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In this essay, I will be outlining a proposal to create a professional portfolio, to showcase my skills as a music producer to attract potential clients, artist managers and music publishers, to my brand. I will be evaluating the feedback I have previously received from industry professionals thus far and recognizing the elements or growth required, to increase my chances of success. My analysis will also include but not be limited to; recognizing my production and branding strengths and weaknesses, recognising opportunities and threats that may help/hinder the achievement of my goal and pinpointing what I can do to minimise them, and finally understanding the different approaches I can take to secure success. I'll also be looking into what it takes from a technical and business perspective for a customer/manager/publisher to take notice of me and closing the skills gap required to achieve the sound that will get me noticed.

For me to achieve this aim, I will be researching the case studies that have allowed my peers and mentors before me to find success and will attempt to dissect the factors these approaches have had, on determining the direction of their careers. I hope that this research will provide clarification and direction in the execution of my project.

Different approaches to the Objective

With my end goal in mind, I began to speak with numerous industry professionals and found that there are several different routes to achieving this aim. The three I will be specifically focusing on building connections with labels directly, building a presence online to attract clients and responding to submissions and briefs.

Building connections with labels directly

My research began by speaking with a seasoned practitioner and expert in the A&R space, to help me explore this approach further. I got in touch with Jamie Searls, the Admissions and A&R manager for Tileyard Education, who was extremely helpful in talking through this with me, taking stock of the music I had previously submitted for A&R playback sessions and loaded with the feedback and experience he had with me.

When asking about the first approach Jamie Searls suggested: 'A great idea would be to identify the artists that you would like to work with, or the labels they are signed to, then either identify key people within those companies and approach them. Alternatively, you could look at smaller independent labels that work with those publishers and form connections with them to pitch songs/music, as they are likely to be more accessible' (Searls, 2020).

This seemed like very sensible advice and something I had not considered early on in my career. When analysing some of the most famous artists in my genre Migos and Lil Baby (who are signed to Quality Control) for instance, I discovered that a joint venture deal was at the heart of their projects. Many smaller labels frequently sign artists/producers on joint venture deals (sometimes a one-song deal), which allows the artists to reap the benefits of a major record label with a larger infrastructure and resource, enabling a much larger reach with influence on their target audience and distributors, whilst still having a degree of creative control of their music.

When asked about feedback on my songs, Jamie was very complimentary and advised that the songs I had submitted in past playback sessions were always on brief and to a good pitching standard. This was very encouraging to hear and to give me an even better chance of success, I wanted to understand how to brand my music and the right approach to take when approaching people in the industry. 'Get a catalogue of your best work, with or without

vocals and create a private SoundCloud playlist or link to an online folder, so that you can send this to the people you connect with' (Searls, 2020)

Building a presence online with a powerful brand

The next approach I will explore will be through building my brand and attracting my target audience through my online (and offline) presence. The idea to explore this route came from my research into successful music producers who had either become and remained independent, or successful producers who previously had publishing deals with major record labels only to find a more lucrative avenue by creating freelance work.

Why would a music producer not be successful once they have signed a publishing deal? One possible reason for this could be due to the types of deals that music producers have been offered early on in their careers and lack of knowledge/legal representation when signing these deals. I spoke with my mentor Lorenzo Cosi regarding this matter who advised that once I have achieved my goal that I 'should keep management, publishing and legal representation in different places. Sometimes a label may want you to use their in-house teams, however, their interests will almost always lie with the company they represent. Spreading your team across different businesses will offer you protection in each department' (Cosi, 2020).

This was indeed interesting as online music producer Curtiss King acknowledges in his interview with DJ Booth that 'most major labels pay new producers a flat fee the following quarter after an album is completed and released to the public. In many instances, this can mean that a producer must wait for nearly a year to get paid if their beat gets picked early on in the album creation process', (King, 2018). Unknown producers have less influence and potentially knowledge of upfront fees, advances and mechanical royalties, being more focused on the music creation process. Since then King has gone on to create a successful business as an online music producer, leveraging marketplaces and social media sites like Beatstars.com, Airbit and YouTube to generate revenue directly

Responding to submissions and briefs

Finally, being fortunate enough to study at Tileyard Education, I have a lot of exposure to live music briefs (or submissions), that are sent out to the community directly from record labels and music supervisors. Responding to these briefs allowed me to explore this route in more depth with feedback given back to me directly and in-person (or virtually).

As my goal is to obtain a management or publishing deal with a record label, I wanted to understand what it was that these companies look for when deciding to add a new artist to their roster. I immediately began to scour through the feedback I had received on all of my current submissions and quickly realised that although the songs weren't given directly positive or negative feedback, as a producer my role needed to encompass more than just the creation of the music.

In a recent feedback session for a brief for an upcoming artist called Celina Sharma, the Artist Manager Dani Stephenson of Straight FWD Music was very impressed by the production of the song but felt 'it was let down by a weaker vocal performance and lyrics' (Stephenson, 2020).

This was something I wanted to address in part of my portfolio even though a recording artist may have a team of songwriters and management, it would still be my role to help direct and lead through influence. This is further reinforced by Charlie Arme, Founding partner at Tileyard Music's feedback on the song which was also similar, "As the producer, you need to

lead not only the music production but to give direction on the performance and lyrics too. You should aim to have that influence on whatever you work on.” (Arme, 2020)

Building my Portfolio

With the information I had gathered from my research I decided that I would play to my strengths that I discovered through my conversations and SWOT analysis (Fig 1), by making songs in genres I am familiar with.

To create a successful business, I will aim for a business model that isn't dependent on any avenue of success and create a portfolio that will be split into three distinct sections at a total running time of around 30-45 minutes. I will aim to create enough diversity in my work to fit briefs that would work for each of the three audiences identified; signed artist's projects, TV and Film opportunities and freelance music production through marketplaces, thus satisfy each of the proposed strategies stated in my introduction.

The first fifteen minutes of my portfolio will address the songs I would like to pitch to artists that I would like to work with. By analysing each artist's previous releases and dissecting the musical key, tempo and structure of the songs of their catalogue, I will create songs which I can then pitch to their manager/supervisors to give me a better chance of being noticed. Following this, I will attempt to form a relationship with these people and regularly send over the music to them to be considered for work in the future.

The second section (also fifteen minutes) will be songs that address my previously discovered weakness of working with other artists. In this section, I will aim to improve my experience with vocal production specifically to achieve a radio-ready commercial sound. I intend to create a strong enough portfolio to demonstrate my music and vocal production skills, as well as my mixing/mastering skills, to potentially attract not only music production but additional freelance services online. This could prove to be a very commercially lucrative successful avenue and allow me to connect with artists and musicians, expanding my network and potentially opening more opportunities in the future and repeat business.

The final fifteen mins will be aimed toward placements in TV and film, with songs that convey relevant emotion to emphasise the mood of the video/picture that it is being synchronised with. The choice in this direction was due to the learning I gained at this year's AIM Sync (Virtual) seminar where Kyle Hopkins, (Head of Music Supervision at Microsoft), spoke about the importance of the emotion of music placed in the Forza Horizon racing game series. He stated that his choice of music placements 'are vital to the experience of the game itself...with Hospital Records and Forza Horizon...it's a fun-loving driving game that's adrenaline-fuelled and drum and bass (as a genre for instance), lends itself to the hospital catalogue so well' (Hopkins, 2020).

I will focus my portfolio predominantly on commercial pop music, mostly without the use of live instrumentation, to live recording equipment and recording spaces, due to the limited access I currently have due to COVID 19 lockdown restrictions.

It is fortunate that I have a home studio and have attended many virtual songwriting camps online, which using technology have enabled me to work effectively. An online case study from Sound on Sound following 'legendary music producer Illmind', demonstrating how he was able to make a full song from scratch using a vocal in an untreated hotel room, recorded on a 'budget dynamic microphone' (Harding, 2019), without ever meeting the artist and achieving an astounding result. This gives me some hope and minimises this threat somewhat, as the network of artists that I have access to, do already have a basic mic and set up in their homes.

Branding

When presenting my logo to Tileyard Education's Entertainment and Design Tutor Steve Cole, he commented that 'It was very tech and serious' and 'didn't seem to align with who' I was (Cole, 2020). I was taken aback by how accurate this assessment was from the first interaction he had with my branding but was able to identify my background so precisely through an image I had created. This is supported by Paul Allen who cites that 'A key component of branding is image. A brand image is the way people feel about a product, and in this case, the artist. It is their emotional attachment to the artist based on their music and performances and how they respond to them. The image of the artist should be a reflection of their own values' (Allen, 2007).

At the time when I had created my brand I was indeed working in the tech space and wanted to work with "serious" music professionals, however with the learning I had received from my MA and from working with artists who were willing to invest in themselves, I realised this wasn't the type of message I wanted to convey.

During a class with Tileyard Education's social media manager Lucy Macieira, I was taught the \$1.80 Instagram growth strategy by Gary Vaynerchuk. Lucy suggested that 'following ten relative hashtag's, having a minimum of nine meaningful interactions through comments with the top nine posts every single day and posting relevant and appropriate content, will likely grow your network and help you build followers' (Macieira, 2020)

Measuring Success

For me, a measure of my success would be to create music that can achieve between five hundred and one thousand views/streams per song, on social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Spotify respectively on each song I upload. This would be a much higher number than I have been able to achieve through my current branding, portfolio and followers through my social media presence. As many opportunities are generated through social media, I would also expect to reach between seven hundred to one thousand followers, (my current number of followers on Instagram is just shy of four hundred).

Meanwhile, by connecting with as many as ten industry professionals that I can pitch my music to directly and aim to secure a management or publishing deal with a small independent label to get in front of as many opportunities as I can. I am hoping that the insight I will gain from these conversations and potentially have my music placed on artists projects/sync opportunities.

Another measure of my success will be the number of paid clients that I can attract on platforms such as Soundbetter.com and Beatstars.com. These sites have the advantage of being purely focused on the goal of collaboration, connecting music creators, however, the competition is plentiful, so standing out requires more than just good music and this is where I believe my branding could help differentiate me. I would expect to create opportunities within the region of five hundred to one thousand pounds, of projected revenue by the week following the end of this course, with actual work to be completed once the MA has concluded.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have been able to distinguish clear goals, which gives me a great direction to proceed in. I will be exploring and minimising the impediments in the way of my goals and aim to take any further feedback regularly with my network, to adjust my trajectory towards success. I've identified a few different paths and strategies that have worked for other practitioners in the past and analysed my skillset, to highlight areas that I can improve on, based on the feedback I've received.

One thing that has stood out to me throughout this process is the need to consider

myself as not only an artist but as a business in my own right. I feel compelled to explore how viable the assumptions highlighted above are and experiment with my approach to; creating my portfolio, creating a powerful brand & message and networking/responding to feedback by industry practitioners.

Ultimately, I wish to be in a position where I am connecting with opportunities that align with my goals, be they with artist projects, synchronisation, or as a freelance musician with a powerful and transparent brand.

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Appendix

Fig 1 - SWOT Analysis

Strengths

Have my own studio and great range of equipment

Use this to connect with audience and record labels/other artist's or producer's

Create a new brand that represents me, and people can connect with

Studying an MA at Tileyard and access to the network here

Great soft skills and easy to work with, like to coach artists to improve performances

Extremely open to feedback and constructive feedback

Growth mindset, always challenging myself to be better but recognising my success too

Good with Social Media understanding the concepts of Marketing and Sales Funnels

Worked with students in the past and have a network of singers I have great relationships with

Distribution is all set up digitally through Distrokid already, I have a Spotify and all social media accounts too

Peers I can get to review my work and help give tips, both students and mentors

Great with technology and able to make my own branding with my photoshop and illustrator skills

Access to high profile music lawyer through my network

Weaknesses

Vocal production could use some work, I've not too much exposure to this in the past but getting better with each song writing camp

Mixing and stereo depth needs to be improved to sound radio quality, some mixes don't sound so big, lead melodies probably need more work to be creative

Don't really play an instrument well, so it takes me a lot longer to make chord progressions, even though this is minimised with plugins I own

Only know the people in the industry from my course and a few outside from events (BBC Introducing, PRS Events, Sync Con). Not sure I could just reach out to artists and producers that I have met because I do not have a strong relationship with them

No experience dealing with record labels or contract negotiations

Potentially no income to invest in this project

Not the highest level of equipment (no outboard sound cards, compressors, etc.). Computer is aging and I do not have a mobile setup

Opportunities

Venture into Sync a market I don't know very well, but I have songs that could potentially work better in sync than charts.

Grow my network and form relationships through my research and interviewing or asking for recommendations of other people I should speak to

Access to the whole Tileyard network, people who I don't know would probably be open to a conversation or coffee (I can easily commute in)

Based in London, so easy to attend seminars and network with new people (when they re-open)

Member of Musicians in London FB group, access to musicians to record songs with

My network can connect me with session musicians if needed who probably have their own recording facilities

Urban music is very popular now and as it's what I like to make I can make music that is relevant to upcoming and emerging artists

Journaling and getting to know myself better understanding why I choose to make music the way I do and how I can improve

Personal development plan give me a reflective practice and goals outside of my end product (music) that I can improve

Threats

Cannot record with artists who do not have their own set up

Cannot attend seminars to grow network and forge new

Many other producers with established brands that I'll be competing with

Not having the time to polish my whole portfolio to the highest quality I can.

Higher competition, with other producers (more new producers than ever before due to it being so accessible)

A second wave/lockdown COVID does not allow me to have access to network with people I would have a coffee with

I am competing with famous pop music producers as well as the Tileyard community and Alumni

Additional Reading

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