Self-Production: Creativity and Process, Triggers and Surprise.

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Abstract

This paper builds on four recent presentations in which I have drawn on my own practice in order to examine some of the creative processes that characterise self-production. I pay attention, in particular, to sonic 'triggers' that can serve to surprise the ear and evoke an emotional and subsequently creative response. I suggest that such sonic aids are particularly useful for artists producing music they have created themselves. The practice upon which I have based these autoethnographic reflections is a recent project that has entailed the complete re-working of 14 songs from my early catalogue. Specifically, I focus on some of the accompanying challenges. By separating out those challenges within the different stages that characterise, more generally, my work as a self-producing singer-songwriter, I examine my responses and situate them within some existing views concerning creativity in each of the respective fields of songwriting, performance, production and mixing. Whilst maintaining that the multifaceted and interconnected nature of self-production is that which distinguishes it as an art form, the intention underlying this practice-based research, is that it should progress what has been to date an ethnographic approach. Consequently, it may be of interest to the ever-growing number of students who may be encountering similar challenges in their efforts to develop their own sound and future careers through the practice and who may be seeking also to situate their work within a given theoretical framework.

KEYWORDS: self-production, songwriting, composition, performance, mixing, creativity

Introduction

To date, my ethnographic research in self-production has aimed to progress the conversation surrounding music production and gender in popular music research whose focus has tended to centre on women's absence rather than on the actual work entailed in the different acts of creativity that the practice most

IASPM Journal vol.13 no.1 (2023)
Journal of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music
ISSN 2079-3871 | DOI 10.5429/2079-3871(2023)v13i1.3en | www.iaspmjournal.net

notably affords.

Instinctively, I have always kept my own practice separate from that conversation as the idea of using my *own* experiences within the studio as a basis for enquiry has made me feel distinctly uncomfortable. Objectivity constitutes one of the greatest challenges for the self-producing artist. How much more so, when one's own practice might also be drawn upon to constitute research? Subsequently, the thought of a practice as research project has filled me with fears of lacking critical distance and concern that the creative process would be forced or false somehow, resulting in my producing sub-standard, overly self-conscious work under the forgiving banner of research. But, I do think about the different aspects that contribute to and characterise the creative processes of self-production *a lot* and following four presentations where I was invited to discuss some of those aspects, I have reassessed my misgivings.[1]

I have taken additional encouragement from the view of Pete Astor and Keith Negus that 'the perspective of the songwriter and musician [...] should be integral to [...] dialogues of interpretation' (in Marshall and Laing, eds. 2016). Although they were referring to the interpretation of song lyrics, their words support my intention here to consider the ways in which the 'perspective' gained from a very particular project has contributed to those 'dialogues of interpretation' concerning creative processes in songwriting, composing, performing, recording, producing and mixing, the combination of which constitute my work as an artist-producer.

Any further concerns, that to draw on one own's creative work as a form of research teeters dangerously into the realms of narcissistic self-indulgence, have been further eased by Patricia Leavy's assertion that 'autoethnography values the researcher's personal experience as a way of studying culture' and that '[t]his method is useful when the researcher has personal experience with the topic under investigation' (2017: 144).

However, I wish to make a clear distinction from the outset between the object of study here, the different creative *processes* that self-production requires, and that which has been produced, in this case, 14 re-worked songs from my back catalogue. Specifically, I will be focusing on the ways in which an extended period engaged in a particular *kind* of self-production—the complete re-working of some existing material—has led me to pay close attention to some of the key elements that characterised the project. Consequently, I consider what these elements contribute to our understanding of creativity within the art form more generally, structuring the discussion within four sections.

The first examines the judgement one might exercise as to whether a song 'works' or not and the subsequent creative actions that might be undertaken to make it 'work'. Some attention is paid also to those external factors that might influence such judgements. Secondly, I consider the ways in which the sound of different combinations of chords or notes played on either a real (in this case electric guitar, acoustic guitar and piano) or sampled midi instrument, during the arrangement process, triggered an emotional response and compelled a subsequent instrumental composition and performance. Similarly, I then note the ways in which the sound of those recorded performances (as

part of a new arrangement) triggered a further emotional response. I reflect on how this either compelled the subsequent vocal performance of existing melodies or determined edits to the original main line or additional composition of backing vocal melodies and harmonies. In the final section, I address some of the challenges that accompanied the mixing process. Here, I consider the role played by a further instance of sonic surprise, resulting from the tone of the treated raw recorded performances, to determine the choices made in the final stages of the mixing process and also the judgement exercised as to whether the mixes were finished and ready for mastering.

Context: Time, Technology and Intention

Following the release of my third album, *White Dots* (*Sib Records* 2019), I had my first EP *Find* (*Sib Records* 2000) and first two albums *Staring* (*Sib Records* 2003) and *Lemon* (*Sib Records* 2008) remastered with the intention that my full catalogue be re- issued and available for streaming before I started work on the fourth album.

The re-mastering of the EP and first album, however, presented a number of problems. They had been recorded using early recording software, Cakewalk, on a digital 8-Track and I was unable to access the original files. Consequently, the mastering engineer had to work from the CDs, and as valiant as his efforts were, the results sounded too harsh. We both felt the sonic quality did not match that of albums 2 and 3 and so I decided to re-record all the songs. I felt also that the songs would benefit from new string, brass and woodwind arrangements performed by real players as opposed to the synthesised midi sounds and beats used in the original production. What then initially started as a 'straightforward' re-recording developed into a complete reworking. Although it took far longer than envisaged, it developed into an insightful and important period of work, resulting in my considering at length the very things I have spent my entire career *doing*: songwriting, composing and producing the arrangements, performing those parts as a singer and musician, recording those performances and those of the session players I bring into the projects, and finally mixing.

Drawing on observations noted down throughout the process, I touch on a number of areas that have been addressed individually by scholars examining different aspects of creativity within popular music. In this study I consider how each of those areas of practice contribute both discretely and collectively to the work of a self-producing singer-songwriter.

For instance, I consider the creative processes that take place in songwriting (see Bennett 2011, McIntyre 2008, 2011, Astor and Barber 2015), on the creation of characters and personas within a song (see Auslander 2016, Dibben 2016, Fairchild and Marshall 2019), on the role of the vocal performance and subsequent positioning of the voice (see Frith 1996, Dibben 2012) and on the notion of sonic triggers and surprise that compel instances of creativity (see Boden 2004 and Ishaki 2012). I also pay some attention to the positioning of music production (see Burgess 2013 and Zagorski-Thomas 2014) and mixing (see Anthony 2017, Hermes 2019, Harding 2020, Izhaki 2012 and Moylan 2016) respectively as distinct art forms.

The perspective this study offers these conversations highlights the holistic nature of self-production and examines those factors that evoke different manifestations of creativity within the studio. The intention is to progress studies that, to date, have been written from the perspective of the engineer or producer. This perspective has highlighted the perceived benefit of a collaborative approach (see Toulson and Burgess in Williams and Williams eds. 2017). Through presenting the artist's view, this article highlights the value of learning core engineering skills, in addition to those skills of production. In addition, it argues the need to pay attention to the emotional intention compelling the initial composition of a given song in order to understand more fully the subsequent production and mixing choices.

The Song is *Still* the Thing

Every production choice I might make is led by the fact that I work with song. Whilst acknowledging that the notion and reception of a 'song' may mean different things to different people (see Moore 2012 and Negus 2012), my interpretation of a song is a lyric and melody, framed within a particular structure. I write the song in its entirety first which then forms the starting point for the subsequent instrumental and vocal arrangement and accompanying production and mixing choices. The intention behind each of these processes is, quite simply, to sonically manifest and best represent the core theme and emotion that had propelled the song's initial creation.

Here, I am interested in examining the sonic triggers that emerged in each of the different stages of the re-working that served to surprise my ear and evoke an emotional response. In turn, these responses compelled me to either sing or play the instrument at hand. This resulted in either a new vocal or instrumental arrangement or fresh interpretation of an existing part.

It is worth noting, that I compose everything by ear. Like a lot of self-taught musicians, I 'hear' the musical lines I need to write. An emotional response to what I hear during the composition stages, therefore, is integral to the creative process. I cannot write what I do not feel. What has emerged through this project is that poorly expressed lyrics present barriers to such a response taking place. This can result in mediocre melodies or instrumental parts inspiring me to neither sing nor play. I have always known this but this re-working has made me play closer attention to the instances when this has happened and the resulting actions, as I discuss below.

I also pay some attention to the *situation* of the creative processes that characterised the project. For instance, the passing of time influenced my interpretation of the subject matter of the songs, written in a specific time period and in a specific location. It influenced also my judgement of the performance captured in the original recordings. The changes to my voice over time also had an impact on the new vocal arrangements and performances as did the development of my skills on the new instrumental arrangements and subsequent production and mixing choices. Exterior influences also need to be taken into account. These include improved digital recording and mixing software and my exposure to an accompanying range of different views and opinions concerning such developments.

Acknowledging all these factors, the sum of which can be seen to fall in line with what has been identified as a systems model of creativity in studio practices (see McIntyre 2008), it remains the case that throughout the project, I have been reminded of William Wordsworth's famous proclamation that "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility", published in his Preface to the 2nd Edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800).[2] Here, that recollection has taken place twice. Firstly, by recalling the situations and accompanying emotions that had propelled the very writing of the original songs in the first place, along with the ensuing production choices made to communicate that emotion. Secondly, by re-interpreting those emotions as a persona of my younger self, influenced by the skills, experiences and perspective from a rather extended period of 'tranquility'.

And that perspective told me, that despite some technical shortcomings, I *had* captured something in those early recordings – the emotion underpinning the songs. And it is *that* that has been the hardest thing to re-construct, re-perform and re- capture. And it is *that* that has had me going back to Soundcloud and listening again and again to particular phrasing in the vocal and guitar lines, not through wanting to re-create the same thing, but rather through needing to maintain the emotional integrity of the original song. This is an imperative for songwriters, as highlighted by Astor and Barber (2015).

'A Good Tune Is a Good Tune'

Any problems that I might encounter in the production stage ordinarily, but most notably here in this re-production, is because the song itself—the melody, the lyrics—are not 'right' or are not good enough. My understanding of a song that *works* is one that can stand up on its own. By that I mean, that if the melody and lyrics are strong, a song can be performed with just a simple accompaniment, or even acapella. We have so much at our fingertips in our DAWs that one of the pitfalls a self-producing singer-songwriter can fall into is to confuse great production ideas for a great song.

In some of the presentations mentioned earlier, I have referenced the observations of songwriters and composers David Arnold and Gary Clark who touched on these ideas during a series of webinars hosted by The Ivors Academy during the first lockdown. Their views have resonated throughout this process, most notably Arnold's assertion that 'amazing records are not necessarily amazing songs', that 'a good tune is a good tune' and that 'the first thing is to try and write a good tune' (Arnold 2020). Songwriting professor and author Pat Pattison made similar observations during a roundtable discussion that took place two years later. He stated, 'I want the record to be a record of a good song', highlighting the pitfalls when, 'the production becomes the message itself, the song.' As a consequence, he emphasised that when teaching songwriting to his students, he does not allow laptops in the class as he 'want[s] them to focus on melody, harmony and lyric' (Pattinson 2022).

In fact, *my* first instinctive approach to reworking a problematic song was to go to my laptop rather than trying to locate the source of those 'problems' by initially

examining the song in its raw state. I tended to address first the vocal arrangement, most notably the backing vocal harmonies. Often, this lead to new ideas offering a fresh feel. Sometimes, however, I fell into the trap of writing too many parts so that they either overcrowded the main vocal line or moved too far away from the original intention of the song or, quite simply, were not very good. Either way, my approach was clearly an example of what Pattison described as a 'producer making up for a non-song' (ibid.) or, at least in my case, a song that needed refining.

I have become acutely aware of this during this reworking project. In addition, it has served to reinforce what is, I suggest, a key challenge and danger for the artist- producer who is a singer-songwriter: to not lose sight of the song – *everything* rests on this. It can be helpful, therefore, to separate out the different roles that comprise the self-production process. This is not to negate the approach of artist-producers working in some genres where the blurring of composition, performance and mixing forms an inherent part of the practice (see Marrington 2017). For my music, however, Pattison's warning to 'never trust an arranger, producer, singer [to do] the work you need to do as a songwriter' (2022), resonated with the same conclusion I had come to myself when I finally picked up the guitar to rework the basic lyric and melody of those songs that needed it.

The Heart of the Song: Emotion, Truth and Integrity

The experience or situation that compels the writing of a given song in the first instance is the very thing that gives a song its heart or emotional truth, even if, as observed below, a song has been written with purely commercial intentions in mind. Throughout the reworking it remained the case that the desire to sonically manifest that 'truth', as I perceived it, drove the production choices that followed. Needless to say, that perception might be shaped by any number of things, just as a listener's perception of what a song may mean to them might be shaped also by any number of things, as noted by William Moylan (2016: 27). However, as the focus in this section concerns that which compels the initial composition and subsequent production of a given song, it was interesting to note similar views expressed by the singer-songwriter Frank Turner (5) speaking on the same panel as Pattison. He stated, 'What I'm interested in is hearing truth' and that 'I can hear truth singing out of a song' (2022). Pattison concurred in his assertion that he could discern also between, 'People who are telling a truth and people who are not telling a truth' and in fact viewed the very telling of that truth—the act of songwriting—in grammatical terms. He stated, 'If what you have to say is your
noun, adjectives, that is the music, [are] the chords [that] colour it' (2022).

To reiterate, this reworking has reinforced the imperative of not losing sight of that truth nor of the processes needed for its interpretation. And that reading only comes from close attention to detail, which is very different from getting lost in the production process—a key danger for the self-producing singer-songwriter, as highlighted by Toulson and Burgess (in Williams and Williams eds. 2017). This remains the case for artist-producers working in all genres even if what is being 'said' is not necessarily communicated through the lyric but through a beat, a

groove, a vibe, depending on whether it is 'music that invites you to think [or] music that invites you to dance' as observed by Allan Moore (2012: 139).

The Lyric: Language, Theme and Musicality

When I did go back to the songs that were problematic and sang them with just the guitar to pinpoint the issue, I found that the melody wasn't right because the phrasing wasn't right because the lyrics weren't right. What was I trying to say? Did I have anything worth saying or was I simply not saying it well enough?

Discussing his lyric writing during a broadcast interview, the British musician and radio presenter, Jarvis Cocker asserted, 'the more precise you can be […] opens it up and makes it universal' (2022).[3] I agree, but I would also suggest that the more precise you can be in your lyrics, the more precise you can be in the composition of the accompanying melody and the more precise you can be in the phrasing of the subsequent performance of that melody.

I do write poetry in addition to lyrics and I concur entirely with Frith (in Astor and Negus 2016: 166) that they *are* different forms. At the time of research, I heard the poet Anthony Joseph describe poetry as 'spoken music' (2022). I have often tried to clarify the difference to students along similar lines by describing poems as being their own band. Unlike many lyrics, they do not need a kick and bass to drive the beat because they make their own beat through the choice and positioning of the words according to their syllabic as well as metaphoric values which result in the subsequent metre.

That said, I *do* pay close attention to the musicality of language within my lyrics afforded, not just by word-choice, but by the positioning of the word in the line and the subsequent impact on meaning as well as on sound. This re-working project has confirmed the value and merit of doing so.

A lot of the songs on the first EP and album are stories based on people and situations observed during a period of living in Manchester in the north-west of England throughout the 1990s. This was a period of hardship for many before the city was to enjoy a sustained period of re-generation and growth. Many of the fictional characters in the songs, therefore, find themselves on the edges of society responding in different ways to their marginalisation.

The songs draw also on personal experiences from that time. Thus, I was combining the story telling of the folk tradition along with the confessional. So, akin to poetry but *not* poetry, the key was finding and then placing the right words, in the right order, to communicate the essence of those characters or the situations as I had perceived them. Second time around, I paid even closer attention to the choice of words and their positioning within the line. This, in turn, supported more effectively the existing melody and aided that crucial phrasing in the subsequent performance. In some cases it evoked a fresh creative response, resulting in a refined melody or in the composition of new backing vocals serving to add a further dimension and layer of interpretation. An example can be seen in a song called Poolside from the original EP. It is a faithful account of a scene witnessed around a hotel swimming pool in Crete that formed part of a holiday during this period of time with myself, my partner at the time and three of our friends. We had hired a small holiday

villa that included the use of the swimming pool of a hotel nearby. Unbeknown to us, the hotel was used also by some Russian sex workers to entertain their clients. Thus, we found ourselves one afternoon at the pool where on one side, a young female sex worker sunbathed on a sun lounger with a client sitting on a lounger next to her, flicking through a pornographic magazine. (I discovered this as I couldn't quite believe what he was doing and had waded over to take a closer look!)

On the other side of the pool was another young woman around the same age sunbathing also. She was British, on holiday with her parents and younger brother, and very clearly of privilege. In the few hours we were there, her parents spoke very loudly about her achievements at the BBC (she must have been an intern) for all to hear. Her brother was in the pool splashing other children, as was the little sister of one of the hotel workers, swimming around in her rubber ring and talking to herself. We were in the middle, a group comprised of an English teacher, a geography teacher, a sociology lecturer, a computer programmer and a singer-songwriter.

The scene struck me as a microcosm of society. The circumstances and accompanying inequalities that had resulted in two young women of similar ages and appearances, doing exactly the same thing in exactly the same place but in drastically different circumstances, stayed with me and troubled me—intensified by heatstroke that was affecting my sleep. Those thoughts gained momentum whilst waiting at the airport for our flight back to the UK, having observed the contrasting behaviours of some female tourists and of the local women cleaning around them in the ladies' loos. The original production was upbeat, an intended juxtaposition between what sounded like a happy holiday song and the underlying theme of life's inequalities, particularly for women. I had written some Spanish sounding guitar lines (even though we were in Crete!) and had even referenced Cliff Richard's 1963 *Summer Holiday* at the end of the track as a note of bitter irony. As to the lyrics, at the time of writing I had wanted to faithfully represent what was said by everyone at the scene but on revisiting the song, some of the words used made me feel uncomfortable. These included my use of the word prostitute in the original opening line of verse 1 and the phrase used by the sociology lecturer to describe the young British woman in the opening line of verse 2; it was offensive and misogynist. In addition, the middle 8 was overly busy and the spoken lyrics from Summer Holiday at the end of the song overplayed the point. The edited version now reads:

Verse 1
Selling her skin,
she sunbathes by the pool while her client sits beside her flicking through
a porno magazine
and a little brown girl talks to herself in the shallow end in a rubber-ringed magic kingdom.

Verse 2
On the opposite side,
another young woman is reading The Times that Daddy somehow managed to find.
Only 23 but she's doing very well at the BBC. Ma calls out from the shade of the sun,

'darling put some sunscreen on',
to her sun splashing other children.

Bridge 1
At night, dried out from the heat, I cried out in my sleep.
In troubled dreams
you handed me a mug of steaming tea.

Ch 1
Cacophony of crude cicadas, bougainvillea blooms in pink on white- washed
walls, slices of ice beneath a sapphire sky.

On balconies heavy with jasmine, old women stare quizzically
at the sunburnt Brits searching for authenticity.

Middle 8
At the airport, women unseen
keep the toilets clean
for the ladies set on their way.

Bridge 2
Ch 2 Outro

The revised lyrics subsequently read more clearly as a story with a choice of words that scanned better and felt easier to sing when performed with just an acoustic guitar. As a result, I found myself performing it more like a folk ballad, rather than the agitated performance of an angry, shouty pop song by my younger self. Subsequently, when I returned to the production, although I kept the original guitar parts and lead vocal, I slowed the tempo right down, wrote new backing vocals, new parts for bass and sax and added a contemporary feel in the choice of beat.[4]

Gary Clark has noted that, 'It's the production that's more likely to go out of date that the song' (2020). On revisiting these songs, I have been heartened (and depressed in equal measure) that those songs exploring broader social themes, in response to experiences and observations from a particular period of time in particular places, still felt relevant. In the case of Poolside, it remained that the theme of the original song determined every change made but with the end result that the original intention, namely to express the emotions I had felt from witnessing particular scenes, had become clearer.

Unlocking the Melody: Triggers, Surprise and Compulsion

What emerged from the lyric editing processes in this and some other songs was the creation of space. This came from using fewer words or from a choice of words that sounded more musical, either because of their alliterative or assonant values or because of their syllabic ordering within the line. Consequently when singing, this allowed me to sustain some notes in certain lines which created space in the melody. In turn, this allowed the sound of the chords being played on the accompanying guitar to cut through and surprise my ear. Subsequently, this triggered a sense of excitement with the resulting

compulsion to sing and/or write new arrangements. It also helped me to tread more assuredly that thin line between nuanced interpretation and overegging either the performative or sonic pudding.

Another way in which the ear can be surprised is through silence. Mix engineer Marta Salogni has spoken about the value of 'shaving off frequencies' (2021) in the mixing process. In a similar way, re-working the more problematic songs has seen me 'shaving off' unnecessarily busy guitar parts or vocal lines or even whole bars within the overall structure, in addition to editing the lyrics. The space resulting from these edits created a musical silence which allowed some recorded performances, notably from the session musicians, to cut through. This served to draw me in to focus on their interpretation. It also created moments of tension and anticipation within the structure. Looking at a number of examples where this has happened, a clear pattern emerges in that that I have tended to create such a break in the middle section of the song or before the final build at the start of the final chorus, not an unusual structural device, in fact, used in many pop songs (see for example, Savage 2020).

Vocal Performance: Interpretation, Immersion and Precision

Throughout the project I sometimes fell into the trap of trying to 'fix' a problematic song by consciously trying to perform it 'better'. This often resulted in trying too hard and overemoting only to then delete the, invariably numerous, takes on returning to the track with fresh ears.

I have learned, therefore, to ignore those vocal performances that have troubled me because experience has shown that once the lyric, the arrangements and the subsequent instrumental performances are *right*, I forget that I have been working on them for months, I stop peering intently at the screen trying to fix things and instead find myself *listening* to the track. This has then resulted in a further trigger or instance of surprise that evoked a 'fresh' emotional response compelling me to sing, making sure that I record no more than three takes of a given line. In other words, I became, second time around, what Barber describes as, 'fully emotionally invested' in the song (in Daniels 2022), not as a songwriter or composer or producer, but as a singer, inhabiting a song in much the same as an actor might a role. This has been described by the actor Brian Cox as 'being a still presence and allowing the process to affect you' (in Wilson 2022). For this to happen for an actor, allowing a nuanced, measured performance, the script, the writing has to be good enough. For this to happen as a self-producing singer-songwriter, the lyrics, melody, arrangement and production have to be good enough. As Turner observed, 'I'm writing to impress myself' (2022).

The Bass: Beat, Feel and Space

Needless to say, this applies also to the instrumental performances of the arrangement supporting that vocal. One of the notable features of this re-working process has been my consideration of the role the bass plays to establish and bed in the right feel to support the emotional core of the song

and subsequent vocal performance. The original bass lines on the first EP and album were composed and performed entirely on a keyboard using a midi sound. On albums 2 and 3, I wrote the lines for both electric and double bass in a similar way but then pulled in musicians from the local jazz scene to perform them to gain, in particular, the depth that only a real double bass can offer.

For this project, however, I wanted to see if I could establish a feel myself. I invested in a Hofner violin bass as its construction promised the depth and mellow sound I yearned for. I learned how to play it by replacing the existing midi bass parts and in many cases re-writing them as I went along. A natural bedfellow to the guitar, the compositional process in fact revealed itself as being very similar to the way in which I write the lead parts for both the acoustic and electric guitars; I responded to what I hear in the guide track and then finding notes that trigger an emotional response which compels the subsequent composition.

I was not being entirely naïve. I knew I could not achieve in a couple of months the sweet depths created by the seasoned, eloquent players I had used in the past. My thinking rather was that if I might at least achieve a mellow tone from the instrument itself, it would provide some depth in the mix and lay the foundation for future work. In the midst of doing this, I heard the Irish novelist Colm Toibin (2022) discuss the creative benefits of handwriting his novels. The impact of the physical act, the relationship of the writer's pen and paper on the creative process struck me, at the time, as an interesting parallel. The physical relationship with an instrument affords a certain kind of creative response that, for me at least, working entirely with midi does not achieve. For instance, this particular process made me think as a bass player in a way significantly more effective than simply writing a bass part on a keyboard using a sampled bass sound. Fully aware of the monumental difference the bass can make to a track, alerted me to the importance of the lightness of touch required and also to the potential of the space that can be created in the bottom layers by playing around the beat rather than rigidly adhering to it.

It has also been the case, however, that for some of the tracks, the sound of the midi bass served the track and so I used it, converting the midi to audio and mixing it with settings similar to the ones applied to the Hofner.

An additional benefit from having learned how to 'play' (I use the term loosely) bass in the latter stages of the project was its having provided a further means of attaining 'fresh ears', gold dust for the artist-producer. Reassuringly, Turner made a similar point in his assertion that, 'Comfort zone is the worst place to be as a writer [...] Picking an instrument you don't know how to play can be a fun way to write' (2022).

Mixing: Ears, Technology, Clarity and Trust

This final section examines some of the challenges encountered in the mixing stages of the project. It is worth noting that, like many artists, I did not formerly train as an engineer, prior to embarking on my creative career. Largely, my training has stemmed from my own experimentation and from trusting my

judgement supplemented by tips and advice gleaned from having recorded in different studios and from different conversations with engineering friends. Such an approach, in fact, falls in line with my research that has examined how some female artist-producers, engineers and producers of my generation gained their skills. One of the characteristics of the research highlighted the role played by professional friends who served as mentors (see Clarke, Perry, Shoemaker and Summers in Wolfe 2020: 56–92).

For this project, the mixing process went through a number of stages:

Stage 1: I adopted my normal approach of applying EQ, sometimes boosting or cutting the lower frequencies of my voice in particular, applying only small amounts of compression, instead making extensive use of automation. I used varying degrees of reverb (using the Valhalla Room plug-in) to the vocals and instruments as needed and applied panning positions similar to those used in the last album.

Stage 2: I encountered a range of different opinions about mixing as a result of teaching cultural theory on different mixing courses. I then started to question my own approach and changed all the settings. The result sounded awful. I played the mixes on different systems and to some trusted non-musician listeners. This confirmed the sound was too harsh.

Stage 3: Having understood that I had fallen into a familiar trap of applying unneeded amounts of EQ and compression, I returned to the raw recorded files to listen to the vocal and instrumental performances of both myself and the session players. In other words, just as I had found it necessary to return to some of the songs in their raw state to understand why the production was not working, so too did I find it necessary to return to the raw recorded files to understand why the tone of the sound was not working. The difference here is that the unprocessed sounds did not provide a trigger, as such, but rather a clearer understanding of where I had gone wrong.

Arguably, this is no different from a mix engineer who understands the value of establishing a static mix as part of the mix prep before any effects are applied. I just did it back to front. Subsequently, I made a number of adjustments with the result that the instruments all sounded better but the vocal was still not what I wanted. This was then followed by an extensive period experimenting with different EQ and compression settings.

Stage 4: I listened to some early, rough mixes I had kept and found that the vocals sounded better than the later attempts. Here, instances of sonic surprise did take place in that the emotion of the vocal and guitar performances communicated well as they sounded more natural. I checked the EQ settings I had used on the vocal and discovered I had used some pre-sets that seemed to me too extreme. Although the vocals were standing proud of the mix as a result of a boost in the mid-frequencies with a broad upward curve, I still felt the vocals could be improved with less extreme movements. Further rounds of experimentation followed.

Stage 5: I got the mixes to a certain stage but felt they would benefit from some objective professional feedback, an invaluable part of the process for the self- producing artist, as noted by Kristen Hermes (in Hepworth-Sawyer et al 2019: 196). I played them to a trusted engineering friend, Dave Pye, who agreed that the mix of the instruments and backing vocals were fine but thought

that my main vocals lacked clarity. He suggested cutting around the 300hz area (the area I had in fact been ping- ponging between cutting and boosting), adding a low-pass filter and boosting the high frequencies to give 'air' and presence, an approach echoed elsewhere (see for example Harding 2020). He also thought I was using too much reverb and suggested a number of compression plug-ins he liked. This then initiated a long discussion over a number of weeks about compression, EQ, available plug-ins and the treatment of the contemporary female pop vocal.

Stage 6: These conversations coincided with two guest lectures delivered by a mastering and mix engineer respectively at one of the institutions where I lecture and who reiterated many of the points raised by Pye.[5]

Stage 7: I took on board all of these views and tried some of the mixing software suggested but was cautious of pursuing genre-determined sonic trends and mistrustful of allowing plug-ins to do the tasks I was striving to achieve myself.

Stage 8: I returned to the mixes, experimented again with small EQ movements and only minimal low cuts and high boosts. I also lowered the compression settings and reverb levels. Everything sounded a lot more natural and better. I tried one of the suggested compressor plug-ins for the vocals, an emulation of the LA-2A compressor. However, as it was so late in the project, I decided that I would return to the stock plug-ins for all the instruments but would research and consider new mixing software for the next album.

Stage 9: Once the tone was achieved, I could finally focus on using automation accurately to raise or lower the various performances at key points in the track allowing the key instances of emotional expression in the vocal performances to cut through.

Final Thoughts

In essence, the process through which an artist-producer might apply different techniques that contribute to a mix is no different to those undertaken by any given mix engineer employed by individual artists or record labels (see Ishaki 2012) and in a manner no less creative or performative (see Anthony 2017). The only difference for the artist-producer lies in the holistic nature of the contribution the mixing choices make as part of the overall self-production process.

When performing in the role as mixer, the response of the artist-producer to the sound of a successfully produced and recorded arrangement, is similar to having responded to those sounds in the role as a singer or musician, or to having responded to the sound of notes and chords in the role as songwriter or composer. The state of mind when engaged in all these activities is the same, namely a state of heightened awareness triggered by what is heard that compels an act of creativity. As neat as these observations may be, I came seriously unstuck between stages 2 and 9. The mixes were just getting worse. What is clear is that having listened to the experiences and approaches of some professional engineers, I had started to doubt my own mixing abilities. I had recorded fine musicians playing beautiful instruments in a good space and yet I was destroying the sound.

Margaret Boden (2004) describes 'exploratory creativity [as one in which] you explore a structured conceptual space, mapped by a particular style […] All professional artists and scientists do this sort of thing. […] They add a new trick to their repertoire, but in a real sense it's something that 'fits' their established style: the potential was always there' (87–8).

I was not achieving the vocal mix I was straining for even though the potential for doing so was there, given that I had already achieved it for the instrumental recordings on this project as well as for my vocal performances in other work. Clearly, I felt I needed some new 'tricks' that I found through access to knowledge from some engineers in my networks. On reflection, all I needed was a clearer understanding of the impact of particular EQ and compression settings. Once I learned about some standard approaches, I discovered that the settings were not all that different to those I was already using. In other words, I was achieving the same effect but in a slightly different way. A systems approach to creativity was at play here. I would not have made some of the final changes and considered a range of new software without having had access to different sources of information, even if ultimately my own judgement and applied methods prevailed.

In every conversation I have ever had with Pye, he has urged me to trust my ears—advice echoed in every paper or textbook on producing and mixing I have come across. But that trusting business is rather more complex than at first appears not least because, for the artist-producer, what you are hearing can easily deceive you if you do not ensure—by finding ways to keep your ears fresh—that you are really listening and that what you are listening to is a true representation of what you have actually done.

There has to be trust also in *both* the creative and technical process. Artistically, sometimes the full understanding of what it is you are trying to say in a *song* only arrives through the culmination of all the writing and editing processes. Sonically, it is not until the final mix that the 'real' *track* emerges, that is, the most accurate compositional, performative and sonic representation of the intention underlying the song's initial composition.

Perhaps, most especially, though, an artist-producer has to trust those instances of sonic surprise, that is, those instances when a clear communication of the emotion of the song successfully reaches the ear. If and when this takes place to me as the creator, even after having spent so long working on a track, then I can trust that the process is close to being completed and the mix ready for mastering. One of the common criticisms of self-production is that you can keep going forever. I disagree. As an artist- producer, you *do know* when a track is finished and I suggest that *this* is the precise point at which you know. As to how long it might take to get to that point and whether or not the process that got you there was the 'correct' one, from a professional engineer's standpoint, is another matter.

From a practical perspective, the project served to validate many aspects of my own approach in mixing. It reinforced also that good ears without an awareness of a broad range of different approaches and the technical knowledge to use mixing tools accurately can make progress much slower and harder than it should be. It has also served as a reminder that new ideas, trends and technologies can throw you off course if you do not keep at the forefront of

your mind the intention of the songs and trust that focus to lead you through each stage of the creative process that takes the raw idea to a product ready for mastering.

One might argue that you cannot know everything but if you are setting out your stall as an artist-producer—in my case as a singer-songwriter whose arrangements use a combination of orchestral instruments, a real kit and acoustic, electric and bass guitars as well as synthesised sounds and beats—a common enough approach used in countless genres of pop music from the late 1970s onwards—you *have* to know *how* to get the sound you want technically, as well as creatively. This ensures that you do not miss a trick: firstly by making sure that the song itself is good enough, secondly by being mindful always of the song's intention when composing the arrangements, thirdly by being physically, mentally and emotionally alert for the best performances, fourthly by having everything set up to capture them (both my own and those of others) and finally by knowing how to create a mix that showcases their sound—the sum result of all the creative processes that have come before—in their best light. The best tone of the best sounds in the best order. The mastering engineer Stephen Kerrison made a similar observation, 'You've got to be great from the start […] so that you can't imagine it being any better [...] [Y]ou should be starting to get as perfect as you can as early as you can' (2023).

As I have suggested, the development of the distinct set of skills to enable these creative processes to take place, demonstrates the importance of their interconnectedness but also the importance of their providing individually a valuable contribution to the final mix.

This re-working, therefore, has reinforced the accuracy of Juana Molina's embroidery metaphor to describe the art form (Molina in Wolfe 2018). It has also reinforced the pitfalls of the practice highlighted by some other artist producers I have interviewed (see for example Williams and Snatch in Wolfe 2020).

As I explain in the introduction to *Women in The Studio* (2020), when I started to teach myself how to self-produce in the late 1990s, the plethora of music production courses now available did not exist. I made up my own course by enrolling on a praxis-based MA that allowed you, as a practising artist, to design your own path. Mine was to teach myself how to produce and make an EP, alongside writing a volume of poetry and researching the media representation of a mainstream and independent female singer-songwriter respectively, setting the course of my creative and academic career for the twenty years or so that have followed.

With hindsight, it might have saved a *lot* of time if I had done an engineering course instead to understand more clearly certain technical aspects of the mixing process rather than relying almost exclusively on my ears and intuition, helped by the bits of advice I picked up along the way.

On the other hand, if I had not given myself licence to and a framework within which to experiment then I would not have developed the sound, that for better or worse, has continued to develop. Furthermore, I would not have undertaken this project that has encouraged me to put under the microscope the very creative processes inherent in that sound and its development.

My experiences of these processes are not that different from those of the artist producers I have examined over the course of my research in music production. The only differences have stemmed from the particular requirements or conventions of different genres that may have framed the work.

Summing Up

Toibin (2022), speaking in the broadcast interview referenced earlier, highlighted the importance of knowing someone by their handwriting, most notably in a contemporary context dominated by online communication. This adds further weight to the familiar term 'sonic signature' (see Zagorski-Thomas 2014). For the self- producing artist that sonic identity will stem not only from a production or mixing style, examined at length by musicologists of recordings and recording practices, but from the *combined* result of the creation, performance, production, arrangement, recording, editing and mixing. Having long argued, therefore, the importance of not conflating the work of the music producer with that of the artist- producer and the need to distinguish self-production as an artform, here I have argued the importance of not conflating the distinct strands that make up the creative processes when working within the form as a singer-songwriter. I have aimed to award each of those strands and their accompanying challenges some attention, in order to examine their contribution to a creative process that ensures that a song and subsequently a track works and is ready for mastering. I have paid particular attention to the importance of, what I have described as, triggers that compel firstly an emotional and then creative response in both the compositional and performance stages of that process. I have also addressed the challenges encountered during the mixing stage and considered the impact of discussions I have both witnessed and taken part in concerning the tone of the recorded sound of some contemporary music afforded by the use of particular mixing techniques and available software. Finally, I have argued the need for an artist producer to trust those instances of sonic surprise—when a piece of music stops you in your tracks (excuse the pun) and makes you feel. These are the moments that allow you to judge whether the song, the track, the mix is finally finished.

Towards the end of the Cocker interview, mentioned earlier, he described taking his young son to the 'only surviving cave art in the UK', a horse's head in a neolithic settlement called Creswell Cragg near his childhood home of Sheffield. It had a strong emotional impact on him, and reflecting as to why, he said how it was 'magical and unbelievable' that 'somehow [the artist] was still communicating something still'. It led him to conclude that, 'If you make an artefact, whatever it is—a vase, a song, a painting, whatever—if you do it right, it lasts forever' (2022).

The desire to 'do it right' is, ultimately, what has compelled every song I have ever written or produced or mixed. The knowledge reinforced by this period of re- working and subsequent reflection, is to trust the triggers, the surprises and the subsequent processes when deciding whether or not I have succeeded.

Endnotes

[1] Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA), October 2020, the University of Agder, November 2020, the University of Huddersfield, May 2021 and the University of Groningen, December 2022, respectively.

[2] The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads is an essay, composed by William Wordsworth,   for the second edition (published in January 1801, and often referred to as the "1800 Edition") of the poetry collection Lyrical Ballads.

[3] The interview formed part of a programme on BBC Radio 4 called This Cultural Life where invited artists discuss the influences that have shaped their work.

[4] All work referenced can be heard at https://open.spotify.com/artist/6xcPIwCgs1qCYoZngfLvG S.

[5] Guest lectures delivered by mastering engineer Stephen Kerrison and mix engineer Max Blue Churchill at The Institute of Contemporary Music Performance (ICMP), London, 15 February 2023.

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