to sing the lead on this track but because of my restricted time frame I couldn't find the right vocalist for it, and I didn't want to get the wrong person for the sake of ticking a box when it still wouldn't be right.

To get this sound I recorded my vocal as normal. I did this at my home studio so it would have been an Aston Spirit into a Focusrite Saffire Pro 26, I later upgraded my interface

during this project to a UAD Apollo but didn't have time to go back and retrack the vocals on everything, that is, however, something I will do later down the line. I then applied Sound Toys Little Alter Boy and edited the pitch to +12 and formant to around +3. Doing this completely changed the tonality of my voice. Because of the algorithm of the plug in I did have to go back into flex tune and fix some bits, but I also left a few parts and added Autotune to the end of my signal chain to give it that Charli XCX Hyper pop sound which I feel really worked for the song. I applied the same idea to all the songs that have my vocal as the lead and used the effected vocal as a backing vocal. The track 'One Look' originally had a lower octave vocal as the lead but when I layered the natural on top it really came to life.

While I was looking into Charli XCX's vocal sound I came across the producer 'Lil Data' from her album 'Pop 2' (XCX, 2017) Going through method of sequencing I've never seen before. He used a programme called Tidal Cycles which is a live coding environment for musical improvisation. He essentially bounced down vocal layers and used Tidal Cycles to create new rhythmic patterns from the vocal. Because we touched on coding in a recent project this is something I'll definitely have a look into going forward.

Artists like Bon Iver and The Japanese House both use the same ideas however they also use it to create harmonies with their natural voice. Another interesting sound that Bon Iver employ is an effect called the "Prismizer" You can hear it in its full glory on '715 Creeks' (715 Creeks, 2016) I've been a fan for years and never successfully been able to recreate to the standard of the band, however after some research I found out about a plug in called Harmony Engine by Antares. (How To Actually Create the Prismizer Effect, 2020). Unfortunately, it's quite expensive so I signed up to a 30-day free trial. Harmony engine allows you to control pitch shifted harmonies using a midi controller. On my tracks 'My Head' and 'Tresspass' I tried to get this by opening up a midi instrument track with the harmony engine on with it side chaining my lead vocal, I set the harmony engine to Midi omni, so it reads the notes being played. Now my music theory isn't great, it never has been, so for me this kind of software is trial and error until it sounds good. it took a little bit of playing around until I got the harmonies I wanted and had something close to the 'Prismizer' effect. Again, when you pitch things, you do get left with artifacts and I think going forward this is an effect I need to spend some more time playing around with to master it, I think that's why Bon Iver pull it off so well, simply the experience of using it in the studio and incorporating it into their live performances.

Generally going forward with vocals, I need to make sure I'm recording the signal to the best standard I possibly can. At home I've now upgraded my interface to a UAD Apollo 8 which is a huge improvement on my old Focusrite. The built in Preamp technology has already made a noticeable difference. I think on songs where I'm the lead vocal I need to be harsher on myself too, it's easy to think that things are good enough when I know I always go that extra mile when it's a track for another artist.

WORK AROUNDS

Not everything goes exactly to plan and that's what happened with this project. During and after writing the proposal I had a strong writing spell where I managed to get 10 songs done in around 2 weeks, obviously not all of them were great but it was a key period in fine tuning the sound I was going for with the project. However, because of a leak in my kitchen ceiling leading to a complete bathroom replacement and a new kitchen ceiling being put in it unfortunately meant having to leave my home studio in London and going to live with my parents for two weeks which was a huge hit to the enthusiasm. However, I did make good use of this opportunity by getting my drum samples recorded, which then lead to a new stint of inspiration and another solid batch of songs.

Lifting of restrictions has also resulted in a spike in my anxiety, a problem I've been dealing with since I was around 13 years old. It's manageable but sometimes it definitely gets in the way, for me there was a couple of missed studio sessions and bouts of head fog all down to anxiety. It also effects the collaboration process for me in terms of over thinking who I work with on a personal level, rather than letting the experience happen. The general experience at Tile Yard has massively helped with this, contributing to song writing camps and working with fellow students has given me a huge confidence boost and a stride in my step for the professional world. Going forward it's something I'll pace myself with, as with more experience I'll become more comfortable. Anxiety linked to traveling was also one of the reasons I decided to upgrade my interface to something more professional with a great preamp mid project, for me the Tile Yard studios are about an hour away from where I live and just like creativity you can't predict when you're going to have a good or bad mental health day.

Mixing the project I didn't find as challenging as I imagined although I still feel I have a lot to learn, but I know that comes with experience. Because some of my songs were older songs the levels of some of the audio was so off and recorded so badly that it was tricky to clean up and bring to the level of some of the other tracks I have on this project, so I did have re-record a lot of stuff on a couple of tracks, but going through that massively helped me understand how important it is to get things right at the point of recording, it can make your life so much easier when it comes to the mixing stage, especially if your mixing the track, it can also save embarrassment if you're sending mixes off to a professional with a good reputation. I found myself mixing on headphones a lot as my room is currently untreated, I've slowly learnt where the noise build ups are but getting some kind of treatment up on the walls is something I'll be doing as soon as financially possible.

A last-minute problem I ran into when checking some final mixes at my parents' house were some phasing and stereo issues when playing back on a surround sound system. This is something I didn't have time to look at before the deadline however with the rise in demand for spatial mixes, it's something I'll be putting some time into.

Aside from this I had no real struggles with my project, You can't predict when enthusiasm and creativity is going to dwindle away so I found myself being very productive when I needed to be regardless of the outcome, I would give myself an hour to work on an idea, if it went somewhere then great, if it didn't then I'd start something new, this is a technique I

picked up from 'Fred Again' and it helped me to stay creative and not be too hard on myself, especially in the face of distractions such as the first 2 weeks of Euro 2020, with 3 matches a day on TV? (TN:75 Fred Again - Tape Notes, 2021)

FEEDBACK

My feedback was largely positive from peers. I also reached out to producer Duncan Brookfield and Dirty Hit A&R James Cara.

Most of my feedback was mix notes rather than anything about the production which was positive in that people clearly enjoyed what they listened to from a song point of view. A couple of people picked up on the track 'Figure 8' with Owen and were impressed by the sound and that we work well together. 'Flowers' also had a great reaction. One piece of feedback from Duncan was to centre the rimshot sound I have in 'Blinding' however he did ask himself if that was him just being boring. After a few listens I decided to keep it on the right as it's not a problem I had flagged up myself as happy with the overall sound of that track. After considering the feedback I still wasn't completely happy with some elements of my mixes, I agree with the feedback that I need to be more surgical with my EQing and create more space for vocal clarity. On a couple of occasions, not only in this project but on others I've had feedback about my vocal not being loud enough or not being able to understand the lyrics. I've definitely improved over the last 12 months but there's still a way to go, and I'm sure this is something I'll get better at with experience. I also need to get better at knowing when a mix is finished, a few of these songs I could tweak continuously and still be in the same position. I reached out to James Cara from Dirty Hit, the record label behind The 1975, Wolf Alice & Beabadoobee, to get some professional feedback and although his feedback wasn't in depth it was positive, letting me know that 'Flowers' and 'Blinding' were 'amazing'. It certainly gave me some confidence going forward.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Goals For The Next 5 Years	Skills Gap	Actions
Have 1-4 Tracks a month from other artists being released	N/A	Reach out and expand A&R contacts, research upcoming artists and create the best music possible when the opportunity arises
Stay creatively enthused	For professional practice at what I do.	Timetable in sessions to try new ideas and work on music for myself with no creative boundaries.
Gain more industry experience	Experience, however this is reason for seeking out a role in the industry.	Research London based studios, Engineers and Producers with the aim of getting an assistant role or internship at a reputable studio
Move into my own studio space	Money / Experience	Stay focused on the above goals, keep writing and producing with artists I believe in. Keep a percentage of royalties and fees in saving account and build towards renting a space.

Going forward, I have put together a personal development plan for the next 5 years. For me it's been really helpful to put my goals onto something that can help me break them down and clear a bit more space in my head. A key goal for me is to consistently have music I've worked on being released, this is how I'm going to be getting my name out there and it's a direct way of potential clients hearing what I can do, creating more opportunities and bringing in more money. To achieve this, I plan to stay creative by allocating myself time to work on new and creative ideas as well as growing my professional contacts in the A&R and management world as well as the studio and engineering world. Alongside this I still need to gain a lot more industry experience, I've been in the studio a lot on the artist side of room but because of Lockdown's my time in the studio at Tile Yard has been limited, although I've learnt a lot while I've been there, I would greatly benefit from an assistant engineer role or an internship where I can learn the job inside out with a constant rotation of clients with professional expectations. In the immediate future I'll be putting time into researching London based studios, engineers and producers and reaching out to try and see where I can get my foot in the door. As my Family are also based in Wolverhampton, I'll be looking into West Midlands based studios as well as looking into any remote opportunities with freelance producers who may be working on projects in residential studios.

Long term I would like to have my own studio space to produce from, ideally based in London. My priorities and reputation may have changed by the time I can afford a studio but right now I understand that a lot of the industry is based here, and you can't afford to miss opportunities because your studio is an extra hour away for an artist that's in town to travel to. That being said, it would be amazing to nurture talent back in Wolverhampton and opening a studio there, creating opportunities for young people to have experience in a top studio is something I want to look at even longer term.

Of course, for all this to happen, I need to make sure I'm looking after my mental health. If you've experienced any kind of mental health problem, you'll understand that your bad days are completely unpredictable and sometimes you still have to work through them. I have my mechanisms for dealing with anxiety and I plan to continue to work on that, as well as trying to do more physical exercise, especially in a job where you can end up sitting at a desk for extremely long and unpredictable hours, usually in a dark room.

Having worked in the industry for nearly 10 years now as an artist I totally understand how much of a slog it can be at times and think my targets here are realistic, it's down to me to put the hard work in to develop and mature my knowledge and to make sure anything with my name on it is something I'm proud of.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I did manage to successfully create an album that I'm proud of however not totally to the initial plan I put forward in my proposal. For a start it was my intention to write and produce 20 tracks and knock that down to 10, I ended up with 11 new songs and bringing some old productions up to scratch to make up the final numbers. This was mainly because of exerting myself creatively, I got off to a really strong start with writing but after a couple of weeks the quality dropped off, but I knew I had some unfinished older tracks that could fit with the sound I'd crafted for the new songs. Luckily, I had enough material to give what I feel is a strong 30 minutes, although I probably wouldn't release it as that into the public domain, I feel that the songs break up nicely into two EP's or even just a set of singles. Another aim was to have an even split of collaborations, but I'll be honest I was being very protective of my music and only wanted to work with people that I felt would improve the song I already had or people that understand the vision and the sound. I simply didn't have the time to trial and error with artists I didn't really trust. I ended up only doing 5 collaborations with only 4 of them making the final cut. As I started to create the music it started to feel more like a personal project and that's where I think the protectiveness came from, this is all music I would be proud to put my name to as an artist.

Going forward with any personal projects I would give myself more time, in fact I'd give myself no time frame at all, at least not until there's a good crop of songs to build from. Working with other artists I feel the same, the song doesn't have to be finished after one session and the first idea doesn't always have to be best or last. There's always a pressure in the room when you're working on music with another artist and I think a couple of times on this project that got the better of me but it's something I'm sure I'll get more comfortable with the more I do it, especially coming from an artist background.

Before this project I felt capable of completing it but not completely confident in each step, on the other side of it now feel comfortable and assured with taking on recording artists and the technical challenges that go with that, however I feel engineering is a skill you can always expand your knowledge in and that's something I will actively be trying to get more experience in going forward. As well as this I plan to reach out to a lot of producers and mixers to try and get as much real-world experience as possible to build up my toolset and become a well-rounded producer. I intend to release a couple of the tracks over the next

year or so, the great thing about writing and producing them myself is that even though I'm happy with them now, I'm still learning my craft every day and when I look at them in a couple of months I might have a whole new set of tricks and ideas that can take them to that next level, That being said, I'd like to be using the tracks I release under my own name to attract artists that want to explore those sounds rather than being a producer that churns out emotionless predictable songs for people that aren't truly invested in creating something original.

Working on this project has been an insightful experience into how quickly deadlines on creative projects can come around and how to manage your time efficiently, I've learnt a lot about myself and how I deal with other people in creative situations under pressure and how to focus when I need to. I've learnt the importance of planning and the importance of giving yourself down time to collect yourself and go again, the importance of listening to other people's ideas and how they can push you out of your comfort zone to try something you'd never have even considered. All of this is especially helpful for taking my next steps out into the professional world of music production and I hope I continue to make music with people that truly care about it and understand the beauty and power of it.

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