

Reflective Commentary - Quiet Wars

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Element C2b - Reflective Commentary

Reflective Commentary

Quiet Wars track list:

1. *Grown*

2. *Fever*

3. *Open Doors*

4. *Coffee*

5. *BIG CITY*

6. *Cycle (interlude)*

7. *Hearth Out (outro, ft. Wislawa Szymborska)*

In this Commentary, I will discuss and reflect critically on the process of my practical work and research within the context of the current commercial music industry.

Moreover will demonstrate the thought process behind the chosen ideas and support it with the research/methods from current producers who have worked or still work in the music industry.

Approach - Writing process

Ever since, my goal was to create a collection of songs that tells the story, the collection that the vast majority of listeners could immerse. Throughout the past three months, I have continuously keep writing material for this project. My idea for a successful song were: emotion, real instruments, story/authenticity.

As I already mentioned in my proposal, my main goal was to create a cohesive body of work amongst authentic/emotional delivery in the genre, such as Pop-Rock/Alternative Pop. I had to learn more about the best ways to record real electronic guitars, bass, drums, piano and vocals. Nonetheless, I had to learn and research when and how to work with analogue equipment to improve the overall sound and maintain the quality.

Songs, Title and Story

I wanted the title to stimulate the imagination, create the images, begin inner conversations, likewise provoke to own interpretations. Nonetheless, it could be interpreted as the journey, from a bubble of a youngster reaching its 18th birthday, straight into adulthood, experiencing its brutal sides. Moreover, the goal was that the title could illustrate the inner obstacles, represent unsolved emotions, the process in making, growth, mastery, issues behind closed doors, therefore I went for Quiet Wars.

The project includes a collection of 7 songs, every track has its own story also possesses different atmosphere/emotional instrumentation. To maintain the most authenticity, I have chosen to write them from my own experience about life. Moreover, I have recorded and added private recordings such as in the song Grown, we can hear ice cream food track. This melody symbolises fun/childhood in contrast to adulthood life. Moreover, another example exists in Hearth Out, where transition presents a quote from a polish writer named Wislawa Szymborska.(Babelmatrix.org. 2021. Babel Web Anthology).

It's believed that the poems, ideologies about live or private recordings that illustrate authors daily life lift the reliability. Moreover, the listener gets to discover more details about the artist and their vision/thoughts about life.

The great example lives in the Lemonade, the concept album from Beyonce (2016). Where the interlude/outro, are fully packed with quotes from poets. The fans were pleased with that type of body of work, which allowed them to emerge with the story a bit more. It shows that despite Beyoncé's massive commercial success, her status became more relevant and reliable to the masses thanks to its touch on issues such as racial segregation/racism or betrayal (The Guardian, 2016).

Inspiration - Instrumentation and arrangement techniques

The goal was to achieve or get as close as possible to this type of music quality in terms of arrangement guitar sound, drums, also storytelling. While working on the project, I became heavily influenced by music from Natalia Przybysz, Daria Zawialow, Brittany Howard, Lianne La Havas and Mela Koteluk.

Few weeks before the songwriting and making arrangement, I have critically analysed each artist, which helped me highlight the elements that will fit into the Quiet Wars project.

For instance, in the song from Natalia Przybysz - Sto Lat, we can hear an intimate acoustic guitar playing on its right when the electric guitar has its place hard left, giving more space to the vocals and extra arrangement idea. It gave me an idea of how to arrange a more intimate atmosphere for Hearth Out.

To achieve more of a Rock sound, I went for full guitar recording, experimented with guitar pedals and dynamics. Moreover, I have recorded several guitar parts, almost each with a different approach. I have explored and researched the variety of mics that could work for this project. Furthermore, I have read about types of amplifiers, how to recording them also, the difference against the direct dry signal.

Listening back to the recording and after my research, I have discovered the different qualities when recorded live via analogue. There is additional value in texture, moreover recording real instruments added an extra dimension to the songs.

M. Senior explains: "Electric guitars and electromechanical keyboards typically use magnetic pickups to convert the physical vibrations of metal components in the instrument directly into electrical signals. These signals are then rendered audible by a connected amplifier and loudspeakers, and the nature of this amplification system is frequently essential to the desired sonic character." (Senior, M, 2015).

Nonetheless, mister M. Senior explains that despite the advantage in sound by making the amplified sound, it may turn into its disadvantage later on in the mix.

Throughout my own experience and working on the mix on the Quiet Wars, I have found out its limiting nature. Adding effect, plugins to the already recorded live guitars tend to “moody” the sound and messes up with frequencies therefore the mix might lose its clarity.

Furthermore, M.Senior argues: “DI signal has the advantage that it allows you to re-evaluate or experiment with amplifier sounds after recording, either by rerecording the DI signal through a real miked-up amplifier (“re-amping”) or by applying amplifier-emulation software at mixdown. “, (Senior, M, 2015, 94p.).

Furthermore, the un-amplified recording could become the backup plan for the mix, in case the tracks need extra flavour, proper DI recordings, could help without messing with the overall balance and not taking much frequency range.

“Many of the instruments we’re considering in this chapter commonly have effects processing built into them, but it’s usually a good idea for this to be switched off while tracking, otherwise it can interfere with the mix engineer’s work later on.”, (Senior, M, 2015,77p.).

Throughout my evaluation, I have decided to record in both techniques, later on, it turned out fantastic choice. While working on the mix, DI allowed me to experiment with the pedals, and effects however sound from the amplifier created more dimension and stereo effect, blending these two could create unique results.

Arrangement - The balance

Arguably, it’s easier to make things complicated than keep it simple:

“Anyone with a little mixing experience has found that the arrangement is usually the #1 non-audio problem in a mix. In these days of unlimited tracks, it’s all too easy to pile more and more musical elements along with double and triple tracks of everything you can think of. You can easily wind up with a hundred tracks to wade through before you know it, and that gives you an impossible task of making it sound like something more than a wad of dense audio goo. “ (B.Owsinski 1999, 85p.)

One of the most valuable lesson, I got to learn is to - keep things simple.

The simplicity in the arrangement has helped me to keep the clarity theme-wise. It allowed me to stay focus on the crucial elements for the project, but most of all, save time that later, I have invested in postproduction.

Nonetheless, simplicity helped me to expand my workflow in the recording studio. Focusing on the basic knowledge took off the extra pressure. Before recording each take, I have had time to thoughtfully and critically assess and decide on the type of miking, their distance, compressors, texture. That way, I was able to fully absorb the atmosphere, and fully commit to the studio in order to deliver the best possible performance of each element.

Additionally, M.Senior explains: “The flip-side of adding lots of layers is that the expressive performance nuances of each one become progressively more difficult to hear, leading to a bland and emotionless result—a problem that plagues far too many of the low-budget productions I hear”. (Senior, M, 2015,109p.)

Likewise switching off built-in processing while tracking could save some time for the engineer in case it won’t fit. However adding layers may give a sense of bigger ‘production’ therefore, specific

instruments might sound bigger, the key is the balance. With all that being mentioned, and knowing that the expression is the main goal for the project such as Quiet Wars, I have worked on the right balance to each song, keeping in mind not to try overdoing things when it comes to layers, doubling, etc.

Communication - The right team

“A producer has to manage not only project time but also the time of the people he’s working with...This adds yet another layer of complexity to scheduling and project management, but it comes with the territory of being a producer.” (Owsinski, B., 2010.,45p.).

Throughout the process, and working in the studio recording/rehearsals, I have learned that having an experienced session musician could save plenty of time. Moreover, sharing thoughts about the vision with the musicians became crucial. While working on the Open Doors, I have witnessed a few issues regarding drums arrangements. Nonetheless, communication and the ability to translate ideas into words turns out crucial.

Mike Senior described: “...your player may know a quicker way to reach a target sound. So don’t just knit your brow and struggle on taciturnly when results aren’t immediately forthcoming; discuss your concerns with the instrumentalist.”. (Senior, M, 2015,108p.).

My honest discussion with the drummer has helped me to achieve desired drum patterns (Bigger fuller tom’s, aggressive attack on the snare, fewer cymbals). Honest feedback has helped me achieve the right energy and performance for each specific track.

”Nervousness, tension, and a lack of confidence in musicians and recording artists when faced with recording in a formal studio space can often be prohibitive to artists producing the desired performance or a ‘good take’”. (p. 2908 A. Watson, J. 2012).

As stated in my proposal, I wanted to find the right people for that project, moreover, create a team that feels safe to share any type of concerns or ideas. It turned vital to communicate with each instrumentalist individually. Concerning their feedback each was pleased to be part of the project and expressed their willingness to join again in future projects.

Nevertheless, the research and prior preparation made me more comfortable along the way, saved time and kept us all productive.

Organisation - Preparation - Research

“...you’re going to be battling the clock a lot of the time, in which case it’s better to prioritize those things that will advance the timbre furthest before time runs out and those things that you can’t address after you’ve hit Record. “ (Senior, M., 2015, 76p.).

Prerecording/Demo’s - Having ready to show demo versions of a song likewise, the ready arrangement turned out to be a massive advantage. Additionally, it puts the producer in a good light and motivates others.

Unfortunately, that is not always the case, it tends to occur that there are artists who expect session musicians to create an arrangement for them without prior notice. It's crucial to create the song

arrangement before the session and set the goal right before hitting the studio. This type of disorganisation causes extra pressure on the instrumentalist by setting up unrealistic expectations.

“One of the first things a producer does during preproduction is to dig deep into the songs to check out the arrangements and the song structure. Even if a song is written well and has catchy hooks, the arrangement is what makes it cook.” (Owsinski, B., 2010, 81p.).

Calendar/Timeline - To stay on track as much as possible, I have created my calendar and crossed the days along the way. It reminded me about tasks that needed to be completed. Moreover, it created a habit that allowed me to be more consistent.

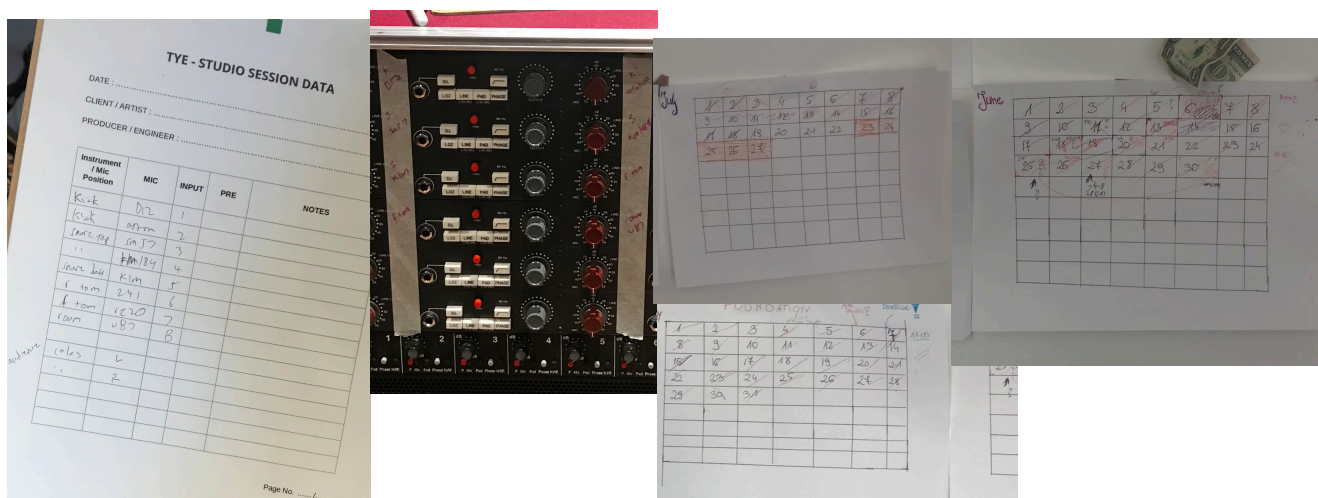
Research - appropriate research allowed me to prepare the right set-up for each day accordingly to the song. For instance, in order to emphasise the mid and "sweet" high range of a guitar, I went for a combination with Coles and smb7.

I needed to find more primary data information about music production, being said that, I have found YouTube Channel from one of the engineers Maciej Karbowski, that have worked with Natalia Przybysz. Maciej Karbowski is a well-known producer/engineer and studio owner in Poland, he tends to share and create informative videos where he explains different techniques in music production. (M.Karbowski, Nebula Studio, 2021)

For more detailed research on analogue equipment, I have chosen series of books from B. Owsinski and Senior M., such as “The Music Producer's Handbook: Music Pro Guides“. The books that illustrated and supported my plan prepared me for responsibilities and the elements involved in music production. Along the way, I kept updating my research by staying in touch with music engineers who currently work in music industry. (Ryhs Malsen, Sean Hargreaves).

The music industry has changed over the last eleven years drastically. Many of its experience seems outdated therefore are hard or impossible to apply.

Arguably, making music has never been more accessible, it's believed that the vast majority of producers/engineers work from home, or possess a home studio.



(Private photos documenting the process, mic choice, timeline, calendar, mic labelling).

Techniques

“If you have any time left over between sorting out your levels and pressing Record, then it’s always best ploughed into making the source itself sound as good as possible. And an important ancillary benefit of treating signal processing as a last resort is that it disciplines you to work harder on your actual recording chops, which means you need it less anyway! “ (Senior, M, 2015,78p.).

That statement from M. Senior brings me back to the prior conclusion about keeping it simple. While recording, it was tempting to keep turning the knobs on the compressors, trying out their impact on the sound, also how it affects the signal. Nonetheless, deadlines and limited studio time pressured me to focus on the satisfactory signal recording itself.

For instance, In one of our sessions, we have faced unpleasant resonance from the bass guitar for the song called Fever. Despite the bass player great ear and his assurance, it turns out that there was an issue with the correct tuning. We have learned that guitars need retuning before each recording or at least needs checking. It shows that communication is crucial. We solved the problem quickly. Since then, every following session, we have consistently kept an eye on the correct tuning, as we have noticed its impact concerning the entire instrumentation.

“What a lot of young engineers don’t realize is that tuning isn’t just a pitch issue, because it also affects how well instruments blend with each other, and consequently how easily they’ll fit into the final mixdown.” (Senior, M, 2015, 82p.).

Arrangement - one of the biggest challenges in arranging the songs, was making sure that each guitar part has its own spotlight, another-words, assuring that all assembled instruments complement each other. It was crucial that despite rich instrumentation, to don’t take away attention from the vocals, cause that's the storyteller. While working on the Quiet Wars had to learn how to create the space for each element. Moreover, proof exists, that the song sound “fuller” when each element of arrangement has its own place in the frequency spectrum with the appropriate volume.

Owsinski explains:” When two instruments with essentially the same bandwidth frequency (like guitars) play at the same volume at the same time, the result is a fight for attention ... That’s because the ear isn’t able to decide which to listen to, and becomes confused and fatigued as a result.”.

“**Balance.** The volume-level relationship between musical elements.

Frequency range. Having all audible frequencies properly represented.

Panorama. Placing a musical element in the sound field.

Dimension. Adding ambience to a musical element.

Dynamics. Controlling the volume envelope of an individual track or the entire mix.

Interest. Making the mix special. “

(The Mixing Engineer’s Handbook Bobby Owsinski, 1999,83-85p.).

Inspired by albums such as Natalia Przybysz - Jak Malowac Ogien, and Prad, I have decided to challenge myself and record the majority of the material in the studio. That way, I've had a chance to critically assess and compare these albums to the collection of songs in Quiet Wars. In terms of plugins effects, I went for the overdrives/distorted guitar sound. In order to give it more dark of a vibe, I also used a combination of guitar pedals and experimented with delays and pitch shifting. (Which could be found in Fever or Grown).

As previously mentioned the inspiration from Natalia's album also could be found in *Hearth Out*. I have focused on an acoustic guitar, I have also captured some of the chords changing sound the finger slide effect to highlight the intimacy in the track. All mentioned effects brought life into the mix. Moreover, it developed the stereo image but also added that extra "human" element. My vision was to create a song that could be sung on the beach, just guitar and voice and story.

Assembling team members

Drums recording sessions were the foundation of that project and it is the drums that set up the tone for each song. Therefore, to achieve the best performance, I went out of my comfort zone, started the research from Instagram. The idea was to find a drummer that can translate the energy and able get the song dynamic.

There was a risk that it might not work, and my evaluation based just on the video from Instagram could be wrong. Nonetheless, it took me around a week to select the best three drummers and eventually, I have decided to reach Rice. That turns out to be a fantastic choice. That experience showed me that networking, reaching, inviting unknown people/musicians could bring lots of fresh energy and excitement to the project. As mentioned in my proposal, one of the goals was networking.

I started looking for the right team the idea was to invite someone from Tileyard. Due to covid restrictions, unfortunately, there was little chance to meet. Like in the case of Rice, I start my research for the guitarist from Tileyard via Instagram likewise, asking people if they know anyone. The key was that the musicians live around the studio also, that they could easily travel for future rehearsals at Tileyard. Furthermore, I have found a guitarist from Tileyard (Tom) also a bass player (Daniel) via Instagram. The main reasons I chose these guys were their confidence in playing their instrument also, they seemed genuinely good people, it turned out to be true.

Drums recording

Each recording session was equally important. However, the high-quality drums recording was my priority. Then we moved to the bass, electric guitars and vocals. Arguably fixing guitar recording would have been much easier in the worst scenario (lack of studio time) could have gone for DI recording and support it with the inbox plugins. However, replacing the real drums definitely would be have been difficult and would affect the stereo image.

After the research and recommendation from the studio engineers, I have decided to go with:

Overheads (spaced pair) - Coles 4038 x 2 (or Neumann KM184 x 2 if not available).

Snare top - Sm57

Snare bottom - Aston Starlights

Kick drum, outside - Aston Spirit

Kick inside AKG D112 (or Shure 58 if not available).

We also added extra room mics like U87 Neumann and additional mic Sennheiser 421 for the snare. That set-up has perfectly worked for the *Open Doors* and *Fever*, it resulted in more stereo live drums sound, added more movement and dynamic.

However, to add a bit of verity to the whole project, I have decided that Glyn Johns technique would be perfect for more intimate sound in *Grown*. We ended up with less stereo, a more narrow snare sound, and a punchy aggressive kick.

We also faced some phase issues, but easily solved by adjusting and setting up the appropriate distance from each other and kit. Moreover, after discussing it with the drummer, we have decided to record on the Gretsch kit to obtain more of a vintage sound.

Moreover, we have used preamps from Neve, which brought extra warmth and a bit of a flavour to the signal as well we were able to EQ any unwanted frequencies before recording.

Furthermore, we have used the compressor that allowed control and prevents unwanted peaks or popups. (that could interfere later on in the postproduction). Nonetheless, it is not always the case the analogue compressors also could add extra saturation to the track. Moreover allowed to control the dynamic and bring up additional details (manipulate the tail, etc.).(2015, M. Senior 75p.)

The piano for song Coffee has been recorded thanks to my close friend piano player Thenry, at the studio in Middlesex University. We have used pair of AKG 414, and lucky enough we had a chance to use grand piano for more bigger sound but still keep intimate vibe.

I have chosen to record entire vocals at home, keeping in mind that emotion and authenticity its the key for that project, I thought it was the right decision to make.

“Deciding on the correct space to record your vocals is of course, paramount. One common misconception about recording professional sounding vocals is that you have to record them in an isolated sound booth. The reality is that most singers don’t perform their best when they’re isolated away from everything...” (Abbey Road. 2020).

It was vital to record vocals in the best-treated room. Nonetheless, it was crucial to keep pressure away from the vocal delivery. Setting vocal microphone I had to make sure that there is no unnecessary reflection, likewise, to eliminate booming sound, mood it required a bit more work with EQ. (Abbey Road. 2020).

Reflection

The past three months turned out to be hard working days which brought new experience and knowledge. Despite prior perpetration, the recording sessions/schedule became a bit more challenging in the light of Covid. Before the guitar recording started, the guitarist was informed and sent to mandatory quarantine for about two weeks (gladly, nobody was infected). As a result, the entire issue has shifted the timeline, had less time for the mixing and mastering. I have had to become more flexible as well hold daily conversations with the team, and keep all updated. Furthermore, I became realistic and started to create a backup plan. The solutions were many, from recording from home just using DI either finding and inviting new session musicians to the project. Thankfully, the team stayed original. However, studio time was already shortened, and I had to prioritise Open Doors, Fever, Grown, over songs such as Big City, Hearth Out. I have made this decision based on the song structure and arrangement. Later on, additionally recorded via DI which, brought extra work on the mix (extra saturation, building ambience, stereo image). The unexpected events occur daily, staying focused has helped me to keep the project going, consistency pushed the project further despite the occurred obstacles.

The nature of projects such as Quiet Wars, where authenticity becomes the priority, the crucial question appeared: How much of collaboration the project needs?

And my answer was: the minimum.

I can easily admit, It was the right decision, however, it meant seeking more research and knowledge but also, the responsibility. To clarify, I adore any type of collaboration. Meeting new

artists and sharing experiences with other peers always have been vital for me. Therefore being in charge of songwriting, arrangement, music production, recording sessions, recording vocals, mixing and mastering became a real challenge. Additionally, each fraction required time and development which, made the days even shorter.

As stated in my proposal, I have had to reach out to the intended mixing engineer also master engineer. Unfortunately, after few revisions, I have had to turn down this collaboration, at least for that project. The main reason behind that decision was that mixed versions had the lack of dynamic. Moreover, it seemed that the engineer needed more notes/time to reach the aim. Working on the mix, and working on the mastering gave me priceless insight into each profession. However, there is always room for improvement, and I am truly aware of it.

Working on all these factors have had a huge impact on the storytelling aspects. This creative freedom has allowed me to illustrate and translate ideas freely but consumed a bit more time. This project represents new directions, style, story, sonics, but also it draws the character and gives a sense of journey.

It has developed my sound as an artist and producer/engineer. After the 23rd of July, my goal would be to improve on the mixing/mastering side likewise, make finish touches on effects and add extra colour/spark to the story.

Marketing and the vision

I am planning to release the final version of this project In late September. Moreover, planning about creating a budget and record two music videos that could represent this project. My vision includes a fusion between retro and futurist styles mood board and visuals wise. It would be crucial to make an appropriate session for the artwork (Metropolis, Skyscrapers, City at Night).

After the premiere date, I have the plan to create the live band and apply it to a few venues/festivals/ live events. Moreover, I am aiming to release exclusive versions of the *Hearth Out* and *Grown* in my mother language (Polish), as the exclusive option, with a limited number of purchases. Furthermore, I would like to record acoustic live sessions and promote the project on social platforms by adding extra footage that shows a bit of backstage, private notes, videos from the recording sessions, etc.

PDP - Krystian Krupinski - Quiet Wars

Learning and Development Need	Current State (May 2021)	Target (23 July)	Development / Opportunity	Criteria for Success	Result	How to Improve?
Leadership, team working skills	In good condition, but willing to expand its experience	More confident about assembling group of people, became more confident about expressing own ideas, positive feedback from the musicians	Invite unknown before musicians, create a band , work with engineers	Positive feedback form team members, reach the deadlines, following the time-line	Great atmosphere, more confident about assembling a band, followed time line, nonetheless the delay accused due covid restrictions	Planning to do more projects, be involved in the outside projects, collaboration
Arrangement skills, production skills	Unsure about arranging real instruments, still working on the right balance, needs more experience	Satisfied with the results, enough research has been done, practical knowledge	Research about the appropriate style of music, critically evaluate the priorities for the project production wise	Majority recorded with live instruments, balanced arrangement, good feedback, emotion captured	Majority recorded live instruments, although could be improved	Practise new instruments, collaborate with other artists, observe industry listen to different music styles
Creative development	Willing to discover new sounds, open for inspiration and authentic delivery	Produced authentic body of work (5-7 tracks)	Spend at least a three days a week on writing material, collaborate, ask for the feedback to improve	Authentic body of work, fully written and produced material	Mostly achieved, although could explore more in the mix	Keep exploring own ideas, working harder and more often on visual representation of the music, keep writing stories about real experiences, read books

Learning and Development Need	Current State (May 2021)	Target (23 July)	Development / Opportunity	Criteria for Success	Result	How to Improve?
Knowledge about the studio equipment / work flow	Needs more information and preparation for the upcoming recording sessions	Practical knowledge, working in studio, more confined in working with analog	Book studio sessions, research appropriate informational about studio equipment, reach out to experienced engineers	Feeling confident working with, (analog compressors, preamps, etc.), choosing right mic's, enough research	Feeling more confident about analog, and recording live, also improved in work flow	Looking for internships in studio, record more projects, read books, meet other engineers/producers/artists exchange knowledge

Conclusion

Along the way, I have had asked myself the fundamental question: research/gear versus what feels right? The research has become a tool that helped me to translate my ideas and supported the entire process.

Moreover, the knowledge has helped me achieve ideal quality and create an atmosphere also capturing the appropriate emotion. The research has helped me define the key elements that make the production stand out or sound professional (production, arrangement wise etc.). Moreover, working on Quiet Wars has made me more confident in-studio. Improved my workflow, expanded my recording skills likewise, showed me how to apply knowledge into practice.

The whole process allowed me to discover my production/arrangement skills and areas for improvement. Lastly, I have had a chance to create a body of work that will always remind me about Tileyard and its impact on my artistry.

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Brittany Howard, Jamie- https://open.spotify.com/album/5xQrvHK0YbNaFslrvJYMNR?si=gL6oHZNRQgqhqeFkT_EhKw&dl_branch=1

Kasia Lins, Mojw Wina - https://open.spotify.com/album/238K5FqDmzZj5fWvFckYAG?si=x-2Q9v1NSkqmr_tFgR4aEQ&dl_branch=1

Daria Zaiałow, A Kysz! - [https://open.spotify.com/album/4h6AUTJMuuCUJGCumhRI0p?
si=n2pTmPnTSy-pXasj-VKqg&dl_branch=1](https://open.spotify.com/album/4h6AUTJMuuCUJGCumhRI0p?si=n2pTmPnTSy-pXasj-VKqg&dl_branch=1)

Krystian Marcin Krupinski for Tileyard Education