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THE STATE OF ART - LARGE-SCALE CREATIVE ENDEAVOUR AND ITS IMPACT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

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1.0 Background

The State of Art has existed in various forms since 2007. The State of Art is a music project, spearheaded by myself with aim of releasing new and innovative creative work designed specifically as an antithesis to modern trends in recording and composition. Compositional and recording style can be likened to alternative music of the mid-nineties, with an emphasis on melody, frequent use of irregular chord patterns and progressions and quality recording techniques. The music lies firmly within the popular music framework and is reasonably intense in delivery. The State of Art, at time of recording, revolved around three core members who have been regularly performing original material since 2008-09. The compositional and creative force behind the majority of the collective's decisions lies with myself, which although has its own advantages creatively, it necessitates a majority share of the workload to ensure that final product aligns with the creative vision. As a recording practitioner, compositional choices are not the only processes that require regular attention, the managerial duties of recording, producing and engineering mean that the contribution from my own point of view is substantial compared to the rest of the collective.

2.0 Initial Planning

Initial planning for the creative music project began in December when the group met to discuss progression opportunities. In terms of performance, the group had not secured many live appearances and were generally content with song writing and rehearsing in a more social framework, with no specific aim. Although having no aim can facilitate an unrestrictive, unpressured and therefore relatively creative atmosphere (Locke, 2018), the open-endedness of the project began to lead to unsatisfactory feeling amongst the group that perhaps needed to be satiated with a large-scale project (Chertkow & Feehan). Common amongst performance groups is the notion that the further away from a previous recording or performance opportunity, the decreased inclination to seek performance opportunities out, mainly born out of being too contented in a creative 'bubble' coupled with the potential of performance anxiety. Parallels can be seen in the industry; the most legendary example being The Beatles where performances were effectively abandoned in favour of composition and recording development*¹. Although the focusing of creative forces on one single idea without the distraction of performance or promotion can lead to work that pushes boundaries and later serves as a benchmark against other creative endeavours, it can also result in complacency and protracted progress of other creative work (Berger, 2018). The desire to break this cycle resulted in our initial meeting that focused on recording every composition completed to date, with a view of drawing a line under all work completed so far in a bid to start afresh on an invigorated era of the group.

Preliminary plans were to record every composition that the group regularly performs, including previous compositions that were released as part of small release 'Sixers and Seconders E.P.' in 2015. The view was that in order to keep recording consistent, older songs would benefit from a new lease of life and to keep the ethos of moving on from old material. Concerns over workload lead to only one legacy track being incorporated

¹ Except for the infamous rooftop concert on top of Apple Corp. headquarters as part of the Let It Be film (1970)

into the new release, with older songs being incorporated not re-recorded. Concerns over consistence of 'sound' lead to a compromise being struck between members, the result being that the composition heavily featured throughout our performance careers and considered a favourite amongst supporters, would be re-recorded as part of the creative process, however less-favoured tracks would be consigned to the history books and left as a signpost to our own creative progression. Two schools of thought existed around the negotiating table; one being the ability to move on from previous work and to accept all vulnerabilities and mistakes in work, however large and uncomfortable and two; using the creative project as a springboard to new material and using the release of material to showcase all work so far. In a world where creative endeavour is the primary focus, the second school of thought would be most appropriate and realistic, in reality with all members of the group in full time employment and with myself having a keen eye on the extended amounts of time I would be inputting to the project in re-recording old material, the compromise of re-recording a single old composition. It was this democratic process and compromise that set the tone for all creative decisions, particularly those in stalemate situations, which I felt worked considerably well in future decision making.

2.1 Pre-production

Pre-production began immediately after the initial planning, with a concrete selection of ten compositions that the group felt best reflected their sound. As the group as compromised on not re-visiting previous work for re-recording, it was no longer necessary to ensure that all compositions were included in the release; the group could now 'cherry pick' the best compositions from the live material. Consultation was made with stakeholders and supporters of the band as well as personal preference that resulted in ten selections. In order to effectively monitor progress and to develop realistic aims and objectives, the group agreed SMART working practices in order to ensure that no one single person was overwhelmed. (Market Inspector, 2018). In batches of three, tracks were subject to guide tracking, where a simple guitar, vocal and prominent metronome is used to determine the structure of each composition and more importantly tempo (ProTools Tips, 2009). It was at this

point that a decision had to be made regarding how the group approached the drum sound and recording process. Drums are often recorded first in a project such as this and are often the most difficult element to get right. Timing, consistency of hit, consistency of sound (between recording sessions considering the group aimed to record three compositions at a time), session length and availability and ability are all factors that need to be considered moving forward on a large-scale recording project such as this. During discussions, it was very important to ensure that the member of the group responsible agreed to the creative and technical choices in order to feel comfortable with the project. The group felt that by eliminating many of the above factors by using synthetic sounds would ensure that the project remained on track. Although there is debate surrounding the use of synthetic and acoustic instruments and the purity of music (Knudsen, 2014), the group hoped to use synthesis as a tool rather than an excuse. Our drummer agreed that the consistency in power of his right leg left previous recordings sounding as if timing issues were not spotted in the post production phase and that any mistakes can be rectified after the session quickly and efficiently rather than recording compositions again. Also, after this decision was made, drums could be tracked at home, again reducing time constraints and frequent use of Institute facilities. In order to fully convince our group member that the requisite time would be lavished on his performance part and that by synthesising his performances it would not lead to reduced creative input, each bass drum, snare hit and cymbal was carefully chosen from the Logic Pro X menu to create the desired sound and to his satisfaction.

2.2 Production

Due to the quick and efficient decision making and organisation of the group during the pre-production process, recording was a relatively relaxed albeit long process. Each drum part was mapped to a Yamaha DTX drum module 'brain', with rubber pads to be played exactly like the real counterpart. Each pad transmits a MIDI signal that is interpreted by the computer and then recorded as part of a sequence. The signal usually contains note on and off data, as well as the length of hit and velocity mimicking quite effectively the touch and response of a typical player. Each control

can be interpreted and measured in 128 ways, which results in a reasonably natural sounding performance. Performances of three tracks were captured over a single weekend and mixed during the following week in a full studio environment.

At this juncture the guitar performances were added in the White Box studios, where space and specialist equipment were needed to accurately capture the sound of the amplifier. Again, studio etiquette was prudent due to the personal nature of amplification; a guitar amplifier is often an extension of the musician's preferred 'sound' and just as important as the performance. As the amplifier in question was a 30-year-old piece of equipment, reliant on old components and technology, it was deemed too loud to reference correctly within the control room. As I was running the recording session in the control room, I could not be present in the live room with the equipment, which was a problem. This routing problem was solved with myself, the guitar and pedalboard (small electronic foot operated device to change sounds) with the computer in the control room, with the amplifier connected by a large extension cable under the control room and live room doors. The amplifier was captured by microphones commonly used by our learners (two AKG 414 – a matched pair). The layering of guitars to create a solid chord progression throughout each track took approximately eight hours per composition, using in the region of 5-15 multitracks of guitar for each. Soon after the three tracks had all guitar parts recorded, the bass track was added on evening sessions, taking around two hours per composition. After each batch of tracks had full instrumentation, the vocals were recorded in evening sessions and took around 4 hours per track. Each batch of three tracks was then given to a third party to mix and master as part of the final recording process. The decision was made to outsource the mixing and mastering for many reasons, including the access to the latest mixing and mastering plug-ins and lack of expertise in this specialist field of recording^{*2}. The whole process was repeated for the next 15 months until all compositions were fully captured.

² The mastering process is the final 'sheen' added that often separates a working demonstration from a professional product commercially released. The mastering process is a completely different discipline to recording and requires bespoke specialist training.

3.0 Student impact

During such a large-scale production such as this, one cannot underestimate the learning curve from a management and technical point of view. This recording project was the biggest and most complex in terms of technical ability and nurturing and maintaining personal and creative relationships. Many of the issues faced through the project have parallels in my own teaching and learning, some of which I already had experience, others are new to me and will influence my teaching style for years to come.

3.1 Student impact - desensitisation

Reflecting on the very beginning of the project, it was important to note that the group were in a very comfortable but stagnant creative place. Due to the sheltered nature and lack of performance opportunities the group had lost a lot of confidence moving forward creatively. The loss of performance opportunities and confidence had resulted in a 'catastrophizing' spiral, where the lack of opportunity fosters an even bleaker outlook and feeds the downward spiral (Bonior, 2016). We often see this with our learners, where performance mistakes breed further mistakes until learners have lost enough confidence that they refuse to perform. Performance at this juncture is now often a very painful experience and one to shy away from. Destination is linked to this as performance opportunities are important to build confidence. One of the reasons we have full recording projects included as part of the formative assessment process in Sound Production (L4 – BA (Hons) Popular Music Performance / Music Production) is to allow learners to make the mistakes and to build confidence. Similarly, frequent performance opportunities built into the Performance 1 and 2 modules are again there to build confidence in small but repeated opportunities. By embarking on this large-scale project in small recording sessions over the last 18 months, it was given the group a renewed vision and has resulted in many more performances and recording opportunities including a greater presence in the local

music scene and BBC radio pre-recorded and live session. The group felt first-hand the desensitisation theory come into effect during the production process.

3.2 Student impact - being the client

Being the client and have the responsibility of implementing the large number of technical and creative choices has certain advantages and disadvantages. Being the sole creative force behind the music meant that I was left alone for the majority of the production work. This meant that many of my own personal production choices were included in the work as I spent the most amount of time working the project day-to-day. Issues arose due to the absence of creative partners when in the studio and making these decisions for the sake of swiftness and efficiency. Many of the creative decisions made were undone and during the brief times the creative partners came to the studio to contribute, an issue that is echoed throughout the projects here in the Grimsby Institute, when attendance during group work becomes a problem with one or more of the groups. Although contribution from the other creative partners happened on at least a weekly basis, logistically it was impossible for all members to be working at a similar pace on the project. For example, as I was running the sessions myself and had access to equipment on a regular basis, it made sense for me to work efficiently and quickly to catch up on the project to keep it on track. Progress then slowed down when the other creative partners reflected on work done in their absence and at times the project slowed down to a complete stop whilst minor issues were discussed. Our students experience this type of 'catch up' when colleagues are regularly absent, particularly in the diary writing stage where the group will often have to recap with absentees' weeks of sessions missed. As Programme Leader, it is often my responsibility to discuss these issues with the those who regularly attend who are often quite frustrated with perceived commitment of other members of the group. Efforts are made to discuss the possible reasons behind regular absence with a view to instilling empathy. With L4 groups, as the year does not count towards final grades, is often easily to placate students when they believe that their grades are being unfairly affected. At these times it is particularly important to explain that having experience of colleague's commitment, whether it is there or not, is extremely

important when forging alliances and groups on L5 and 6 when grades count towards their final degree classification.

It is also important to consider the impact on time, effort and self-esteem when embarking of project that involves 'being the client'. When students begin their recording project it is quite natural to assume that they also need to be the client; they would like to hear themselves on the recording. However, in nearly all production-based sessions, there is no requirement for any performance on the recording, which would spare any conflict of interest when making technical and creative choices. Perhaps this is a consideration that needs reinforcing in my delivery during sessions such as these.

3.3 Student impact - draw the line

Linked to the above concerns regarding the slow progress when taking creative partner's infrequent contributions in consideration, it became apparent that too many producers can indeed spoil a perfectly working session. Coupled with this was the lack of understanding of the impact of remedial action, for example, feedback from creative partners late during the technical process would often have huge implications. A single action point could mean an hour-long process of change over two systems. Despite having multiple formative events with the group over many hours in the studio, opinions and applications for change were made until the very last minute, causing large delays, mainly because of a lack of technical sympathy and understanding of the turmoil caused by such late decisions. Again, 'being the client' does not help matters due to the incessant changes being discussed. An external producer's role would be to distil these requests that then ultimately make the most of the decisions regarding production value on behalf of the client, sidestepping disagreements (Dupont, 2014). Also, there is often a cap on remedial action points, whereby clients are limited to a maximum of two 'rounds' of changes before it begins to cost extra. As the group were project managing the creative process, these changes did not cost money, only time, that one project member was quite adept at spending. It must also be noted that recording technology can now be accessed 'in the box',

meaning that there is instant recall and the infinite ability to make change after change with no end in sight, which compounds issues of drawing a line under creative work. In this instance, formative hand ins can work to a tutor's advantage, giving the students the confidence to complete a project and hand in, knowing it is at a certain standard at least. However, we do need to be aware in cases where work is late, as students tend to work hard on late submitted work despite penalties being potentially applied.

3.4 Student Impact - working around problems and etiquette

It is often a secondary consideration when working with clients, that emotions may be running high for a number of reasons. Unfamiliarity with the environment, struggles with recording process (for example the use of click tracks and musicians who are used to setting the pace and tempo find this difficult to succumb to) are a number of elements that students are required to think about during the recording process. Etiquette is important to put performing musicians in a relaxed state and to consider musician limitations, and the ability to work around these in a sympathetic manner. Students can employ simple techniques of communication to explain the reasoning for decisions without running the risk of offence. Considerate use of language when discussing tempo and click tracks to managing the insistence of musicians to use personal equipment in a way to allow the musician to make the final decision, is important to foster trust and therefore progression through the project.

Creative Work Links:

Bandcamp-<http://thestateofart.bandcamp.com/>

iTunes-<https://geo.itunes.apple.com/us/album/the-state-of-art/1249494660?mt=1&app=music>

Spotify- <https://open.spotify.com/artist/69M9lZsolOHxXuI6QkPwEH>

Berger, W. 2018 *How to Know When It's Time to Show People Your Creative Work*.

<https://medium.com/s/story/how-to-know-when-its-time-to-show-people-your-creative-work-df64ff07048d>

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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/friendship-20/201611/5-ways-stop-catastrophizing>

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www.ranchstudio.com/otherstuff/PlanningYourAlbum.pdf

Dupont, F. 2014. *The Role Of The Producer In Music Creation*

<http://www.avidblogs.com/the-role-of-the-producer-in-music-creation/>

Knudsen, L. 2014. *Digital Instruments vs. Real Recorded Instruments*

<https://lewisknudsen.com/2014/02/13/digital-instruments-vs-real-recorded-instruments/>

Locke, J. 2018. *You and Your Creative Process*

<https://www.easygigs.co.uk/blog/2018/11/4/you-and-your-creative-process>

Market Inspector. 2018. *Smart Working: 5 Steps to Rethink Work - How to Revolutionise The Way You Think About Work*

<https://www.market-inspector.co.uk/blog/2017/09/steps-to-rethink-smart-working>

ProTools Tips. 2009. *The Key To Great Recordings: A Guide Track*

<https://www.recordingrevolution.com/the-key-to-great-recordings-a-guide-track/>