Combining Technologies and Artistic Approaches;

Modern Methods of Creation

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My final production project as part of the Masters programme at Tileyard set out to create between six and eight pieces of music for a new artist profile titled “Blak Haus”, based on the works of sculptor and visual artist Hedi Xandt. As the project was undertaken, collaborative work presented itself with various artists that aligned with the Blak Haus project and brand, but also sat outside of what this project was originally intended. Thus, a wider scope of what was achievable with this project and my further career was adapted and revised. Blak Haus is an electronic music project that sets out to combine a wide variety of creative methods within the world of music including, but not limited to; analogue and digital means of music production and recording, manual and digital performances, and incorporating Artificial Intelligence (AI) or Machine Learning in various means such as AI generated artwork, music, and new AI processes in production and mastering. McCarthy (2004) defines AI as the “science of making intelligent machines.” Essentially, it is the process in which programmes are built to carry out intelligent tasks without the input of a user.

This knowledge of AI has the potential to help the modern musician and will be further explored. Forbes.com (2021) discusses various methods of AI-generated compositional ideas with an article entitled “How Artificial Intelligence (AI) Is Helping Musicians Unlock Their Creativity.” They provide the example of artist “Alex da Kid” who used data from five years of successful songs and combined this with themes from across the cultural zeitgeists from a similar time period found in films, social media, and articles. This data was then used to create lyrical content and compositional themes in order to develop a song which according to the forbes.com article attained number four on the iTunes ‘Hot Tracks’ chart. This occurred within 48 hours post release. In the same article, services like “AIVA” and “Amper” are discussed and are both services that generate music from deep learning algorithms. Instead of gathering themes in which a composer can then use to develop musical ideas, these services use machine learning to directly generate the music themselves. This comes in the form of melodies, chord progressions, time signatures, and arrangements. “AIVA” allows further development on this by allowing the user to input prompts in the form of genre choices, moods, and even so far as using reference material as a trigger for the AI generated music (aiva.ai, 2022). “Amper” uses similar processes for prompts but does not use a reference track modeller (ampermusic.com, 2022).

After trial and error, the project set out by my proposal did not use AI generated music, but AI methods were used as part of the wider process including AI mastering, and AI generated art work. AI mastering was

chosen as a process for this project due to two factors; time constraints, and budget. The AI mastering software “Landr” uses machine learning (a similar process to AI) to develop master audio files based on parameters set by the user, or via reference material also provided by the user (landr.com, 2022). The effectiveness of services like Landr is still being debated. As discussed by Sterne and Razlogova (2019), Landr will “master” and make audible changes to an audio file, even if it is not required due to the need to prove the concept to the user. These changes are noted in the article produced by Sterne and Razlogova (2019) but in practice seem to have been mitigated based on my own use of the platform. Now, Landr will warn the user that a “lack of dynamics” has been detected and will make few, or no changes to the required audio file. It will even warn that this lack of dynamism will result in poor quality output by Landr likely, a way to forgo a lack of audible change to the audio file experienced by the user. This change is noticeable in my track “Xamurai.” Ultimately, the use of AI mastering services like Landr produced effective results in the given music. I felt that it gave the majority of pieces the volume levelling, energy, and tonality required in regards to both what is expected in the given genre of a piece, as well as what suited the pieces as individual tracks depending on what each track needed.

The decision to pursue artwork for this project is due to the fact the origins of the musical content is based on real artwork. After researching various means of producing AI artwork, I settled on using Midjourney. Midjourney is an AI art generator that uses prompts to generate the artwork. For example, by inputting “Tileyard” into midjourney as a prompt, the AI generator created the following image:



The reason for choosing this AI programme to generate artwork for the pieces was despite its ability to create art based whatever prompt the user inputted, it kept a distinct artistic style, and a strong ability to fine tune

specific details such as changing the size of the image, lighting, and details seen in the image. Each of the various artworks pictured here can be upscaled using midjourney AIs, and can be varied where required. I considered artwork a key aspect of this project and wanted to find new means of creating art using already existing themes with new technology. Ultimately, the use of AI was found to be very effective.

Despite streaming services mitigating a lot of the need for album artwork due to its uniformity, according to Seydl (2016), album artwork can give the artist a small portion of individuality and branding in a seemingly uniform platform. Whilst discussing streaming services he states:

"The reason so many people listen with them is because they're easy to use. They organize everything in a streamlined way. But the concept of the album can often suffer because of it." (Seydl, 2016)

The branding for Blak Haus features a distinct yet dark atmosphere with a level of anonymity incorporated. Using the Midjourney AI I was able to further these artistic ideals whilst serving the music the art was assigned to, whilst keeping the original Xandt works in mind throughout the process.

Using eight selected works of Xandt as visual stimuli, music was created using synesthesia as a springboard for compositional ideas related to the given artwork. In "Synesthesia and the Arts" by Dani Cavallaro, synesthesia is described as a neurological phenomenon where senses seem to cross paths. Some may see days of the weeks as certain colours, see sights and shapes whilst music plays, or experience certain smells in a given setting. Synesthesia is derived from ancient Greek meaning "together" (syn) and "sensation" (aisthesis) (Cavallaro, 2013). After reflecting on the feedback given after the proposal, I ultimately feel that using synthesthesia as a means for creation was very effective. This is despite it being fairly difficult to communicate to other musicians and colleagues due to its personal nature. It is purely an artistic perspective. I also feel that some of the piece ended up not matching what I originally had in mind when I set out to compose the materials, but the result was music that effectively served an artistic goal and was exciting to all parties involved. Whilst initially researching Hedi Xandt I set out in my project proposal, I discovered the work by Xandt titled "Saint Sebastian." The description of the piece "Saint Sebastian" (pictured below) is as follows:

“High Times For Low Lives (SAINT SEBASTIAN), Cover Artwork For Australian Band “The Griswolds" (Xandt, 2016).

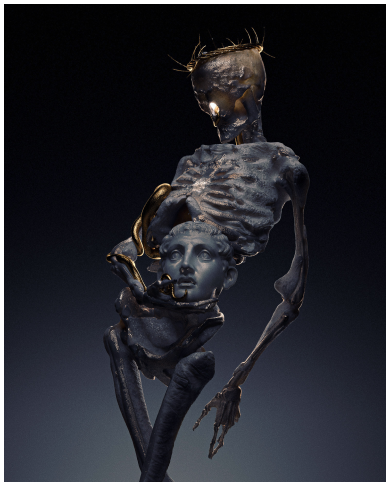


The piece features a classical styled sculpture appearing to be made from aged bronze and gold. The statue has arrows protruding from various angles which have caused the distressed figure to bleed gold, and the face also features a gilded skull. This violent image conjures up a feeling of torment and anguish, along with potential themes around opulence, ego, and grandeur, and perhaps a rejection towards these themes with the use of the arrows seemingly as a result of an attack on the figure. Also, perhaps the image of the skull suggests a vulnerability that has been unveiled in a time of distress and torment whilst the figure and arrows suggests strength and violence. Upon listening to the album “High Time For Low Lives” by the Griswolds I felt that the music did not match the overall feeling projected by the artwork by Xandt. The Griswolds are an indie rock band known for their “catchy tunes, party style live shows, and tongue-in-cheek humour” (Spotify, 2022). I would argue that the artistic expression seen in “Saint Sebastian” evokes something far more foreboding and sophisticated than the musical content it is set to. However, I recognise the fact that its lack of synchronicity is what makes the use of the imagery suitable to the set music, especially considering the self described use of “tongue-in-cheek” humour used by The Griswolds. Spurred on by this research, and the conflict in artistic perceptions with the above piece, I had a far more clear outlook of what the coming music that was to be set to the Xandt artworks was to embody aurally, and in other creative aspects including the artwork. As discussed in my project proposal, the pieces by Xandt that I set out to create music to were as follows:



1. A Kings Bed.

“Concept for a sarcophagus. The remains of the deceased are placed in a tomb carved from white granite and molten bronze is poured in, replacing the flesh with metal, which is then processed and finished into a sarcophagus lid.” (Xandt, 2022)

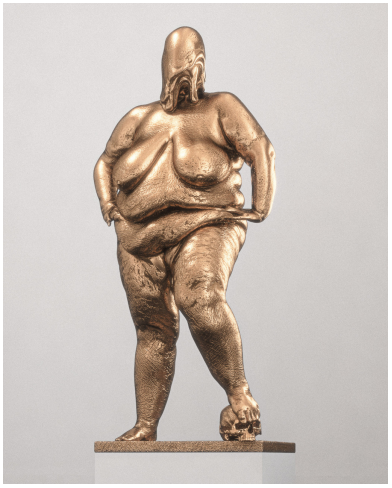


2. As a Man Thinketh.

“As A Man Thinketh.

Ongoing digital sculpture series based on works by James Allen.”

(Xandt, 2022)



3. Bodilisk II

"Digital Sculpture, Various Sizes, 2018” (Xandt, 2022)



4. Femur Tanto and Stand (Xandt, 2022)



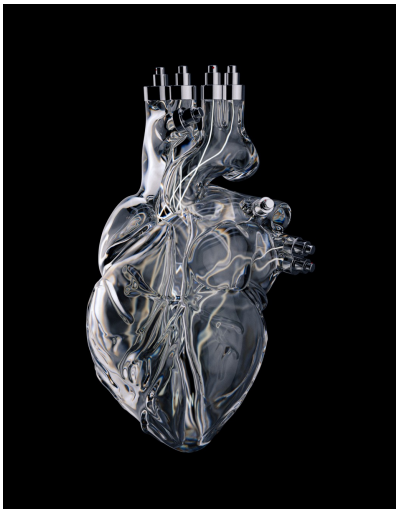
5. God of the Deep II (Three Sisters)

"*Pentelic Marble, Powder Coated Steel"* (Xandt, 2022)



6. God of the Grove

"*God of the Grove (original version), Black bronze, partly gilded with black marble plinth, unique, 2013" (*Xandt, 2022)



7. Heart of Glass

"Heart of Glass,

Perfume Flask (Concept)" (Xandt, 2022)



8. Xamurai

"Xamurai (Olexesh), Bronze, Partly Gilded and Resin, Lifesize." (Xandt, 2022)

These pieces of music were to be created in various styles of electronic music and were to be released as singles on a monthly to bi-monthly basis. Alongside this being a self contained body of work, the aim was to incorporate other artists to collaborate on the works set out if the piece required a certain sound. Another aspect to this project that resulted in confronting unforeseen challenges was to incorporate old production pieces into the fold with the new material being created. The pieces for “Xamurai,” “God Of The Grove,” “Femur Tanto,” “God Of the Deep,” and “As A Man Thinketh” were built from older demo recordings and finished pieces. The pieces set to “Bodilisk II,” “Heart of Glass,” and “A King’s Bed” all consisted of new material. The challenges faced with using old demos and recordings proved to be a careful balancing act between completely recomposing and mixing from scratch, to simply mastering an already completed piece. I will expand upon these aspects further as I breakdown the processes, challenges faced, and discoveries encountered on a track by track basis later on in this reflective essay.

Another consideration for this project was the medium in which sounds were collected and developed. A continuous debate in the world of music and audio production is the debate between digital and analogue means of production. Set out in my proposal, I stated that one of the core aspects of Blak Haus’ musicality was the incorporation of analogue sampling. Simply put, analogue processes use microphones to convert differences in air pressure into electrical signals, and imprinting them directly onto analogue tapes or vinyl records. The digital process achieves this by converting sound into an electric analogue signal, except it extends the process to convert that analog signal into a digital signal in the form of bits in order for a computer to process them (adorama.com, 2022). This aspect of the analogue vs digital debate does not affect the outcome of the Blak Haus productions as each piece will ultimately be recording into a digital audio workstation (DAW) and then placed onto streaming platforms, or digital distributors like iTunes and digital formats like CDs. However, this debate in the world of audio and sound was acutely considered in terms of selection of sounds for sampling, performance, and mixing. The majority of synthesis that was used in most pieces was “wavetable” synthesis, alongside various recorded examples of “subtractive” synthesis. Granular synthesis was not used due to the reliance on subtractive and wavetable synthesis, and limited options for granular synthesis. Roland.com describes subtractive synthesis as “*one of the main types of synthesis. As its name implies, tones are created by subtracting unwanted frequencies, to form the sound that you’re looking to produce.”* (Roland.com, 2022). A Behringer Poly D Monophonic synthesiser sent into a Strymon Deco Tape Saturation Pedal was used to create the majority of synthesis throughout many of the pieces but was widely featured in the piece produced for Bodilisk II.

As discussed previously, throughout the project development various artist had approached myself and the Blak Haus team to develop music as “Ghost Writers” and as a means for remixing an already commercial release titled “Hair of The Dog” by the band “Year of The Dog,” Drum and Bass song titled “Colours” for a yet to be named DJ, and a collaboration with another commercial producer as a springboard for their first commercial release as an artist alongside Blak Haus. Ultimately, this led to many styles of dance music being incorporated into the Blak Haus project and other works. This addition of new music with other artists resulted in the initial time line set out by my proposal being delayed and adapted. These works were carried out early in the month of September and resulted in the work for this project being delayed to be completed during late September and early October. Despite this new work load, I feel that it was a worthwhile project to undertake and resulted in new avenues to exploit. The initial plan was for myself to mix and develop these sounds as a ghost producer, but for two pieces set out in the project including “Hair of The Dog (Remix)” via the collaborative works and “God of The Deep” as part of the Blak Haus works, these will be released as collaborations on Spotify and other platforms alike. In an article by Spotify titled *"Teaming Up to Expand Your Sound and Reach”* (2019), the discuss the work of the band “The Body” and the resulting collaborations they undertook with various bands within their circle. Spotify stated that as a result of these collaborations that *“Unsurprisingly, The Body have expanded their sound by leaps and bounds.”* (artists.spotify.com, 2019). Although they do not provide any measurable metrics in the article, it is a common practice within the music industry to see a “cross-pollination” by artists in order to reach a wider audience and sound. This approach will be greatly considered as the release plans for these collaborative pieces are developed in the coming months.

Alongside this, as discussed in my proposal, the plan for releasing these pieces was to be in a continuous release of singles. Upon researching release strategies, I discovered further evidence and validation that particularly in the dance community that music is best released as singles. This can also be observed in pop music and other various genres of music across a wide spectrum. A common theme and methodology for releasing music is known as the “Waterfall” strategy.

“The waterfall strategy centres around an artist releasing a new single every 3 - 4 weeks, just as the previous single is at its peak or just starting to decline, in a bid to stay relevant, build an audience & create an eventual EP or album over time.” (dittomusic.com, 2022).

Although as of the deadline for this project, no music has been released or will be released within the first few months outside of the deadline, I feel that the "Waterfall" release strategy will be an effective way to garner an audience and maintain momentum for past releases whilst using any successes from previous release to help bolster and accelerate growth on new music. According to dittomusic.com (2022), the waterfall strategy will help boost impressions and in theory generate a fan base and reach new listeners, document the aforementioned impressions and any growth or decline, and works better with modern streaming platforms algorithms. The reason for delaying initial releases thus far for this project has been due to the fact that although an effective method for realising music, a "Waterfall" release strategy truly only scratches the surface when it comes to releasing a song. This is seen both in my own practice and in peer-to-peer discussions. Ideally, a suitable distribution service such as Distrokid or Landr would be used. In previous releases with other artists, Distrokid has been extremely effective due to its reach to streaming platforms and social media services like TikTok and more recently Meta's incorporation of music streams in Instagram Reels and stories. Distrokid's effectiveness is also discussed in "How To Release Music In 2022: The 7 Best Tips And Strategies" an article by twostorymelody.com (2022). They discuss using Distrokid due to its effectiveness and efficiency. Other aspects such as budget, visual assets (promo photos and videos, music videos, canvases etc), playlist submissions, social media campaigns, pre-save campaigns and others all go into making an effective release. Upon reflection, this could have been achieved within the given time frame and was set out in the original proposal to be planned upon, however, I feel that this will need further deliberation with all parties involved including the members of Blak Haus, collaborating artists, and potentially further advice from A&R, social media consultancy, and peers in the industry. Considering the project time frame, I chose to delay this action to be further enhanced outside of the project deadline.

This also raises the question on releasing via a label, or independently. Initially, the releases as part of this project were to be releases purely independently using Blak Haus as the representative label. However, after research and conversations within the Blak Haus team we have reached out to various labels within the aforementioned genres of music. One notable label that we deemed appropriate for our releases was the techno and tech-house label "Stereo Hype." Musically, the label suited our sound and image as well as the music put together for this project. A medium.com article (2020) discussed various benefits between releasing music via a major label and an independent or "indie" label. The author states that despite on a smaller scale, indie labels have a stronger access to niche styles of music, and have a smaller catchment of artists minimising competition. Added to this there is a layer of bureaucracy that is removed which enables

indie record labels to begin working with whom they see fit which enables closer working relationships (Moore, 2020). Alternatively, major labels have a vast wealth of resources to dispose of, as well as in house publishing and distribution.

Another alternative approach I have considered is a release as an independent artist, meaning that the roles of the record label will be carried out by myself and the others associated with Blak Haus. This approach has its own varied benefits including the amount of control over content and music, how marketing is to be carried out, and the overall perceived sound and image of the artist by an audience (forbes.com, 2021). The author of the forbes.com article states that ultimately, many of the artists and musicians regret signing into contracts that initially provide them with a wealth of resources from the record label, but ultimately lead to a lack of control over their own music and brand. Likely, after continued discussions, Blak Haus will release music as an independent artist profile once a more thorough release strategy is considered. As discussed previously, this will likely include social media campaigns, building visual assets, budget, and a general timeline built that will likely continue into the new year and onwards. This is not to say that the music put forth in this project would be too niche for a global market if an opportunity to work with a significant record label were to present itself. Songs like Fisher's 2018 release "Losing It" prove that niche genres of electronic music tech house, and techno as a whole can achieve wider success outside of the niche they are set in.

A Kings Bed



Like many of the pieces in this project, the first piece in the project is titled after the Xandt work it is based on. The first piece "A Kings Bed" initially was set out as an orchestral leaning piece with more modern synthesis approaches including wavetable and granular synthesis, with samples and potentially field recordings of metallic and industrial noises. I also planned to feature a local artist to write and perform the vocal top line. These aspects I originally intended to incorporate into the piece did not come to fruition by the end of production. After testing some initial ideas, an arpeggio heard in the introduction of the song lead the piece into an almost industrial sounding form of techno. Some key characteristics of techno laid out by masterclass.com (2021) include the use of early synthesis methods and drum machines, continuous repeated beats, and looping. These features can be heard throughout the piece with these use of

drum samples from a Roland TR-707, and the overall repetitive nature of the compositional aspects of the piece. Synthesis methods included replications of subtractive style synthesis through wavetable synthesisers like Serum, and this was combined with sampling. Ultimately, I feel that the approaches considered were achievable, but I found it far more effective producing this piece in a method that allowed new approaches. Instead of sticking to the brief I had set myself, I chose to adapt the style, production and mixing techniques over time. This consideration will also likely affect a name change in the future. This piece was put together by myself, and I feel that a more effective approach moving forward would have been to allocate work within the Blak Haus team. Overall, I am happy with this piece and its progression over time.

As A Man Thinketh



As discussed earlier, the music for "As A Man Thinketh" was composed and produced prior to the beginning of this project being undertaken. Original demos of this piece date back to May 2020 and exist in many forms. Overall, I consider these demos and the final piece to be in the genre of "tech-house" which blends the styles of techno and house music. This time period saw the origins of my electronic music production and as a result, some earlier mixes sound relatively primitive and under developed. However, the latest demo of this piece was created in December of 2020 and was at a suitable standard for this project with only minor tweaks being required to further enhance the mix. Such changes included a sampled TR-707 clap, a change to the bass to emulate the subtractive synthesis style sound, and a new master. The vocal top line was written in collaboration with a Cardiff based rapper and songwriter and producer Matt Bond, resulting in the title for the track; "Hype." I feel that this collaborative approach to songwriting and production yields the most effective results and has lead to one of the most exciting tracks for this project. I also feel that my role in this was far more effective as I primarily operated as a producer and songwriter, but my songwriting contributions did not include the vocal top line. I recognise that writing vocal top lines is a weakness of mine, however, my skillsets lie in audio production, synthesis, drum kit performance and production, and music theory. Like in "Hype," I feel my contributions are far more valuable in the production, mixing, and song writing outside of the vocal top line. These aspects of my skillsets are the same throughout all pieces. Ultimately, All parties involved both in Blak Haus and the song writing team are happy with the production that has been achieved, despite some

changes to the top line that were requested by the songwriting team which is to come at a further date. Fortunately, the themes discussed in the vocal top line, and my initial approaches I set out in my proposal line up in a way similar to the aforementioned work by Xandt title “Saint Sebastian” in regards to its top line opposing themes set by the artwork.

Bodilisk II



This piece was spurred on by my research and practice into DJing. As a producer, I feel it is vital to be able to perform in the genre you are composing in. This allows a greater understanding of what is required from the music in regards to performance, but also allows a greater knowledge of idiomatic themes to be utilised by a composer. Throughout studying DJing both online and by using DJ turntables, I began to understand the need for not only a wide variety of music, but relatable music set to the style of the genre a given DJ specialises in. Most tracks also have elongated intros and outros featuring themes found in the songs as per normal modern songwriting, but these sections also serve the purpose of allowing DJs to blend tracks seamlessly. Hence, in the intro of this track, I used a vocal sample and a drum loop I built to be used to blend from a previous track, to another. This track was set out as a tech house track and I feel that it was achieved to a high standard both in regards to mix and genre. This also served as an opportunity to explore remixing. The vocal top line used is from “Got Your Money” by ODB (feat. Kelis) and would likely only be used as a feature in live DJ shows, but would gladly welcomed as an official release in the future.

Femur Tanto and Stand



As with “Hype,” the music set to “As A Man Thinketh,” this track is also a production that was already in a release ready state, but its inclusion in this project served as an opportunity to execute a new mixing and production process onto the existing material. New synthesis in the form of analogue subtractive methods and updated wavetable synthesis was added, as well as analogue emulation plugins to further add to the analogue sound design. The track titled “Unleash This Beast” does not line up with what I set out in

my proposal, however, after deliberation I feel that it suits the overall imagery and resulting artwork from the Midjounrey AI system to a much higher degree based on peer-to-peer feedback and my own observations. This I feel is best demonstrated by the vocal top line, composed by Matt Bond and Rhi'n'B.

God Of The Deep



"God of the Deep" serves as the only collaborative work within the Blak Haus/Hedi Xandt project set out in my proposal. The initial aim of this piece was to blend house and dance production with heavy reliance on analogue production methods with genres that sit considerably outside the realm of house and techno, in this case, trap. A half-time second verse, updated drums and synthesis methods is how I was able to produce a distinct trap sound. I sought out the work of Jordan Round, a producer local to me who specialises in trap to further enhance the mix and production style to further enhance the trap sound. However, some of the production choices set out in my proposal were not met. This is due to the development of the sound via the collaboration and the lack of vocal top line. Moving forward, I feel a male, hip hop/trap style vocal top line would suit this piece best as opposed to the softly spoken female vocal set out in my proposal. Ultimately, this will serve as a commercial release with Blak Haus and a yet to be named alias of Rounds.

God Of The Grove



This track was born as a remix of a sample of a famous "Vine" video dating back to the apps popularity in the mid 2010s and is another track that was considered release ready. The melody heard in the sample immediately evoked a tech house arrangement for myself and the Blak Haus team, as well as the playful nature of the seemingly nonsensical lyrics. Despite it moving away from what was originally set outlay my proposal I fell that ultimately I was able to achieve something that was idiomatic based on reference material, but also unique and exciting enough to stand out. In order to further develop the piece from its original state, new sampling was incorporated as well as new mixing techniques and songwriting ideas. This includes added layers of

percussion in the verses, and new synthesis phrases in the choruses. This will likely serve as Blak Haus' first single and will be titled "Semi-Automatic."

Heart Of Glass



This piece was constructed as new material for this project and follows what was set out in the project proposal. A gently sung male voice sits on a bed of dark piano melodies and sampled string counter-melodies. The chorus of this piece was a lot darker than initially anticipated and moved away from the previous genres discussed including techno and tech house, and instead incorporates heavy use of wavetable synthesis moving it towards bass house. Both musically and lyrically, I feel it effectively addresses the themes of fragility and insecurity, whilst opposing themes of seduction and lust. I do however feel that more mixing revisions are needed.

Xamurai



Xamurai, as discussed previously, is a previous work from my early ventures into house and electronic music, combining elements of tech house, future house, and bass house. The most challenging aspect of this piece was incorporating the final demo mix with a new production. This is due to the fact that the original Logic Pro X file was lost and an attempt to use the original file as a sample was not effective. I found that the mixing process of adding new samples and sound design elements conflicted with existing material and seemed out of place with the original track. Ultimately, the original audio was mastered and was effective to the brief set out by my proposal according to peer-to-peer feedback and my own observations. Moving forward, a vocal would ideally added with a heavier leaning sound, perhaps in rock or metal idioms.

Finally, the collaborations that I began earlier this year will also be used to springboard my works as a solo "ghost producer," where I will write music for an artist but not align myself or my associated projects with

the released music. As addressed earlier, these will serve as a means to expand my network, reach and branding as a solo producer and via Blak Haus.

In terms of personal and professional development, within a year I aim to; have started the process of releasing the music associated with the Blak Haus/Hedi Xandt project in the aforementioned “waterfall” release strategy, regularly creating content as a solo producer and content for Blak Haus, and containing my work as a freelance producer across a wider variety of genres than those set out in this project. In two to five years I will aim to; have established Blak Haus as a competitive artist profile and brand in the music industry, and organise tours and shows for both Blak Haus and other projects. Between five and ten years, I will aim to establish a functioning studio outside of a home environment hosting a wide variety of artists, have increased the brand of Blak Haus to a well known industry name, and maintain touring and session work as a working musician and producer.

Ultimately, I feel that this project has laid the ground work for a considerable leap forward in the music industry as a producer with the backing of an artist project. I feel a recognisable brand both visually and sonically is an asset I would greatly benefit from on top of my current skillsets. Confronting earlier works, producing new material, and collaborating with other artists, and exploring new mediums and technologies in such a short time frame has proven to be difficult yet considerably rewarding and has resulted in a professional portfolio that I believe will be a backing for the next phase of my professional career.

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