

# **BEHIND THE SCENES?**

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# 1. Introduction

It's not until one music directing job the author got in 2015, she realized the necessity of learning music production in order to further her career in the music industry. The author worked mainly on the music side as a performer, arranger and music director and had experiences with Pro Tools as the only DAW she knew. In order to learn the whole process of music production and at the same time, keep her artist identity, the author decided to produce an EP for herself. She'll not only be the producer, but also the songwriter and primary artist as the pianist/keyboardist. Since the EP is in the genre of pop, each song in the EP features a different vocalist. Given the author's culture background, the EP is targeting mainly the Chinese market.

## 2. State of The Art

### 2.1. Influences on Music Style

There are many amazing pianists/keyboardists, like Elton John, Stevie Wonder, and etc in the popular music world, however, their artist identity is more on the singer side than the pianist/keyboardist side. Artists that inspired and influenced most the style and sound of this EP are Billy Preston and Bruce Hornsby, who are recognized more as pianist/keyboardist than singer. Both of them not only perform on their own concerts as primary artist, but also worked as session players for many artists, such as Beatles, The Rolling Stone, Sly & Family Stones, Bonnie Raitt, The Grateful Dead, and etc.

Preston has a unique sound in his playing, featuring funk and gospel. One of the track in this EP was inspired by his song "Outta Space"<sup>1</sup> in which he played the clavinet. Besides the clavinet, Preston also has his stylistic sound on organ and electric piano, examples are "If You Really Want To Be My Friend" from the Rolling Stone album *It's Only Rock'n Roll* and "Far East Man" from George Harrison's album *Dark*

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Preston. *I Wrote A Simple Song*. Universal Special Products 393507, 2000, CD. Originally recorded in 1971

*Horse*. Unlike Preston, Hornsby plays mainly piano and his piano playing in “I Can’t Make You Love Me”<sup>2</sup> for Bonnie Raitt becomes his signature sound. His style is more on the improvisational side when he plays solo piano, however, he also has songs like “The Way It Is” that features him singing and playing.

## 2.2 Influences on EP Concept

The concept of being the primary artist as a pianist/keyboardist, and still produce the EP in the genre of pop music was inspired Herbie Hancock’s collaborative album *Possibilities*. Each song in the album features a different vocalist with Herbie playing piano/keyboard, blending his jazz style and different pop singers.

Another pianist/keyboardist produced an album in the similar concept is Robert Glasper. Since Glasper’s style is more contemporary jazz and neo-soul, in his album *Black Radio*, he collaborated with vocalists mostly in the genres of jazz, r&b and soul.

## 2.3 Chinese Pop Music

Chinese music, as the music the author growing up listening to, definitely plays a big role in her music. In the author’s opinion, there are mainly four types of pop singers or groups in the Chinese music industry,

1. Professional vocalist, their music was mostly recorded with real rhythm section with a hair of beat making and sound effects. Two songs that represent the style are “Lovelorn, Not Guilty (失恋无罪)”<sup>3</sup> by A-Lin (黄丽玲) and “Exaggeration (浮夸)”<sup>4</sup> by Eason Chen (陈奕迅).

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<sup>2</sup> Bonnie Raitt. *Luck of The Draw*. DCC Compact Classics 1107, 2000, CD. Originally recorded in 1991

<sup>3</sup> A-Lin (黄丽玲). *Lovelorn, Not Guilty (失恋无罪)*. Avex Taiwan, 2010, CD.

<sup>4</sup> Eason Chen (陈奕迅). *U87*. Cinepoly Records, 2005, CD.

2. Pop idol singers, their music are mostly electronic dance music or sad ballads. Two songs that represent the style are “Practice Book for Youth (青春修炼手册)”<sup>5</sup> by TFBoys and “The Clown (小丑)”<sup>6</sup> by Wilber Pan (潘玮柏).

3. Singer songwriters, their music style have a bigger range from r&b to folk, to jazz. Two songs that represent the style are “In the Name of Father (以父之名)”<sup>7</sup> by Jay Chow (周杰伦) and “The Moon Represents My Heart (月亮代表我的心)”<sup>8</sup>, which was originally written by Yi Sun (孙义) and Qignxi Weng (翁清溪) and rearranged by singer songwriter Khalil Fong (方大同).

4. Groups that produce viral brainwash songs, the music and production of these groups has a similar style as pop idols, but the difference is their lyrics and melodies are in slang words and sometimes funny and they are not trying to look cool or beautiful. Two songs that represent the style are “The Most Dazzling Folk Style (最炫民族风)”<sup>9</sup> by Phoenix Legend (凤凰传奇) and “Little Apple (小苹果)”<sup>10</sup> by Chopstick Brothers (筷子兄弟).

Three of the songs in the EP feature the first three styles and will be elaborated in the next section.

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<sup>5</sup> TFBoys. *Practice Book for Youth (青春修炼手册)*. Time Fengjun Entertainment, Digital, 2014

<sup>6</sup> Wilber Pan(潘玮柏). *Crown & Clown (王者丑生)*. Universal Music International, 2014, CD

<sup>7</sup> Jay Chow (周杰伦). *Ye Hui Mei (叶惠美)*. Sony Music, 2003, CD.

<sup>8</sup> Khalil Fong (方大同). *The Soulboy Collection*. Warner Music Taiwan, 2013, 2 CDs.

<sup>9</sup> Phoenix Legend (凤凰传奇). *The Most Dazzling Folk Style (最炫民族风)*. Peacock Record (孔雀唱片), 2009, 2 CDs

<sup>10</sup> Chopstick Brothers (筷子兄弟). *Little Apple (小苹果)*. Ruyi Films/Le Vision Pictures, Digital, 2014

### 3. Description

The EP is called *Behind The Scene?* which represents the author's experience, shifting from on stage (in the scene) to off stage (behind the scene). There are 4 tracks on the EP and all of them are originals. The track order and titles are as follow:

1. "Sorata"
2. "Married Girl"
3. "Forget (忘记)"
4. "Mama"

"Sorata" has Chinese lyrics and is in the professional vocalist style, featuring Yaxin Deng as the vocalist. The music consists of recording of drum set, electric bass, piano, electric piano and organ.

"Married Girl" has English lyrics and is in the pop idol singer style, featuring Ronald Esteban Ayala as the vocalist. The music was produced in Ableton Live plus the recording of acoustic piano.

"Forget" has Chinese lyrics and is in the singer songwriter style, featuring Luke Lu as the vocalist. The music consists of recording of drum set, electric bass and piano.

"Mama" is a short instrumental outro to the EP in funk style. The music consists of recording of electric bass and clavinet, with a beat made in Ableton Live.

### 4. Innovative Aspect

In Chinese music industry, most famous pianists are from the classical world, like Lang Lang and Yujia Wang. There are many jazz pianists in China, but very few of them have an artist presence or have a signature sound. Among those who have a presence, even fewer of them have collaborated with pop artists. The EP is an exploration for possibilities to open up opportunities for instrumentalists who wish to step up

and establish their style and artist identity, as well as the possibilities to collaborate with musicians from different genres of music.

Nowadays, Western music has a growing number of Chinese audiences. Chinese pop songs with a hint of Western elements becomes really hip for the younger generation. Therefore, each song from the EP features a Western elements and add something new to the Chinese pop music world. "Sorata" has some blues influence in both the harmony and the rhythm. "Married Girl" has some contemporary R&B elements in the vocal style as well as music production. "Forget" implements some jazz harmony in the piano and more improvised drum parts. "Mama" has a typical funk style and heavy bass driven groove.

## **5. New Skills Acquired**

The production of this CE project has mainly four stages: the creative stage, which including composing, arranging, rehearsing and etc, the recording stage, the mixing stage and the mastering stage. Coming from a performance oriented background, the author's experience with music production remained mainly in the creative stage. Through the production of the EP, the author had to learn recording, mixing and mastering and each of those requires different new skill sets. Besides recording actual instruments, the author also learned Ableton Live in order to make beats as well as to add some EDM elements as the "accompaniment" and sound effects in the EP.

## **6. Challenges**

The biggest challenge in music production is the vocal production. Since singing is more personal than playing an instrument, to communicate with the vocalist is essential. It definitely takes practice to give the vocalists a clear idea of what the song is about and the emotion behind the song. During the session, another challenge was to tell the vocalist dos and don'ts. Some vocalists have a strong character and to con-



vince them to do what the producer wants requires a lot of communication. In some other occasions, the vocalist got really nervous in the studio and lost the confidence, to help them relax was not easy, and to choose the right words to compliment them also needs a lot of observation and consideration.

Another challenge is to switch the role from performer to producer or sound engineer. Since most music experience the author had was in performing and composing, it was very hard, even temporarily, to give up the performer's identity and devote all her time into recording and mixing. However, since the author didn't have the necessary production knowledge and experience to produce this EP, it was absolutely necessary for her to put away her musician identity and focused on learning all the production skills. It was another form of culture shock at the beginning of the year, but gradually died down as she got used to the vibe and flow.

## **7. Future Ramification**

Based on the author's own experience, the main way for the young generation in China to listen to music is through music streaming services. Although most Chinese music streaming websites provide paid download service, most of them have a lot of songs that they don't have the copyright for streaming, especially for songs from foreign countries. Due to the language barrier, most of these artists haven't realized that their songs are being streamed in China and the streaming websites don't have to pay for royalty. Although the copyright condition is getting better in China in recently years, to get royalties from publishing songs in China doesn't seem very promising.

On the other hand, the procedure of streaming their music is different for established artists and emerging independent artists. Music from established artists as well as their musician page on the website were posted by the website administrator, while emerging independent artists created their own page and upload their profiles and songs themselves.

Therefore, the public presentation of the EP, which is to upload the tracks on a selected Chinese music streaming website (Xiami Music), works better as an online profile. The purpose is to showcase the author's skills as a pianist/keyboardist as well as a producer through the EP.

## **8. Conclusion**

The author's CE project, the EP *Behind The Scene?* is not only a series of songs, it is also a learning experience for the author to shift from a performing musician to a producer. The result of the project achieves the author's expectation.

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