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Element 2b

Reflective Commentary

Introduction - The journey of vulnerability

When I chose the name VNRBL, the abbreviation for the world *vulnerable* to be my artist project this year I didn't realise the pre-conceived ideas behind the world would be quite as strong as they were. At first, I thought I wanted to really expose my deepest feelings and share my story in my song writing but as I progressed, I found the concept extremely limiting and to be honest, pretty boring. I began feeling that the name pretty much boxed me in. There's an expectation that being vulnerable means I have to be 'authentic' and that being authentic means I have to be deep. Somewhere around the end of term two after receiving some great feedback on my portfolio by Martyn Ware, I came to the realisation that being vulnerable for me, was to embrace the theatrical element in me, and in some senses the creation of personas that are, in essence *not me*, but reflections of shades of me, resulting in actually, well... being me. I realised that I'm all of them, everything. All the inspiration and motivation I have for sharing my story is still there but I don't feel like I have to do it in such a narrow way anymore. In fact, the funnier and quirkier I am will probably make people more receptive to my message in the long term and create more of an opening for an inspirational life story. I'm not sure I want to spend my time being 'all that serious' although of course there are times for that. Obviously for this essay I'm reflecting on the year for this particular task but this is an idea that will continue to evolve within me and I suppose in the coming weeks as I work towards the official releases of some of my work I've completed throughout the duration of this MA, some of these ideas and concepts will become clearer. Well, maybe. I just know that my ideas and beliefs will change and develop and that's a good thing I think. So all these little realisations and have led to me being in a bit of an artistic dilemma for the last few weeks whilst I've been trying to figure out how to bring all the varying parts of myself together in the form of a producer, songwriter and artist and how to best narrow them down into some kind of workable, listenable style that reflects all of me but could at the same time be marketable. I want to be unique of course, but not so obscure that my music doesn't relate to the average listener.

Over the past few weeks but mostly in the last three months, I have had the privilege of having had a lot of input from some amazing producers and have been able to hear their thoughts and perspectives on the idea of vulnerability versus marketability. An artist being their true self or

creating a persona. One of the people I managed to interview was Peter Gabriel's head studio engineer at Real World Records, Oli Jacobs. Due to the current world crisis, I was unable to meet him in person and wasn't able to tour the studio as previously planned. However, our meeting on Zoom was invaluable and the conversation really impacted me. From the word go, Oli really led the conversation and didn't leave me that much work to do in terms of prompting him. I had planned out ten questions but in the end, he answered most of them by just talking freely. I pretty much just let him talk and it was awesome. I asked him how the process at Real World studio's differs from other studios in terms of songwriting to the completion of a radio ready track. He explained that a lot of artists or bands come in to the studio's with almost nothing but a concept and spend a week to two weeks there from beginning to end of album completion. The environment at Real World provides the opportunity to really get away from the mundane things of life and truly connect, (in an inner sense), with the environment as it is set in the country side in Bath. It also provides a relaxed and non time pressured approach so there's an element of just, 'seeing what happens,' in a very free flowing way. Oli explained that it might just start with the singer having a melodic line and then a guitarist playing a simple lick behind them. Then the piano player feeling out some chords and from there the songs organically progressing in a natural way and suddenly an album is coming together. For me, this sounds pretty amazing as, in terms of my songwriting and production, it has been happening all *in the box*. This has mostly been because of cost and the ability to produce myself. It's just so much easier to use midi however, coming from a blues, jazz improvisational background, I am really drawn to the ethos at Real World. The approach seems to be less commercially driven. Now don't get me wrong, I love pop music but I think each environment would breed a different result too so I'm interested in doing something at Real World at some point.

Another one of my sources of research for this project has been Brene' Brown. Brown talks in her Ted Talk in 'The Power of Vulnerability' that many of us have a deep sense of unworthiness and that this keeps us from connecting with others and from whole hearted, healthy relationships. She also discusses the idea that telling your story with your whole heart and having the courage to be 'imperfect' and treat ourselves with compassion, leads to authenticity. People who are willing to let go of, 'who they feel they should be,' and are able to embrace who they are, seem to have an understanding of the concept that what makes them vulnerable, makes them beautiful. Not to try and suggest here that vulnerability is in any way comfortable but rather, that it is necessary to live a fulfilled life. Whilst many of us fear it, vulnerability is a place for creativity, personal progress and ultimately success.

"You either walk inside your story and own it or you stand outside it and hustle for your own worthlessness." (Brown 2018.) I feel like I've been doing that for as long as I can remember and actually, I think it's held me back as an artist and maybe in life in general but I have a new sense about it now. I don't need to be ashamed about my story but I don't necessarily have to lead with it at the forefront of absolutely everything I do either. It doesn't define me and not everyone has a right to know. Walking inside my own story means something different to me than

it did three months ago. I can own it but not necessarily share it. I can compartmentalise it though because I feel ahead of it more than behind it now and using personas doesn't have to be an escape so much as it can be art and entertainment. Maybe fun is underrated. Maybe Lady Gaga went too far and couldn't sustain herself but that might be for different reasons other than not being authentic. Having spent over a decade shrouding herself in a mythical and ethereal artist persona, things took a massive toll on her physical and mental health and personal relationships. Maybe she needed a therapist. I think she has one now and perhaps that's why she's managed to reign it all in and turn it around because now she seems to be really enjoying being an artist and I guess that's the whole point. Artists or entertainer? Or, artist and entertainer?

The Concept of Vulnerability in Society

As stated in my opening paragraph, people have very strong ideas around the concept of vulnerability. A lot of people's reaction to vulnerability is negative although that is changing. It started to feel a bit like a noose around my neck however and I became exhausted pretty quickly at the thought of having to be authentic all the time although, I gave it a pretty good shot. I think I've had enough of a dose of it and might go back to being mysterious and quirky now. I have begun to feel a bit like the quote below. 'Maybe you're one of those people who cringes when they hear the word "vulnerability." Maybe the very thought of being more vulnerable nauseates you, conjuring up images of holding hands around the campfire while you cry over how your best friend doesn't love you like you love him, or whatever.' (Manson, 2018)

A lot of people actually have a negative view about the idea of vulnerability as seen by Mark Mansons quote above but it is true that there has been a strong movement in the public eye and in the media in regard to this concept of the power of vulnerability in recent years. This has been largely led by media personalities like Brene' Brown, Mark Manson and even more currently from a musical perspective, artists like Billy Eilish. You might be put off by Billy crying all over instagram but her millions of fans are clearly lapping it up like there's no tomorrow. At first I found it refreshing. Now I'm bored. Personally, I wish Billy Eilish would get it together a bit now. I'm sick of her crying all over instagram. Just saying.

My reflective thought here is that sure, it's not good to suppress emotion, but then it raises the argument as to whether or not it should be revealed in the public eye to such a high degree. Is exposing oneself in this way so healthy or should our inner most thoughts and feelings be reserved for those closest to us who we can trust? Cool and aloof is becoming more attractive to me by the day.

However, In their book, *The Power Of Negative Emotion*, acclaimed psychologists Dr Todd Kashdan and Dr Robert Biswas-Diener explain why positivity and mindfulness can only take us so far. To live life

to the full, we need to cultivate 'emotional agility' – the ability to access our full range of emotions (not just the 'good' ones). (Robert Biswas-Diener, 2020)

There is medical research that suggests suppressing negative emotions leads to illness and conditions such as; Chronic Fatigue, Fibro Myalgia and other anti immune disorders.

The ways in which humans manage their emotions has become one of the most important but least examined concerns in medicine today. Emotions are physiological phenomena . When poorly managed or regulated, they can lead to negative health and psychological consequences. (Patel and Patel, 2020)

I've personally experienced that suppressing emotion has quite a negative impact and actually, my life has changed quite a lot since I started some sessions with Tileyard's in house therapist Suzanna Storey at the end of last term. Having done twelve sessions with her now, my perspective on this topic has thoroughly evolved and my own, 'in some senses, *need* to express my emotions on social media has pretty much dissolved which has been a significant personal development for me.

Having done a lot of personal research into the subject of vulnerability over the past nine months, I have found that being vulnerable within a musical spectrum is thought by some medical professionals to be a very therapeutic approach to use music as a form of therapy and means of emotional regulation. There have been countless studies done concerning this over the years and I conclude from my own research that not only is it beneficial for one to listen to music as a form of therapy but also to express one's emotions and state through the platform of music, be that in the form of an instrument, lyric or poetry writing or performance. Results from research conducted in 2013 stated in the following citation. 'Results indicated there are certain music characteristics and experiences that produce desired and undesired neural activation patterns implicated in ER. Desired activation patterns occurred when listening to preferred and familiar music, when singing, and (in musicians) when improvising; undesired activation patterns arose when introducing complexity, dissonance, and unexpected musical events. Furthermore, the connection between music-influenced changes in attention.' (Moore, 2020)

All the above research has definitely impacted the direction of my songwriting, music production and progression as an artist this year. Below is a little excerpt about each of the songs in my portfolio and some inside into the journey for each.

The Songs

Firstly I've re-looked at What I Can't Have. My original approach to the production was initially dark and moody but I felt as though it made everything a bit depressing and I thought that the song would benefit from a contrasting, tropical house type groove. I changed the beat which immediately changed the whole song and brought it to life. I think this is where my production

turned a corner and I started to A/B tracks much more carefully, listening intently for how subtle sounds were being layered and placed in the stereo field. After producing this song I decided to switch to Ableton and that decision probably set me back about two months whilst I struggled to engage with the program. In the end, I just couldn't get myself to enjoy the feel of the layout and with Logics latest update, I decided I would make my life easier and go back to the program I knew best! I've included this track in the final project and have basically left the production as is but re-arranged the song and re-tracked the vocals properly now.

(Reflective note 27/08/2020 - In the end I've really messed up on this one and somehow deleted the vocal stems. I've had to hand in this in now as an instrumental and I guess this will give me a chance to record them even better however, disappointing...

Overload is a song that I had originally produced for a remix that was never used and I decided to make a few tweaks to the production and re-visit the song for myself. I had spent a lot of time on this as it had been for a record label so I feel that sonically it's probably my strongest track. I had also received a lot of feedback on the mix from producer peers at the time. I wrote the song at the end of term two and laid down a rough vocal but after feedback from various producers at Tileyard, I decided to re-structure the song and make it less singer/songwriter and more hooky. I removed the second verse and replaced it with a repetitive hook which is more fitting to the genre which has turned out to be quite electro, and have lifted the volume of the bass and added some subtle drive to give a dirtier feel to the glossy production. I will continue to work on this one but may re-write the song even further to make it into more of a dance tune which is even more hook than song based. I felt that my personality really came through with this one on both the lyrics and the vocal.

Play That Funk is one of my most recent productions and I was pretty happy with my improvement on production. I paid a lot of attention to beat placement and build however, I didn't get a chance to finish the production but I think the direction is strong and it is one I will continue to work on as well as writing a proper top line for this. Unfortunately I was really rushed and simply ran out of time to finish this one.

Young Love is an older track that I have revisited. The vocals were recorded in the studio so much better quality on this track. The track has been mastered by someone other than me and the style is very pop/singer songwriter. I think it could be re-worked really well as a house track with less lyrics and more hooks pulled out to fit the genre.

The song Jekyll and Hyde has truly been the bane of my existence and has taken up about 90% of my time and focus for the last three months. It came out of a meeting I had with one of the producers at Tileyard, Nadeem Daya, which led to me gain some great input and feedback on my tracks from him and his partner Adam Halal, (another producer at Tileyard). After carefully listening

to my tracks he said that I should try to blend everything into a similar style and make the tracks more, 'cool and sexy'. I had to look at that because I'm prone to writing cheesy pop lyrics with way too many lines in them. Adam reflected his thoughts and the more and more I talked with other producers such as Sean Hargreaves and most recently Prash from Engine Earz, the same sentiments kept coming back to me. Everything is coming along quite well as it's own element but things aren't coming together in a workable style yet. 'Just make them cool and sexy.' (Daya and Halal 2020.)

This was harder than I'd anticipated and I have re-produced this track now about ten times and still couldn't get it to feel quite right. To date, I have four days left before hand in and this track is not finished. At this point I don't know what I'll be submitting for this one. In some senses I feel like I've wasted a lot of time here but on the other hand I have learnt so much on this track and it has been the basis of me honing in my musical direction and establishing my own sound. That may not be reflected in this portfolio to the extent I've realised but I think moving forward it will. This track has been the turning point for me going down an electro, house type route.

(Reflective note 27/08/2020 - I have had to leave this track as a work in progress. It's something I will come back to because I think it's a strong song potentially. Post today, I will get this one up to release standard however long it takes me.

Flashee has been another kind of breakthrough for me in finding a unique sound. At this point I was really sick of being authentic and just wanted to do something fun. Once again it came from Adam Helal introducing me to the music of dance duo Sofi Tukker. He played me one of their most famous tracks, Purple Hat and I was hooked. I could really see myself relating to their lyrics, musical genre and even performance style. The quirky lyrics yet relatable and familiar music make this duo really unique and different but not so different that the genre of this audience wouldn't relate. I began to see a picture of myself doing something similar and went home and wrote Flashee using Purple Hat as my main reference. I wanted to write something hooky and quirky that didn't really make any sense. Sexy and cool was going through my mind with this. I also wanted some real instrumentation so decided to use a live bass sample beside the rest of the midi based sounds. The song is a little niche but only if you haven't heard of Sofi Tukker. Without too much thought I decided to try my own take on re-creating a guys voice by rap/talking the verse and pitching it down to sound like a guy. A couple of people asked me who the guy and when I said, 'No it's me,' They were so surprised that then it opened up a whole new idea which has actually led to my next creation. Frankie Makks. I'll explain more later but the idea of gender bending the vocals has been received better than I anticipated. This is another song I am continuing to produce as I write and Tileyard Ed's very own Justin Gartry will be laying down some rock guitar on this too. It's hard to say what musical genre this one falls into. I honestly don't know but I think it will sit in well with the rest of the dance/house production whilst maintaining it's own individuality as a stand out song.

(Reflective note 27/08/2020 - This track unfortunately remains unfinished and I may have indeed, made it worse than when I started.) The guitar tracking went well but I didn't leave myself enough time for editing so I have handed this one in without the guitar and is another work in progress.

I wrote 'Breathe' for a brief. It took me about ten minutes to write the lyrics and it already had an instrumental so for this one I recorded the top line and added in the vocal samples for the intro and outro. It was the first brief I have answered so when it got down to the final two I was completely surprised and blown away. I didn't feel as though my vocals were that strong on this because it's not exactly my most comfortable genre and also the key was set so I just sung to the track as it was. I used alter Boy for some interesting vocal effects and also the new Logic Sampler for the chopped up breathe parts.

I really went down the dance/house route with the production on Talk About It and I am still learning how to produce in this style but I like it and feel comfortable with this genre. I ended up changing the name of this song in the end because I didn't end up being able to record the vocals. I have struggled with my voice for the last couple of weeks and needed to stop singing. Because of this, for a couple of the songs I have used repetitive, pitched down hooks. They were originally only meant to be used in some places of the song and other parts should have been sung but due to the vocal problems I have used the samples throughout. I think it's okay because it suits the genre of the track and the rest of the song can be written and recorded at a later stage. I've been influenced on this track by Ida Corr's Let Me Think About It song from way back in the day. It was such a great track so I'm aiming to do something like that but for the purpose of this hand in, the production may need to be finished post the MA hand in date.

I feel that with the more recent songs I'm starting to define my own sound. Talk About It, Jekyll and Hyde, Breathe, Play That Funk and Flashee all really feel like tracks I could finish for release as an individual artist. They are all unique but feel to me as though they fit together and I find myself in all of them in. Some of the topline on these needs development but once again it was a time issue and I'll continue working on those and perhaps look to collaborate on them also.

Conclusion

I'm not really sure if I was meant to reflect on the whole year or just this terms portfolio so I'm going to make an executive decision and reflect on the whole year. I started off running. Really excited and then took a few hard personal hits. Falling down the stairs and breaking my ankle was a pretty big deal. It made me feel so isolated and I really lost my confidence. Previously I had dealt with a my emotional ups and downs with exercise and suddenly I couldn't do that anymore. The injury took longer to heal than anticipated and getting to classes and the studio for term two was pretty much impossible and then... Corona Virus hit. For me this was very hard. I was already pretty isolated due to the ankle fracture and still on crutches at the time. Having had just moved into my own studio thinking it would be great to live alone, suddenly it really wasn't and I got into a very low place with my only contact a few very close friends in Australia via WhatsApp and Facebook. I honestly think this might have been the most challenging year I've ever had but the upside to all of that is at the end of term two as I was on the verge of throwing it all in I received some amazing support from the Tileyard Education community such as Harry Lekstein, Martyn Ware, Ciaran Robinson and other producers within Tileyard itself. I'll never forget Martyn and his wife coming down to meet me at the studio. That act of kindness meant so much to me. I felt really cared about and it pushed me to keep moving forward. Because hey, in the scheme of things, I'm nobody, just another person, but still they came out for me. Then Harry met me on Beebop in that last two weeks every three days and with his encouragement I kept in the race and managed to finish with a mark of 85% on my portfolio.

I think that all these things happening made me grow as a person in leaps and bounds this year. I can't say that this year has been all about music production for me because it felt more like a constant test of my character, resilience and determination. I've realised I have a lot of that and throughout this year, the inner sense of self belief has prevented me from giving up. Because I was alone here during the Corona Virus epidemic, it caused me to continue to go into Tileyard almost every day and I basically used every spare minute to work on my music production skills. I'm still not at the standard I want to be at but I know I've improved a lot and more importantly, I've set myself up from my inner most self to succeed now. I know that in terms of skill, I will just continue to improve because I'm un-shakeably determined. I realise this reflective commentary may not be as technical as some others and a bit more like the Breakfast Club essay but it's been my experience.

The Future Plan

As a lot of this year for me has been finding a way to bring all my various skills and interests together, it has led me to try out interesting and different ways to both express and promote myself as a music producer, songwriter and artist. Through experimenting with pitch changes on my vocals, having been largely influenced by Sofi Tukker's music and also some of Tileyard Music's dance production community, it has led me to create a persona which is actually two personas in one. Frankie Makks is in essence Frankie and Makks. Frankie is the feminine version of me and Makks is the masculine. They are both edgy and cool though and have individual looks, fashion styles and vocal and instrumental roles on the tracks. Frankie sings and plays drums and guitar whereas Makks is the producer, rapper and plays bass and keys. Makks rapping is defined by the lower pitched vocal and to anyone listening would sound like an entirely different person to Frankie. Makks has the short, blonde hair and wears hats whereas Frankie wears long colourful wigs and rocks out on drums. In terms of performance when one is performing, the other will appear on screen and then switch throughout the performance when possible.

How does this link in with vulnerability? Well, perfectly and I think this idea is extremely relevant in this time where there's a lot of discussion and confusion about gender identity. I can do all these things whilst embracing both my masculine and feminine sides whilst also remaining secure in the fact that I'm a woman. I feel really excited about playing these different roles up yet, being completely myself in both of them seems really cool to me. In terms of marketability I think it's something new and different but also the musical style will be familiar. I will be continuing to work on four tracks from this terms portfolio to release under the banner of Frankie Makks for the summer 2021. Hopefully by then the world might be ready for performers and events again and ready to party. In my future, perfect world I'll be signed as a songwriter and producer for Tileyard Music and write and produce a countless number of hit songs.

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