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Back to the Future. The Music Production Imagination, Songwriting and Exploring the Past

Pat O'Grady
Australian National University
pat.ogrady@anu.edu.au

Abstract

The study of songwriting invites us to enter into the music production process of making a song. Here, we may observe melodic or lyric ideas in their unfinished form. However, within this process there are also ways a songwriter might imagine how the song will sound when it is completed. This article probes this process as the "music production imagination". Using a practice research approach coupled with brief textual analyses of existing accounts of practice, it examines the imagined futures of a song during the songwriting process. It draws on 1980s pop as an example, where highly mediated production elements, such as surreal reverb, synthesizers, and drum machines, often appear first in the imagination before they are realised in a recording.

KEYWORDS: music production, imagination, songwriting, popular music, 1980s pop music

Introduction

I stumbled upon a chord progression while playing my keyboard one day last year. It wasn't original in popular music or even in my catalogue, for that matter, but I liked the chord voicing I was using. It felt like the start of a new song. And so, it was. I then improvised a melody with my voice, and then a verse took shape. To anyone nearby – such as my partner in the other room or my neighbour who was gardening – they probably heard a ballad. Why? That's what I was playing, and that

was what I was recording into Logic Pro. But I was hearing other things. My mind was wandering beyond the music that was filling this space. I could imagine a mid to up-tempo pop song with 1980s pop production inflections. For example, I could hear in my head an electric guitar with a chorus effect, synths, and a big reverb on the snare drum. Over the next 20 minutes, I improvised chords, melodies, and nonsense lyrics until I had a sketch of a song. At this point, some decisions still needed to be made before I could release the song. Others had already been made, but they were not yet audible in the piano or vocal parts — they existed only in my imagination.

These decisions are emblematic of this stage of the music production process in pop music. Materially, there is a skeleton of a song. For example, "Every Breath You Take" by the Police, with many of the production inflections I envisioned, originates with a fragment of the song that lead singer Sting created. He states: "I woke up in the middle of the night with that line in my head, sat down at the piano and had written it in half an hour" (Davis & Smith 1993). This preceded the production elements of the song, such as instrumentation, arrangement, and processing, including the famous chorus effected electric guitar arpeggio. Another example is "Africa" by Toto. Singer and keyboardist David Paich discusses developing the melody and lyrics: "I was hearing the melody in my head and I sat down and played the music in about 10 minutes. And then the chorus came out. I sang the chorus out as you hear it" (Parker 2013). It precedes the famous Yamaha GS1 present in the completed recording. From these accounts, it is unclear how the production elements of the completed work were imagined, if at all. These accounts are focused on what they started with, materially, not imaginatively. Put differently, in these moments, if the songwriter, writing on the piano, wishes to consider these components as part of a specific outcome for the song, they may have to imagine them. Otherwise, all they, and musicologists as potential observers of this process, may hear is vocals and piano.

In this article, I consider the imagined futures of a song during the songwriting process. When scholars have analysed songwriting, they often confront a completed song and attempt to understand how it was made. However, as I argue, this may not enable us to encounter the imagined parts of a song in these moments, such as the long tail reverb that may linger between melodic phrases or the instrument parts that will provide a riff over the vocal hook in the chorus. I call this the *music production imagination*. To be clear, there are various ways in which a song might emerge. It might be collaboratively where various people feed into the songwriting process. In this instance, the persons who write the melody and lyrics might be building on a guitar riff such as the one in "(Can't Get No) Satisfaction" by the Rolling Stones, or it might be a studio-constructed backing track such as those created by Brian Eno for U2. But here, I am dealing with a case where the songs were written in a solo context, using accompanying instruments that probably won't feature prominently on the final recording.

I draw on songwriting influenced by 1980s pop music as a case study of this practice. 1980s pop, a genre highly mediated by studio technologies, provides a clear example of the music production imagination in songwriting. While these songs often share melodic and structural conventions common to popular music more broadly, they are associated with distinct digital production aesthetics such as expansive reverb, chorus effects, and synthesizers. As Goodwin (1988: 34)

observes, 1980s pop culture was characterised by a sense that "the future has now arrived, for good", reflecting the increasing prominence of new recording technologies in shaping musical aesthetics. Scholars have also noted the distinctive timbral qualities of this period; for example, Lavengood (2019: 88) argues that the brightness of the Yamaha DX7 and similar digital instruments differentiates 1980s sounds from the warmer timbres associated with earlier synthesizers. These characteristics make the decade particularly useful for examining how production aesthetics may be imagined during songwriting. In some cases, these sonic ideas may emerge during the songwriting process itself, particularly within studio-based songwriting where a producer might begin with a drum machine pattern and develop a melody, chords, and lyrics around it. In other cases, songs are written first and production elements are introduced later. Using a 1980s-focused case study, therefore, narrows the analytical field, allowing practice-led observations to be grounded in a coherent sonic vocabulary while illustrating a broader process within songwriting practice.

This article considers the songwriting process to explore how a practice research perspective may help develop a framework for popular musicology. Through listening to music, we may ask a series of questions and find answers stemming from what we can hear on the completed recording. We might ask different questions if we glean accounts of the creative process through interviews in the research design or through examining existing ones. The researcher can also be engaged in the creative practice through documentation. However, by structuring the research design around not just the documentation of creative practice but direct engagement in songwriting, we can encounter different and potentially more extensive insights into the creative process. This process may help us better understand the musicology of popular music, including the aesthetics and the cultural practices that lead to its development. Therefore, I endeavour to complicate our understanding of songwriting as a convergent practice with performance and recording. This indicates that studio-based songwriting may be more than technologically aided, but the studio production is also imagined during the songwriting process.

Defining the Music Production Imagination

Imagination provides a useful lens for exploring the songwriting process. The concept of imagination used here draws on existing scholarship that treats it as a theoretical tool for understanding cognition, culture, listening, and recording. Some scholars approach imagination as a cognitive process that plays a role in creative activity. Hargreaves (2012) and Jakubowski (2020), for example, describe imagination as central to the creation of texts and closely linked to broader discussions of creativity and musical thinking. Other approaches situate imagination within wider social and cultural contexts. Mills' (1959) concept of the sociological imagination encourages us to reconsider seemingly individual activities by placing them within broader social structures. As Mills argues, the sociological imagination is a "quality of mind" that allows individuals to connect personal experience with wider social processes. In this sense, imagination can expand our epistemological perspective, allowing songwriting to be understood not

only as an individual creative act but also as a practice shaped by wider cultural and technological contexts.

In music and sound studies, imagination has also been used to interpret the cultural and technological environments through which music is produced and experienced. Sterne's (2012) notion of sonic imaginations encourages scholars to consider sound within broader cultural frameworks. As Sterne (2012:5) writes, sonic imaginations are "plural, recursive, reflexive, driven to represent, refigure and redescribe" the sonic world. Related work has examined listening practices that cannot be directly observed. Valverde's (2022) concept of imagined listening recognises that listening must often be inferred through people's interactions with musical media and digital platforms. Imagination has also been applied to recording practices themselves. Negus (2010: 216) introduces the concept of the phonographic imagination to describe how recording technologies reshape musical creation by separating performances from their original contexts and relocating them within more private and mediated listening environments. These approaches suggest that imagination can be a productive way of examining musical practices that involve anticipating sonic outcomes beyond what is immediately audible.

Building on these perspectives, songwriting involves working with incomplete musical material – melodies, chords, and fragments of lyrics – while simultaneously anticipating how the finished recording might sound. This imagined future may include elements such as instrumentation, vocal processing, spatial effects, or production techniques that are not yet present in the songwriting sketch. In the context of this study, these anticipations often relate to production elements associated with 1980s pop, such as synthesizers and digital processing. These imagined outcomes do not always align with the final recording, as production decisions, collaboration, and studio experimentation may transform earlier ideas. This forward-looking dimension of songwriting is understood here as the *music production imagination* which describes the process through which songwriters anticipate the sonic outcome of a recording while working with unfinished musical material.

Delineating Songwriting and the Song

This study is situated within a research context that considers songwriting as a process that often operates fluidly alongside other elements of the creative process. Studying songwriting more broadly can involve examining how a song –typically a lead melody accompanied by lyrics and chords – emerges through creative activity. The emphasis here is on songwriting as a process rather than on the completed work, which is more often the focus of traditional popular musicological approaches (Moore 2012). If one wishes to understand how particular musical decisions are made – such as the development of melodic ideas or the establishment of tonal centres – it becomes necessary to examine the songwriting process itself. This approach has been examined from a range of perspectives. Some studies consider songwriting as a practice that can be taught through pedagogical approaches to craft (Tobias 2013; Kratus 2016). Kratus (2016), for instance, notes that when teachers work with student songwriters, the aim is to help students refine their own musical ideas rather than impose those of the teacher, framing

songwriting as an iterative creative process. Other work situates songwriting within broader systems of creativity and collaboration. Bennett (2011) highlights how collaborative songwriting emerges from both artistic and economic motivations, while McIntyre (2006) situates songwriting within a wider cultural system of musical knowledge and experience. His discussion of Paul McCartney's composition of "Yesterday", for example, illustrates how songwriting draws on accumulated musical practice rather than appearing as a fully formed idea.

More recent research has examined collaborative songwriting in industry contexts such as songwriting camps. Studies by Herbst (2024), Tolstad (2022) and Wernicke (2024) demonstrate how these camps function as structured environments where songwriters collaborate under time constraints, exchange skills, and negotiate creative roles while producing commercially oriented music. Other studies emphasise how songwriters anticipate audiences and musical trends. Hiltunen's (2023) ethnographic research, for instance, shows how professional songwriters engage in forms of "foresightfulness", and thus draw on their awareness of industry trends and potential musical futures when shaping songs.

This research context also highlights the fluid relationship between songwriting and music production. While songwriting often involves socially recognised tasks – such as developing melody, lyrics, and harmony – these activities frequently occur alongside the production processes of performance and recording. Zak (2001: 30), observes that many artists employ integrated methods in which songwriting, arranging, and recording occur simultaneously, a practice that has become increasingly common. Bennett (2011) similarly notes that contemporary studio environments enable the blurring of roles between songwriters, arrangers, performers and producers, with studio technologies themselves shaping creative decisions. Such perspectives challenge the assumption that melody, chords, lyrics, and arrangement are fully formed prior to recording (Zak 2001).

I propose that stepping inside the songwriting process allows us to consider moments when the song is not yet complete. Various elements – from sections to reverb – may still need to be added, removed, or reshaped. Existing studies demonstrate that songwriting unfolds through collaborative, cultural, and industrial processes. While work such as Hiltunen's shows how professional songwriters anticipate audiences and musical trends, these perspectives tend to frame this forward-looking activity in relation to industry expectations and possible musical futures. I suggest that songwriting also involves imagining the sound of the finished recording itself. The melody, chords, and lyrics produced by the songwriter may not fully encompass the vision of the completed work, which may exist primarily in the songwriter's mind rather than in a demo recording. How, then, do we make sense of these elements? How might we examine songwriting in a way that allows us to encounter this imagined future shaping the creative process?

Practicing the Imagination

The methodology of this research is underpinned by three approaches: textual analysis of songwriting practices from existing and prominent examples documented through media, making music in a music production context and documenting these experiences. These three approaches allow the study to

examine the music production imagination from complementary perspectives: through lived creative practice, reflective documentation of the songwriting process, and comparative analysis of documented production practices in popular music. The primary research materials, therefore, consist of DAW session files documenting the songwriting process, written reflective notes produced after each session, and a series of interviews, documentaries, and recorded artefacts analysed through textual analysis.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis in this article builds on existing studies that interpret documented accounts of how songs are written and produced. Research by McIntyre (2006), Katz (2010), and Moorefield (2005) demonstrates that examining interviews in magazines and documentaries can help illuminate processes of music creation. Although such texts present limitations – such as editorial framing, selective narration, and the motivations of interviewees (Williams) – they nevertheless provide valuable insights into creative practice. For example, accounts from The Beatles and Beach Boys illustrate how the 1960s marked a period in which the boundaries between songwriting and production became increasingly blurred, a development discussed by Katz and Moorefield. McIntyre's (2006: 215) analysis of Paul McCartney's reflections on "Yesterday" shows how songwriting emerges from a complex cultural and experiential process rather than spontaneous inspiration. This highlights how songwriting narratives can be interpreted through theoretical frameworks to reveal broader creative processes. Similarly, Long and Barber (2015) examine passion in songwriting, arguing that emotional investment plays a central role in shaping songwriters' careers. This body of research demonstrates how textual analysis can connect diverse practitioner accounts and reveal recurring themes in creative practice, while also acknowledging that many narratives are produced for general audiences and may lack detailed documentation of production processes.

This study employs textual analysis of materials relating to music production practice. These texts include artist discourse, mediated representations of studio work, and recorded artefacts. Artist discourse includes interviews and public statements in which musicians describe their songwriting and production processes. For example, interviews with Taylor Swift discussing the sonic direction of *1989* in *The Hit Formula* (2014) provide self-reported accounts of creative intention and production thinking and allow interpretation of how artists articulate aesthetic goals, including references to "80s synth-pop". Retrospective practitioner accounts are also considered, including interviews with David Paich about the development of "Africa", which reference the Yamaha CS-80 and GS-1 synthesizers and help document the relationship between songwriting and recording technologies in the 1980s. Industry publications and production journalism provide additional technical perspectives on recording sessions, such as interviews with producers working with Harry Styles, including comments by producer Tyler Johnson, which reveal instrumentation choices and studio decision-making. The study also draws on mediated observation of studio practices through documentary footage, such as *Miss Americana*, which depicts songwriting at the piano, collaboration with producers, and the addition of electronic drums and synthesizers

in Pro Tools sessions, providing observational insight into production workflows and enabling process tracing across stages of composition and recording. Finally, comparative listening is undertaken across recorded artefacts, including early demos and final studio recordings. For example, the home demo of "Billie Jean" (1981) is compared with the final recording on *Thriller* to analyse the persistence and transformation of instrumentation and arrangement, while songs such as "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" (1983), illustrate how synthesizers, drum machines, and other production techniques associated with 1980s aesthetics were applied to pre-existing compositions.

Practice-led Production

The production context of this research is based on a practice-led approach, meaning the researcher composed music during the research process. This draws on my experience and practice as a songwriter, and the research data comes from the act of songwriting. Studies on songwriting and composition in popular music often focus on two different approaches. One is observation informed by a practical understanding of songwriting. For example, Tolstad (2023: 12) explores songwriting practices at camps, stating that their role was mainly to observe and listen from the studio corner. This highlights how songwriting can be experienced in the moment and narrated by participants. Another approach, one which inspires the method used in this paper, involves the researcher engaging in music making solo, as seen in Wolinski's examination of utopian thinking in songwriting. Wolinski notes (2017: 11). This method leverages the researcher's skills as a songwriter.

In this project, I performed the role of songwriter. This sits alongside my other skills as a musician (singer, guitarist and keyboardist) and producer/audio engineer. I have been making music since 2002, firstly in a bedroom context and then, since 2009, in a hybrid project/large studio approach (Goold 2022), primarily facilitated by my associations with tertiary music schools. The studio has been central to my songwriting practice for two decades. At the time of the commencement of this 1980s pop project, my studio setup consisted of a Universal Audio Apollo 8 audio interface, a MacBook Pro computer, and a U87 clone large diaphragm condenser microphone.

The project has two start dates. The first song was written in August 2021 without intending to be on a 1980s throwback album. However, the songwriting sessions, which were intentionally set out for a 1980s album, began in July 2022. I had, at this time, commenced work at a university that had a world-class large recording studio where I was to teach music production. I wanted to understand it better and explore some research questions simultaneously. Before this, though, I needed to write fourteen or so songs. This part of the project did not involve the large studio. That was to come, and I report on this in another article. The songs were written in my project studio, on voice, accompanied by piano or acoustic guitar. The song's melody, chords, and lyrics were developed over ten takes, sometimes shorter or longer. So, an initial melody or chord idea was expanded and developed into a new section. The last take was typically a finished version of a verse, pre-chorus, and chorus, and may not consider how the sections will be repeated in a typically pop song fashion. I recorded what I was writing into Logic. The instruments were recorded onto separate audio tracks. While working in a digital audio workstation

is a valuable research tool, it is also an effective songwriting device, as sometimes a melody can develop in an unsuccessful direction. Returning to some of the early iterations can help refocus the direction. I've done this for twenty years. The end result of this process was fourteen Logic files containing the process of the songs. Not all the songs were complete. While, for example, lyrics for the songs were finished, sometimes they didn't have a recorded take of the second verse with its lyrics.

My studio was normalised for songwriting, so there was minimal setup. This also meant the role of the studio in the songwriting session was scalable. While studio-based songwriting practices were used, the technology did not get in the way of the process. Signal paths for vocals, guitar and keyboard were already set. I had a template in Logic entitled "80s template", with a track with vocals, guitar, piano (whichever I used), then a couple of soft synths and drum machine tracks for easy access. The songs had a varying degree of studio use. Some songs were written with minimal studio tools, such as reverb, and 1980s-sounding Lexicon 480 L as a send effect. Some software instruments and loops were used to audition the 1980s aesthetic. DAWs such as Logic and third-party companies such as Arturia enable songwriters to access the sounds and functionality of famous 1980s hardware such as the LinnDrum or DX7. I reflect on these approaches in the next section.

The next stage was to prepare the songs to track the album. The songs were then to be tracked with drums (which I explored in another article). To accompany this, I recorded all the songs into one session to send bounces of each song to the drummer. The songs were recorded quickly over 90 minutes. Although some songs had studio instruments and piano in the writing process, they all returned to a consistent vocals and guitar sound. The production process analyzed here ends with the completion of 10 demo recordings made in my home studio. There was some processing, including compression, EQ, and reverb, but they were uniform across all tracks. The songs were titled: "By My Side", "Cone of Silence", "Fill my Cup", "Holding On", "Looking Glass", "The Morning Day", "Never That Easy", "Save A Little Time", "Where I'll Be", "Finally Arrived", "Lingers", "This Love", and "When Will It End".

Documenting the imagination

Research on songwriting, derived from the creative process, must have a methodology to document it. This research involves material elements, such as the documented process through a digital audio workstation. However, capturing documentation of an imagination, which doesn't manifest sonically, requires periodic written reflection. Jacobsen (2017) explores the interplay between ethnography and songwriting, while Carless (2018: 228) shares their songwriting process through reflective writing, stating, "Using a storytelling approach helps me respect the mystery and openness of the art". Although I summarise their approaches here rather than presenting entries, the thematic ideas suggest that the songwriting process can be productively translated into written form. During this research, I noted imagined futures for the song after each session. As a result, I captured my experiences with imagination during the songwriting process in notes. This was done as a written reflection at the end of each songwriting session. This approach presents challenges, as it's not something that I am familiar with in my

creative practice. Wolfe (2023: 27) reflects on their transition into practice research, expressing discomfort with intertwining personal experiences and studio inquiries. This resonates with my background in traditional research, where practical experiences often shaped broader research questions, serving as introductory rather than central elements.

The Music Production Imagination in Songwriting Practice

Accounts of contemporary songwriting practices provide a way of observing how the music production imagination may operate, even if only indirectly. Taylor Swift has, in recent years, adopted 1980s sounds in her music. This is particularly evident in her album 1989, but is more broadly present across her work after her pivot from country music. Swift recalls: "The sonic inspiration for this album really kind of harkens back to the sounds of late 80s pop" (Recording Academy / GRAMMYs 2014). It is possible to observe these sounds on the album. Swift notes: "With this album you'll hear like flickers and hints of 80s synth-pop in there" (Recording Academy / GRAMMYs 2014). The 1980s pop references on the album function as a vehicle for change. She says: "The goal is to continue to change, and never change in the same way twice" (THE HIT FORMULA 2014). The songs seem tailored to go in a new direction, which takes time, and her previous approach needs to change. She reflects: "Usually the things I write in the first six to eight months get thrown out not because they weren't great songs but because they don't fit my idea of what the new album should be" (Recording Academy / GRAMMYs 2014). These comments suggest that production aesthetics may already be imagined during the songwriting process, even when they are not yet materially present in the recording.

Swift incorporates electronic instruments into her songwriting process throughout her work. In the Netflix documentary *Miss Americana*, at 8 minutes, Swift states, "I'm only me", starting on piano to develop melody, chords, and lyrics. Later, in the studio, she and her producer add electronic drums using Pro Tools. At 52 minutes, she collaborates with producer Joel Little on "The Man", pausing to reference pre-recorded parts on her phone. She suggests, "Maybe if you start a vibe, then it'll just write itself", leading to the setup of a synth and additional keyboard tracks. Sloan (2021) argues that Swift's shift to 1980s pop sounds reflects both artistic experimentation and savvy rebranding. They note, "one can hear Swift thinking like a producer", as pre-composed music and in-studio experimentation help shape the final version of the song. This method exemplifies the music production imagination at work, integrating 1980s sounds into the songwriting process. Swift (Re-edition N.d.) begins with piano and vocals, incorporating studio technology later, aligning with her belief that "I can't write a song without a melody". In tracks like "The Man", technology enriches the production and defines the song's potential beyond the initial piano version. In this way, mediated accounts such as interviews and documentaries provide partial insights into how production thinking may shape songwriting.

Similar indications of a music production imagination appear in other contemporary songwriting accounts. Harry Styles' approach to engaging with 1980s aesthetics integrates instruments from the period. Tyler Johnson (cited in Rogerson 2023) notes: "Harry was sitting on the Moog One, and I liked what he

was playing, so I sat down and played as he started to write the melodies and the lyrics". Also, Harry's approach shows that some of the 1980s elements present in the songwriting stage might be replaced later. The programmed drums that helped develop the song were replaced at one point on this album. Johnson (cited in Willman 2022) states:

> Hull [producer]loved the drum part he'd come up with on the spot, but found the actual sound of it lacking. So he re-recorded each element of the drum kit, one at a time. They also brought in a second drummer, Mitch Rowland, who plays guitar on the album as well, for a slightly thrashier sound toward the end of the single.

This approach reveals that the technology used in the songwriting process can be frustrating, thus reflecting my experience with drum loops in Logic Pro X. These examples suggest that imagined production elements can influence songwriting decisions even when the final sounds are not yet fixed.

The mediated nature of these accounts presents incomplete insights into the creative process. In *Miss Americana*, the portrayal of one song emphasises the progression to a concert rather than the decision-making involved. The 40-minute section on "Get Away Car" shows Swift and her producer Jack Antonoff developing the melody and lyrics, followed by a Pro Tools session with layered tracks. The transition to a concert performance happens quickly, limiting our understanding of her initial vision and the studio's role in shaping the final sound. This highlights the limitations of relying solely on mediated accounts of songwriting. While they provide useful glimpses of production thinking, they often obscure the moment-to-moment decision-making through which such ideas emerge.

Historical recordings and demos offer another form of textual evidence through which the music production imagination can be examined. 1980s aesthetics and these songs can be intertwined and observed in the Michael Jackson song "Billie Jean". "Billie Jean" was released in 1983 as a single and a track on Jackson's second solo album, *Thriller*. The song was written by Jackson and co-produced by Quincy Jones. In 2001, a special edition release of *Thriller* included a revealing recording of "Billie Jean" titled "Billie Jean Home Demo" (1981). Jackson created the demo for "Billie Jean" at home two years before its public release. It features various 1980s instruments, including a drum machine, synth bass, Rhodes keyboard, electric guitar, and Jackson's voice. While the instrument parts carry over to the final track with improved performances and recording quality, the vocals and lyrics are still in progress. The chorus is well-developed with overdubs and melody, but the verses remain incomplete, indicating that the 1980s instruments and tech processing play a role in shaping the song's production. In this case, the demo suggests that production technologies were already shaping the song's imagined sonic form during its early development.

However, not all examples suggest that production aesthetics are present at the earliest stages of songwriting. This is indicative of the two examples that I referred to in the Introduction with "Africa". The song and its famous arrangements were developed after David Paich wrote the melody and lyrics. Robyn Flans (2005) writes, "Paich then proceeded to work on the lyrics for another six months. He brought the skeleton to drummer Jeff Porcaro with the idea of having percussion

being an integral part of the composition". It was at this point that he then turned to the 1980s sounds. In another interview (in Parker 2013), he states,

> I realised I had a song in the making, so I started writing on the Yamaha CS-80, which you hear in the intro - that's the keyboard playing - and then you hear the little kalimba sounds [on the Yamaha GS1] in the chorus. It was a fertile time to make music with new sounds, and that kind of defined that song.

These elements indeed defined the song, framing its distinctive introduction section and the following instrumental parts. If they were there in any form in the early stages of the songwriting process, it would be the music production imagination of Paich. In such cases, the production aesthetic emerges after the song's core musical material has already been established.

The technological reference points that can prompt an imagination did not always exist when some of the most well-known 1980s songs were written. Not all songs from the 1980s were written during that decade. Several famous songs from the 1980s were covers of songs written before the 1980s (1). Examples include "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" (1983) by Cyndi Lauper and "Bette Davis Eyes" (1981) by Kim Carnes. These songs underwent significant changes compared to the originals. The heavy use of synthesizers and gated snares are examples of such changes. The original version of "Tainted Love" had more acoustic instruments, such as a Rhodes keyboard, which was later replaced by various synths in the Soft Cell version. Synths and drum machines replaced the original bass and drums. Additionally, the reverb used in the Soft Cell version has higher frequencies consistent with the 1980s Lexicon 481. Even "Bette Davis Eyes" was originally a swing pop jazz piece transformed into a straight groove for the 1980s. These examples illustrate that 1980s songs do not necessarily have a particular aesthetic because they were imagined as such during the songwriting process. The temporal distance between the origins of some of these songs and their release renders such an imagination impossible. Instead, they were applied to a completed song, like adding colour paint to a pencil sketch. These examples underscore the importance of conceptualising songwriting as a process. While textual sources allow us to infer how production aesthetics may intersect with composition, they rarely provide direct access to the imaginative decisions that occur during songwriting itself. The following section, therefore, turns to a practice-led approach in order to examine these moments more closely.

Technology, the Mind, and Imagination in Songwriting

Stepping into the songwriting process and documenting the experience of imagining how the song might progress provides a productive lens to understand the music production imagination. The creative process, here, can be understood as a temporal sequence of events, but the anticipation of what comes next or how the song might progress into a finished work took on different forms.

For some songs, I primarily imagined their progression in my mind. Put differently, they were internally auditioned. While I developed these songs with vocals and either acoustic guitar or piano, there were elements that extended

beyond the audible output of the session. For example, when I was writing "By My Side", a mid-tempo 1980s-style pop song, I initially wrote the chorus on acoustic guitar and voice. While developing the section, I could imagine a synth counter-melody accompanying the vocal line. This first appeared as I developed the chords that moved between ii and iv. I imagined a coarse, sawtooth-like synth timbre playing a short run centred on scale degree III. Here, as the vocal melody developed, I anticipated a counter melody that would be important to the song's functioning. Further, as I experimented with ways to resolve the chorus, which was otherwise building harmonic tension, I anticipated a second synth line responding to the vocal melody and creating a deceptive cadence. This expectation shaped the melody's phrasing, leading me to leave space between lines so the imagined response could occur. Later, while writing the bridge section, I changed my strumming approach to focus on chord changes to create a sense of textural openness. I imagined this space later being filled by an electric piano sound akin to the E. Piano on the DX7. At the same time, I anticipated the sixteen-bar bridge building toward a climactic moment in which the drums would introduce large tom hits framing the section. This expectation even shaped the lyric, prompting me to develop the line "can you hear the sound of drumming". Although the guitar and vocal performance defined the immediate sonic material of the session, the compositional thinking was oriented toward a fuller arrangement. I imagined certain sections becoming densely layered while others would be stripped back, reflecting common dynamic contrasts in 1980s pop production, including reverberant toms and synthesizer textures that were not yet materially present in the session. This approach was also used in "Where I'll Be", a similar, uplifting pop song.

Another approach involved using recording technology as a stakeholder to augment the imagined future of a song. A constant element throughout the creative process was the use of a Lexicon 480L reverb plugin. Digital reverbs produced by Lexicon, particularly the 224 and later the 480L, became closely linked with the expansive spatial aesthetic of 1980s pop production, and creating a surreal reverb sound in pop music. I applied it to the vocal track as a send for playback and on the UAD Console during tracking, meaning it was not being recorded. This reverb was heard both in playback and during tracking. It prompted me to imagine how the reverb might decay and how to leave space for it in the melodies I was writing. During the songwriting stage, I could experience a spatial aesthetic that would align somewhat with the final recording. The 480L was set to a male plate preset with a long decay and an unnatural amount of high frequencies, consistent with 1980s aesthetics. I found it particularly useful when writing the song "Cone of Silence", a 1980s ballad similar to "Heaven" by Bryan Adams. While I regularly use reverb during my songwriting practice, it is mainly to provide some depth, but not to this extent. In this context, I noticed that the reverb tail inspired me to sing in my upper register and let notes ring out longer to maximise the effect of the reverb. This reverb was a placeholder, and I anticipated that it would be refined later, as it was only for monitoring and not captured in the session, although the Logic session itself was running another 480L as a send.

Similarly, the sound of 1980s pop was produced by placeholder software synths and drum machines during the songwriting process. This meant that at some point before the core melodic parts of the song were completed or chords were finalised,

various 1980s elements were added. These elements included 1980s synths like the DX7 and the drum machine like the LinnDrum. These instruments provided some insight into the 1980s sound that might be present in the completed recording. An example of this is the song "A Lonely Night". There weren't many lyrics beyond nonsensical words when I developed a verse and chorus melody and chord arrangement. It had a swung 1950s feel and an ice cream turnaround (I vi IV V) progression, and I was unsure how this would fit into an 1980s pop arrangement. I arranged it with three synthesizers and a drum loop to counter this. These 1980s cues illuminated my imagination of how the song might work in a 1980s throwback context despite its 1950s underpinnings. Crucially, these 1980s elements were embedded in the track before the melody and lyrics had been developed. In fact, very few of the final lyrics were present when the synthesizers and drums were well established. However, the use of 1980s sonic elements revealed some limitations. As my primary concern was developing the melody chords and lyrics, the drum machine and keyboard synth parts were established quickly. There was no chance of them making it to the completed recording. Consequently, they weren't fully formed or with extensive consideration. The embedded nature of the LinnDrum and DX7 into Logic enabled quick access to these sounds, but I was struck by how, without time or focus on refining the sound and parts, the success of imagining a 1980s pop sound was limited. This process also revealed that the sound I was looking for was not always the robotic groove created by the LinnDrum. I often wanted real drums. The tools in Logic were unable to help imagine this. They were, in fact, counterproductive. Nonetheless, it spurred my imagination that synths – if chosen more carefully – would successfully place this song in a 1980s context.

There were moments in the songwriting process when the imagination, whether technologically mediated or not, failed to project a 1980s pop aesthetic vividly even though the song – in terms of its chords, melody and lyrics, was approaching its completion. On those occasions, I shifted from an acoustic songwriting context to building a rough demo, expanding the guitar and vocal ensemble to include drums, bass, other guitars, backing vocals, and synths to explore the arrangement more concretely. This happened while writing *The Looking Glass*. I remember sitting in the studio, unsure how the song might produce a 1980s sound. The acoustic guitar and vocal sketch were working musically, but the production aesthetic remained unclear. To explore this further, I began constructing a demo in Logic, starting with the "Logic Drummer", a virtual drummer designed to approximate human playing styles. I selected the *Floor to the Floor Kit* with an *Indie Disco Acoustic Drummer* setting, which produced a straight beat with the kick on every beat and the snare on beats two and four. I added substantial gated reverb to the snare to recall the spatial qualities associated with 1980s pop recordings. I also began layering vocal overdubs in the chorus, experimenting with backing vocal textures and doubling techniques. This process allowed several aspects of the arrangement to emerge, particularly the song's groove and the density of the chorus. I also spent time spatialising parts and applying processing such as compression and EQ. In the chorus, I layered additional piano and backing vocals, gradually building a fuller arrangement around the original guitar-and-vocal sketch. The disadvantage of this approach was the time required and the limitations of the virtual synths and drum instruments. At the same time, I knew that once the live drums were tracked, these programmed elements would likely become latent in the final recording.

Nevertheless, the demo gave me confidence that the song could function within a 1980s production aesthetic. In particular, I was aiming to capture something of the sonic attitude found in "I Won't Back Down" by Tom Petty.

The results of the approaches taken produced a diverse range of recordings, ranging from acoustic guitar and vocals. Some had extensively fleshed-out demo recordings that were processed and mixed, and others that were ready to record but did not have a completed version (there might have been incomplete lyrics in the last recording that took place in the songwriting session). The next phase of the project was to follow the tracking of the drums – this itself being its own research project. I did not want to send the drummer and research collaborator incomplete lyrics and songs with a structure that had not been recorded. Further, I did not like sending them demos when I was unhappy with the groove. This was because I didn't want the drum machines to influence the real drums that would be used. I wanted to work with the drummer in a collaborative manner. This was the primary reason for recording the 14 songs for the session.

This process is indicative of how songwriting in a wide variety of contexts can be studio-based. Even though the use of technology differed across these spaces, all these instances shaped the songwriting. And aligns with the idea that recording and composing are indeed aligned. This might be because the recording is imagined, or is put in with stakeholders, to help shape the melody, or later to help confirm that the song is right and then prompt minor adjustments, but it's all indicative of a fluid process between the song and its recording environment and can appear in a contemporary production context.

Conclusions

This article has explored how the creative process of music production is devoid of the text we are often most familiar with: the completed recording. For the songwriter, if they are mindful of the completed recording, they must imagine it. First, this imagination may take shape in the songwriter's mind as they compose the melody of a specific section; they may imagine the instruments that will play beyond the one they are playing to compose. They may imagine how the instruments provide parts around the melody or concurrently. They may imagine the processing that will occur using studio technology. Second, this imagination also takes shape within the affordances of studio technology in contemporary music production contexts. As the songwriter composes, they may add a drum loop. They may add another vocal part to the main one they are composing. They may process the sound of their vocals as they write. While these are very different forms of the music production imagination, they exist as multiple-layer spectrums and flow fluidly in individual production situations.

The music production imagination speaks to the layers of meaning propagating when we encounter text. It may relate to the creative process more broadly. Clark et al. (2003: 773) state, "When people tell stories, and when they listen to them, they think about what is going on in the worlds being described". This suggests that when we both produce and encounter cultural texts, there are layers behind the information we are either producing or being presented with. There is curiosity. And the music production imagination reminds us of this. The music production

imagination is about creating a melody – or some fragment of a new song idea – and thinking about what might come from it or how it might fit into a specific genre. Similarly, Klempe (2017) argues that music prompts vivid imagery in the listener. Likewise, music encounters can initiate a series of reference points in the creative process. Yet, I am interested in how this cultural practice plays out in texts. This imagery can be documented through a practice research approach and then contextualised more broadly within popular music practice through accounts of process in the media articles.

A music production imagination framework for songwriting may provide fertile ground for future research. The processual consideration in songwriting study may involve not only the order in which elements materially emerged in the process. It may also consider the imagined futures that are present during this process. As just one part of making a 1980s album, this article prompts questions about how the music production imagination plays out in the tracking stage in a collaborative context or how this imagination is realised when the songs are produced and the album is completed. But beyond this, the music production imagination might help us understand production in a context embedded in the past or a style of popular music with less technological mediation. It provides another lens through which we may contemplate the music production process. Imagination here is twofold—the process by which musicians consider where their music might go and how music production scholars attain insights into these considerations.

Endnotes

(1) Several internet blogs, such as Saturday Evening Post Brownfield 2022) and Popmatters (Gerard 2020), report on famous 1980s songs that were covers.

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