

Introduction, Recap of Project Proposal and Changes Made to the Original Project Idea

This reflective commentary will describe the planning, skill development, creative process and all stages of the overall execution of my project, such as writing, producing, recording, mixing and mastering. It will also discuss the development and utilisation of my 'soft' skills, such as personal interaction and organisation, as well as 'hard' technical skills. Furthermore, this commentary will set out a detailed evaluation of the results of the project and points of improvement for future professional practice and ventures. Further still, it will recap on the original project idea, discuss the changes that occurred during its execution and comment on feedback from music industry professionals and peers. Lastly, a personal development plan will also be presented.

The original project idea was to create a collection of ten tracks inspired by the R&B, Hip-Hop and Trap genres, collaborating with the artist Hazl, who is the co-writer and vocal performer of the music. My precise role and focus within the project were, as a producer and co-writer, presenting me with a multitude of distinct and different tasks. Some of these were; developing the artist's ideas and tracks into high-quality productions, creating additional musical material that fits the themes of the genres, getting the most out of the artist in the recording and production processes, overseeing and managing the creation process as a whole and meeting the demands and visions that the artist had for his music. In addition, although originally, I was responsible for mixing the music, later on, it was decided that I would also master it. This was most notably due to COVID-19 and financial restrictions, and while this was not ideal, Hazl and his management were confident in my mastering abilities. Moreover having produced the entirety of the album, this would at least accommodate the need for an interconnected sound, and achieve the desired cohesiveness.

As explained in my project proposal, our intentions were to write double the ideas that we wanted to eventually develop into fully produced songs and pick the best ten for the project. This is a proven method for many songwriters and producers to maximise creativity and overall results of projects (Ritter and Mostert, 2018). We successfully achieved this, however, upon deliberation and intense work on our selected ten ideas we decided to whittle the body of work down to the best eight tracks, in order to focus our attention and efforts on the most worthy songs, so that we could develop them to their fullest. Upon their completion, the artist, his management, and myself decided that the songs will be released as an album titled 'Intertwined', with a number of singles to be released in advance over a period of two months. Ultimately, this decision was made with consideration of what best suited the artist, his audience, his plans for the future, as well as the current trends and landscape of the contemporary music industry, specifically in relation to those particular genres and their respective industry spheres.

Commencing planning for the album, Hazl and I established four artist references that we would use as staples in the formulation of the album - SZA, Chris Brown, Travis Scott and Bryson Tiller. These artists' music was utilised extensively, not only as inspiration during the writing process but also as a point of reference for the mixing and mastering stages of the album.

Furthermore, Hazl and I established that we had a desire to enhance this collection of songs in some authentic way and that simply having ten songs in the same style thrown together was not original enough for the complexity and level of work we wanted to achieve. We developed the idea of the tracks being one continuous, flowing piece of music when released together as a whole or as different bodies or 'volumes' of work in the form of EP's. However, upon experimentation with this idea, we came to the conclusion that trying to execute this was not only distracting and harmful to our creative process but simply did not complement the overall vibe and cohesiveness of our material. Moreover, keeping in mind commerciality and the current trends of music consumption (ie. single streams and consumers mostly adding individual songs to their playlists rather than listening to entire albums), we felt that our efforts and time could be better directed towards developing the songs themselves to their utmost potential, increasing our chances of commercial success (Leight, 2018). Therefore, with the best interests of the venture in mind, this concept was scrapped.

Although the genres we were aiming to emulate take largely electronic approaches, both the artist and I expressed a desire to add a little more flair and feel to our songs by recording live drums, guitar and bass parts where appropriate. This required me to organise recording sessions with a number of musicians, which I was responsible for selecting, as well as communicating our ideas and vision to. In addition, demo tracks were prepared and sent to the performers in advance so that they were able to rehearse and develop the parts they were required to record. We recorded one track with a full band which did not make it onto the album because it did not fit stylistically and was not appropriate for the overall mood. However, the final versions of a few of the songs, such as 'Personal', 'Sex (Interlude)' and 'Fallin' do have guitar and bass guitar parts that were recorded at Tileyard studios and using my own home studio set-up.

Creative Process - Writing

One of the most significant personal roles as a producer within this project was to develop the ideas that Hazl proposed to me during the writing process. It was crucial that when work on the album commenced, I kept an open mind to songs that he had begun writing on his own. Firstly, because if this approach wasn't taken it could stump the relationship between myself and the artist, as well as the entire creative process, potentially leading to a diminished result and secondly, because another crucial responsibility of mine was to ensure that the artist related to his music as much as possible. If this responsibility was not met, not only would it make the music unreleasable but would also have a negative impact on my career, making the project a complete failure.

Moreover, I quickly discovered that Hazl fell within the category of artists, or writers, that was most comfortable creating authentic music in solitude. The dynamic which he and I established led us to a writing process where Hazl wrote lyrics and melodies in his own time over samples that he liked, accompanied by rough beat ideas, and we would then work on those ideas together in sessions. Once he presented the ideas to me, we would enhance them into fully fledged productions with my knowledge of arrangement and sound design. For example, this would involve selecting different drum sounds and patterns that built a more cohesive and suitable soundscape for the song, forming bass parts, designing and choosing appropriate keys, synths, textures and harmonisation, programming existing and new MIDI, as well as tweaking song structures and timbre to build and release tension and complement those parts. I did also present ideas of my own, using samples that were approved by the artist to work with, some of which, such as 'Lashes', made it on the album.

The initial focus in developing my approach to writing for this project was to study my points of reference with regards to the music that was to be created, fixating on how SZA, Travis Scott, Chris Brown, Bryson Tiller (as well as similar artists in their genre) and their producers have made successful music. I was able to analyse the producers' creation process of songs and beats, and how they put it altogether for all of these artists using the 'Deconstructed' series by GENIUS. This method of research was insightful and interactive, allowing me to learn straight from producers and writers who created these songs, due to their extensive and detailed explanations for their creative processes.

Perhaps the most prominent common theme among all of the producers was that the ideas for their music were conceived through the utilisation of samples from well-known songs, with soul vocal parts, in particular, playing a major role in their productions. As I mentioned, given the genres that we were working within, this theme became quickly apparent in mine and Hazl's own writing process. So to streamline our writing, I collated an extensive playlist of suitable samples and loops, using YouTube and Splice, focusing mainly on soul vocals and parts, and lo-fi synths and keys, which we could easily sift through together and use as inspiration when beginning to develop material for this project.

It is common for creators in this genre of music to take samples such as these and manipulate their tempo, key or sound, using effects such as reverbs, delays, filters and modulators. For instance, K.P and Envyi's "Swing My Way" is used in "Exchange" by Bryson Tiller, Otis Redding's "Cigarettes and Coffee" is in "Modern Slavery" by Travis Scott, and Justin Timberlake's "Summer Love/Set The Mood (Interlude)" features in "The Weekend" by SZA. Producer Foreign Teck of Bryson Tiller's "Exchange" conveys "When I heard this sample and all the extra intricate things that I added to it, and the fills and whatnot, that's the only way I thought to create it", which reflects just how important samples are in this particular world of music production (Foreign Teck, 2018). Noticeably, these artists used recognisable samples from established hits, however, given the limited resources and smaller proportions of this project, it was of course impossible for me to use samples of this calibre due to copyright issues.

That being said, not all songs were initiated exclusively through the use of samples. Some tracks such as 'Personal', 'Sex (Interlude)' and 'Sentimental' were either based around or feature Hazl's own chords, which adds originality and identity to the album. This authenticity is needed in order for consumers to relate to Hazl's artistry, in turn translating into higher potential levels of success.

Evidently in the tracklist chart, all songs are in a minor key (See Appendix 1). This was intentional with two things in mind - our initial concept of adjoining the songs with interludes to make one big flowing body of work would have made this more cohesive, but more importantly because the songs generally consisted of melancholy lyrical themes of break-up, relationship struggles and heartbreak. Using minor keys, which the western music consumer broadly interprets as somber and sorrowful, complemented the overall body of work thematically (Ball, 2010).

Our tempo and time signature choices find justification largely when referring to the genres and artists we were taking inspiration from. 4/4 is almost integral to achieving the sound that we were aiming for and is used on all songs in the album. It is the generic time signature for the majority of commercial music that falls in these genres. R&B and Soul music largely resides between 70 and 90bpm due to its downtempo vibe, whereas trap operates in faster tempos between 100 and 135 to bring out more energetic nuances (Bennett, 2020). Therefore, given the desired sound for the album, this whole spectrum was utilised within 'Intertwined'.

Recording

Although most of this album consisted of electronic-based production, the previously stated desire from both myself and Hazl to have live instrumentation on a few of the tracks meant that I needed to appropriately research and prepare to capture drums, bass and guitar in a professional studio. It was especially important that I conducted this research, allowing me to develop my technical skills in recording instruments, due to my inexperience in this specific area of production and engineering.

Having decided we would record a track with a full band, I had to utilise strong communication and organisation skills so that this could be done within the allocated studio time that was available to us (10 A.M to 6 P.M), in order to make the recording a success. My first task was to send a demo version of the song idea to the musicians a week in advance so that they could prepare and develop their parts. Consequently, I had to uphold communication with each musician with regards to their arrival times, the equipment that they needed to bring and their travel to and from the studio. I arrived half an hour early to the session so that I could brief the engineer on the task at hand, start setting up the studio and make decisions on microphones and techniques that would be utilised to further streamline the process.

I decided that the methodology for the recording session would consist of capturing a solid drum take with all three musicians playing together. This was important as I wanted the drumming to have feel and vibe, which is difficult to achieve when playing to a metronome, but

much easier when locking in as a band. During this stage, the guitarist and bassist played through a DI so that there was no interference with the drum microphones, making the drum takes considerably cleaner. The guitar and bass would then be overdubbed and recorded through both amps and DI's.

I determined it was best to close-mic the drums to give me as much control as possible during the mixing process, considering that I was looking for a contemporary sound. I used top and bottom snare microphones, kick in and kick out, a spaced pair of overheads and one room 'Coles' ribbon microphone in the middle of the room pointed at the drum kit. I sought advice from the engineer on microphone selection but insisted on setting up microphones and monitoring, as well as patching and running the session on Logic myself, to develop my 'hard' technical skills, studio proficiency and recording knowledge.

The bass amp was recorded using an EV RE20 large diaphragm dynamic and a Neumann KM184 small diaphragm condenser, whilst the guitar amp was recorded using an SM57 and the RE20 as well. This selection of microphones aimed to capture the different nuances of the sound, with some being more suited for higher frequencies, whilst others, for lower frequencies.

When it came to vocals it became apparent that after a couple of sessions, I wasn't getting the level of professional performance out of Hazl that was required to achieve our aims for this project. After a conversation with him, where I suggested that we should try a space where he feels more comfortable and creative, we were able to come to the agreement that we would record vocals in his home studio. This decision was vital because we needed to keep the best interests of the project in mind and recording vocals in this way yielded the results we hoped for. It was important that I kept an open mind to this idea because it allowed for a greater chance of project success and we achieved a professional sound anyway that we might not have, had we stuck to trying to grind out vocals in the studio. Moreover, it made the artist more comfortable, improving our work rate and the overall performance of songs.

However, this meant that there needed to be certain steps taken to ensure that the vocals recorded in Hazl's home studio were as professional as possible. Therefore, we set up a homemade vocal booth from heavy blankets that would help us achieve a dry sound, with minimal room noise, mimicking a professional recording studio with sound treatment, which catches sound waves before they bounce around the room and muddy the recording.

Production and Mixing Process

Once the initial ideas had been developed into songs with full structures, timbre and a certain extent of production elements (such as sound design and arrangement), and were completed during the writing process, I began utilising more complex production and mixing techniques to further enhance the tracks.

One challenge in particular, which arose when working on an album, and one which I hadn't encountered in previous professional practice, was the need for cohesiveness when it came to the

overall sound. In other words, a multitude of production and mixing elements would have to recur throughout the album, most notably a focus on drums and vocals. For example, using the EXS24 Sampler in Logic, I decided to create a bespoke drum kit, using ‘one-shot’ drum samples that I curated. This was used in a number of the ideas and a couple of the songs, namely ‘Sex (Interlude)’ and ‘Lashes’ that made it onto the album, as well as some percussion and hi-hat parts on ‘Personal’ and ‘Fallin’. I sent all drum tracks on all of the songs through a bus and utilised similar processing on all of them, using parallel compression with Pro-C 2 to achieve more punch and glue as well as Saturn 2 and overdrive to add saturation and colour to the drum mix.

Furthermore, I developed a unique vocal processing chain for Hazl’s vocals, employing 13 plug-ins, most of which were used on every mix to achieve the desired sound consistency across the album. This processing chain was made up of: unique EQ for each song; two compressors for better dynamics and clarity; a multi-band compressor to further suppress boomy or harsh frequencies; a limiter; a de-esser; saturation to colour and enhance; a vocal doubler to add even more thickness; a vocal rider for a greater consistency of vocal levels; delay; auto-tune (used stylistically); one dryer room reverb; a bigger and wetter reverb (routed through a bus) and finally distortion.

These choices were guided by research conducted on having a consistent drum sound throughout a body of work and on producing “radio-ready” vocals. Specifically, the idea of using the same drum group processing throughout the album was taken from Disclosure’s producer Guy Lawrence who explains how he came up with slightly different processing chains for each of their albums (Lawrence, 2020). As aforementioned, this was also translated to the vocal mixes, for which I also took inspiration from Guy Lawrence’s video on preparing “radio-ready” vocals. Lawrence often states “I use every plug-in in moderation to push the audio to that next step of clarity, excitement or texture, but they all work together to make a big difference” (Lawrence, 2020). This research on a hugely successful industry practitioner was extremely beneficial and enabled my development of these particular ‘hard’ skills and my own original approach, allowing me to harness a professional result.

A problem that I have often encountered as a producer and mix engineer is cutting out all audio on instruments and tracks when a break in the music occurs. Although editing regions to stop at the right time is easy enough, delays or reverbs on those channels would still produce sound which diminished the dynamic effect of having a period of silence in the music. Whilst conducting this project I got around this through appropriate research and started utilising automation to mute individual channels or even the master bus itself. This development of ‘hard’ skills was essential, especially because the genres we were taking inspiration from utilise beat breaks a lot to either accentuate a lyric or vocal, or a ‘drop’ into a chorus or other section. Mute automation was used in many of the songs, namely ‘Sentimental’, ‘Fallin’ and ‘Lashes’ (**See Appendix**).

Another instance of the use of automation was with EQ, for example, rolling off or opening up low-pass filters in transitions between sections, controlling volume or increasing the level of an effect such as reverb, to complement a vocal or instrumental part. Automation was a useful

tool for me during the production and mixing process because it reduced linearity in the songs and added extra dimensions, in the hopes of capturing the listeners' attention more effectively.

An observation of mine was that the vocal production of most R&B, Hip-Hop and Trap songs are very clean and very front and it is noticeable that the space for vocals is often attained through keeping the timbre simplistic and focused in the lows and low-mids, with only the artist, hi-hats and occasional synth part occupying the highs. Therefore, using EQ and careful arrangement, it was important that I carved out spaces for instruments to be heard but not overpower the vocals. Employing bell curves, filters, panning and in some instances sidechaining the bass to the kick, I also minimised muddiness in the overall mix and opened up clarity for each sound within the stereo image. This was crucial to achieving a professional and commercial result (Basnid, 2020).

Heard with the guitar and percussion in the intro to Fallin, a further production technique that I picked up from producer Guy Lawrence was keeping my mix largely mono before a 'drop' and then opening it up to stereo for an enhanced dynamic effect (Lawrence, 2020). This makes the listener hone in to the hi-fi stereo sound of your record because there is such a noticeable change in audio. To take this to the extreme I doubled the guitar part by transposing it an octave lower than the original and having the lower octave panned hard-left whilst the original was panned hard-right.

I utilised a little bit of 'top to bottom mixing' during my process, by mixing into a light compressor on the master channel (Recording Revolution, 2014). In certain instances, this enabled me to make better choices as it allowed me to hear what the overall tracks and individual parts would sound like after they would inevitably be compressed in the final mixing and mastering stages.

When I felt like a song was close to perfection and almost ready for master, I took a few days' rest from listening to it. I was then able to come back with fresh ears and a better perspective so that I could make improvements (Matla, 2021). It was also vital that I used many different points of reference when it came to critically listening to a mix. I needed to obtain a cross-platform balance due to the fact that most consumers would not be using high-quality studio monitors or headphones to listen to music. Therefore, I utilised five different monitoring devices to hear discrepancies in my mixes - my Bluetooth audio system for home listening, my TV, my car, my laptop speakers and my phone. The changes I made after this process were not drastic but just subtle adjustments to levels, EQ and effects until I was satisfied that the tracks sounded good on all five platforms.

As previously mentioned I also had the job of mastering. Considering that I had already worked on the album and been mixing it for so long, this presented some difficulties as I had lost some perspective on the music and the necessary final touches that play a big role in getting the tracks to radio-ready level. To minimise this, once again a break from the music was required as well as a reference point with a song within this genre on Spotify. When listening to my track and the track from Spotify I tried to concentrate on how the low end and high end sounded in comparison and also volume and dynamic range. I used light compression, multi-band

compression, the Abbey Road J37 tape emulator plug-in for saturation and warmth, the Abbey Road TG Mastering Chain, Ozone Imager to achieve a higher stereo width and lastly a FabFilter limiter to further push the volume of the track. I aimed for about -10LUFS to maintain dynamics as much as possible whilst also achieving the loudness that was necessary.

Evaluation and Development of ‘Soft’ Skills

In relation to the ‘soft’ skills I developed throughout the planning, creation, mixing and mastering processes, there were several key areas and skills which significantly aided the overall final product. Notably, the management and organisation of my time, where it was imperative that, due to the scale of the project, I started early and created a detailed timeline for my progress, which was monitored and kept to. This entailed the creation of a brief plan and small deadlines in late April and early May, where I set out my plan of brainstorming ideas and samples with Hazl by the end of May, the completion of the album by late June and the mastering by mid July.

Furthermore, in order to streamline the process for the final part of the module, the Reflective Commentary, I made continual notes on the decisions made, the undertakings of the writing, mixing and mastering procedures, and any difficulties I had. Although a time plan was established, unpredictable events, such as me and Hazl having to self isolate for 10 days, significantly hindered the timeline set out for myself. However, by starting early and timelining the processes, this impact was diminished.

Furthermore, a key component of ‘soft’ skills which were developed throughout the process, was team building and working, which not only benefited the final product, but also helped streamline and aid the processes. By working as a unified team with Hazl and his management, we could brainstorm and all contribute ideas, viewpoints and criticisms, which ultimately helped ensure we all liked the final product, and gained secondary opinions on themes, sounds and ambiances. It was also important to, as producer, to take lead in some musical and stylistic decisions. I had to ensure a healthy balance was established in assuring that, with my knowledge and ear of what works and what does not when mixing and producing, my views and experience were incorporated into the final productions, and the creative freedom of Hazl was not compromised. This balance was achieved throughout the entire process, such as during our weekly meetings and discussions over the direction and progress of the album.

Lastly, through the constant communication with the artist via FaceTime, online media platforms and in person, such as our recording sessions at Tileyard studios and Hazl’s own home studio, it was ensured this balance and correspondence was maintained in creating a piece of work we were both proud of.

Feedback from Artists and Musicians

In order to form the basis for my personal development plan, and further improvements I could make for future ventures, I obtained written and vocal feedback from both Hazl and the musicians, about their experience working and collaborating with me.

Firstly, due to the longevity of my relationship with the artist, we approached this collaborative album with a friendly and positive mindset. The fact that Hazl and I had a positive friendship significantly aided the process and final product, as we could act professionally, such as when we were recording together, but also keep a light atmosphere, which made creativity flourish. Following the end of the main collaborative aspects of creating the album, I asked Hazl to review the overall experience of working with me as a producer. He emphasised that he felt significantly supported throughout the project, and that I gave him full creative freedom in the writing process, which ultimately ensured he was proud of the album. While we both acknowledged the difficulties we faced in terms balancing the creative freedom during the mixing process, Hazl made clear that he understood that, a collaborative approach and the contribution of my skill set would positively serve the productions. However, as previously noted, I ensured that the artist's views and opinions were taken into consideration, which, Hazl confirmed when I asked him for feedback. Overall, the writing, mixing and mastering process according to Hazl, was "productive", "professional", and enabled him with "creative freedom".

With regards to the musicians, I asked them all for feedback on our recording session, in which the guitarist noted the environment I created in the studio "cultivated a really fruitful creative zone". He also mentioned how despite the "laid back" feel of the session, "He made suggestions about how best to approach recording for our band set up, such as recording a guide track as a band and then overdubbing our individual parts, which really helped to streamline the process and get the most out of us as musicians with regards to the finished product".

Overall, I am very happy with the feedback I received from both Hazl and the musicians, they confirm I achieved what I set out to do, which was to create a relaxed but professional environment and relationships. This in turn ensured that creative ideas flourished and the final product was something that we all were happy with.

Personal Development Plan

With regards to my personal development plan for future ventures, this project puts me in a great position to further my status as a producer in this specific genre. The artist was not only satisfied with our working relationship but also with achieving an overall sound that reflected our initial genre and artist reference points whilst carrying an original flair. The album is a great addition to my portfolio and is an asset I can use to pitch myself to publishers, labels or in obtaining a placement. I will also carry on working with Hazl and hopefully grow in status as he gains popularity as it is safe to say that our musical relationship will be ongoing.

However, something that I have to develop is a social media presence as a producer and artist. This will allow me to show potential collaborators or industry professionals as well as followers of my work that I am a serious music maker and am constantly growing my musical

career. It will also allow listeners to have easy access to all the music I have been working on, acting as a public portfolio. In order to realise this, I will need to work on an artist name, logo, graphics and general imagery, as well as a plan on how I will grow my social media following. Therefore, this is one of my main objectives for the next few months, and is hopefully something I will have up and running before the release of Hazl's album.

Conclusion and Overall Evaluation

When evaluating the overall outcome of the final album, as well as the continual process of writing, mixing and mastering the piece of work, I can conclude that the project was a personal success due to a number of various factors. Firstly, because the artist was happy and felt like his vision was heard and executed and that his abilities were truly reflected within the final product. Secondly, because I successfully completed a reasonably large body of cohesive work for the first time in my career, which sounded professional and fitting of the genre which the artist wanted to be part of. And thirdly, because I developed vital skills such as recording a live band in a professional studio environment.

There are some elements which could be improved upon, such as the mastering process which ideally should have been done externally and the vocal recording process where I could have tried out different ways of making the artist more comfortable in recording in a studio for that bit of extra quality in vocals.

To conclude, this reflective commentary covered all aspects of my creative process and outlined many technical and 'soft' skills utilised within the project. It set out the feedback received, and my plans for the future, both vital tools for progress and improvement.

Appendix List

Appendix 1

Track no.	Track Name + Track Time	Key + Tempo
1	Intertwined - 3:12	Bb minor - 96bpm
2	Personal - 4:07	A minor - 100bpm
3	Sex (Interlude) - 3:22	A minor - 77bpm
4	Bad - 3:17	C minor - 70bpm
5	Sentimental - 2:55	E minor - 107 bpm
6	Iceman - 3:08	D# minor - 130bpm

7	Fallin - 3:25	G minor - 75bpm
8	Lashes - 4:30	Cminor - 70bpm

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