

Berklee College of Music

5/23

Realization of Self

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Master of Music in Music Production, Technology and Innovation

Supervisor: Pablo Munguía

by Jamie David Mariettakes Blake

Valencia Campus, Spain

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Abstract

5/23 is an extended play album (EP) that tells a compelling and relatable story of self-realization through heart break, addiction, debt and love. The lyrical subject matter is drawn from life changing personal experiences from the protagonist's life. Musical elements of the EP are aesthetically contemporary and innovative in their presentation, style, and storytelling. This project is a means to process and express life changing events that led the protagonist to where he is today. The EP is roughly 10 minutes in length, with four songs that serve as acts in the overall storyline.

Keywords: EP, songwriting, hybrid recording methods, music production, storytelling, contemporary R&B, pop, electronic music.

1. Introduction

The purpose of *5/23* is to tell a story about facing, accepting and dealing with challenges that are common but rarely talked about in day to day life. Jamie, the protagonist of the story, experiences a revelation through music after surviving a drug addiction, adultery induced divorce, debt, and self realization. This story is meant to offer a means of understanding and hope to anyone who has ever been affected by loss of self, drug addiction, betrayal, and distrust.

There is an undeniable presence of showcasing success in society. This project's relevance stems from its authentic awareness of real problems that people face every day, but don't always talk about. Society doesn't like to focus on or talk about failures such as addiction, divorce, and lack of self-esteem. *5/23* creates a space for listeners and viewers to acknowledge aspects of life that are often looked at solely as problems, and not as learning opportunities.

Aesthetically, the music production and mixing sounds like 2020, while the composition, harmonic aesthetics, and arrangements sound more like the 1970s. Melodically, songs on *5/23* is simple, catchy and easily digestible. There is a strong underlying emphasize on melodic, lyrical, and instrumental hooks throughout. The drums sit in deep pockets, with simple but intricate patterns influenced by funk, hip hop, and electronic drum sounds. Instrumentation is an even and creative mixture of analog and electronic elements.

2. Review of the State of the Art

2.1 Ylang Ylang

Ylang Ylang is the latest project release from artist FKJ. It's a 21-minute EP comprised of six songs, with a distinct and unique range of musical influences. FKJ spent six months isolated in a jungle in Southeast Asia to create this EP, which is “representative of a tumultuous time in his life”.¹

FKJ stated that he wanted to “score his own adventure”² when creating Ylang Ylang. This album's reflective undertones, heavy emotion and unique production reflect a balance of relatability, familiarity and authenticity. Comparing this project is difficult, as it sits in its own lane and does not sound like any single style of music. Elements of jazz, soul, classical, pop, hip hop and electronic music are prevalent throughout.

¹ McKain, Jack. “FKJ Debuts Heartbreakingly Beautiful 'Ylang Ylang' EP, Made in the SE Asian Jungle.” *Billboard*. November 12, 2019. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/dance/8543350/fkj-ylang-ylang-ep-video>

² Kato, Precious. “FKJ Soundtracks a Perfect Period of His Life in 'Ylang Ylang.’” *Ones To Watch*. November 12, 2019. <https://www.onestowatch.com/blog/fkj-soundtracks-a-perfect-period-of-his-life-in>

2.2.Ventura

Ventura is the latest full length album from artist Anderson Paak. He released it in April 2019, and successfully “conjures vintage soul with modern beat science underpinnings, an elegant mix of tough and plush”.³

The album appeals to mainstream audiences while incorporating styles from hip hop, soul and a “fantastic melding of pounding house beats, aged horn samples and lush harmonies”.⁴ In terms of making an album that incorporates influences unique to its creator, Paak’s *Ventura* is a good example of how to deliver unique styles of music and production in a format that is familiar to music consumers.

³ Hermes, Will. “Review: Anderson .Paak’s ‘Ventura’ is Ambitious, Wide-Ranging Hip Hop Soul.” *Rolling Stone*. February 12, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/review-anderson-paaks-ventura-is-ambitious-wide-ranging-hip-hop-soul-821350/>

⁴ Petridis, Alexis. “Anderson .Paak: Ventura review – stripped-back soul to silence the haters.” *The Guardian*. April 11, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/apr/11/anderson-paak-ventura-review-rapper-album-oxnard>

3. Description

5/23 describes difficult life changing experiences and maintains clear storylines and emotional tones throughout. In order to write the most clear and effective songs, a lot of focus was placed on songwriting. There were 14 songs written as potential candidates for the EP. With no prior experience writing songs, this allowed Jamie to advance his songwriting skills well beyond where they would have if he stuck with the first four songs he wrote. There are clear advantages to writing songs quickly and letting go of attachment to potentially weak songs. Spending a week writing one song doesn't lend the same opportunities to improve as spending a week writing a new song everyday.

In terms of production, all of the decisions were guided by the emotional tone of the lyrics. Production elements are intentionally minimal, yet they inject a warmth and vibe to the songs that enhance the songwriting. Live recordings of drums, guitar, bass, saxophone, field recordings and vocals are tastefully paired with custom made electronic elements that give 5/23 a contemporary sound that is reflective of Jamie's musical experience and interests. In order to blend live and electronic elements effectively, a great deal of consideration went into how the musical elements were mixed. Everything was processed with a combination of algorithmic plugins and innovative convolution technology based on Vectorial Volterra Kernels (VVK).⁵ Some of the main plugins used were Taupe, Coffee, Lime, Pensado EQ and Water from Acustica Audio as well as Auto-tune, UAD Distressor, UAD EMT 140, and Fabfilter Pro Q 3. This combination of technologies allowed for the precision and linearity of algorithmic processing and the analog warmth and color of sample based emulations of nonlinear analog processing.

⁵ "At the Heart of Analog." *Acustica Audio*. February 14, 2019. <https://www.acustica-audio.com/pages/engine>

4. Innovative Aspects

One major goal of the artist when creating *5/23* was to deliver a unique blend of musical styles in a format that music consumers are familiar with. What makes this project innovative is its successful representation of the artist as a whole, which is the sum of his lifetime of musical experiences and influences. Instead of following a particular trend or boxing the style of *5/23* in to one genre, this project draws influences from many artists and styles. You can think of this EP as a musical genetic lineage of the artist's musical upbringing. The sum of the songs on *5/23* is “bigger than their parts”, like a remix of the creator's musical ancestors.⁶

Throughout the four song EP, *5/23* incorporates live and programmed drums that are influenced by hip hop, funk and dance music. Chord progressions are formatted simply, as is common in pop music, but contain unmistakable harmonic qualities derived from jazz and soul music. Bass lines are a mix between heavy 808 style programmed basses and live bass recordings heavily influenced by jazz music. There is an abundance of custom sound design with electric synthesis and heavily manipulation of field recordings. Vocal lines are simple, catchy and cadence driven, with performance styles reminiscent of hip hop, pop and indie music.

In terms of sonic aesthetics, the tasteful variety of musical styles are accompanied by production and mixing techniques that give the EP a cohesive, warm and heavy emotional undertone to the project. Unlike mainstream music, which is very polished and clean sounding for the most part, *5/23* is full of imperfections, nonlinearities, subtle mistakes and a tonal aesthetic that sounds like a mix between the 1970s and 2020.

⁶ Kleon, Austin. *Steal Like An Artist*. (New York: Workman Publishing, 2012), 11.

5. New Skills Acquired

While writing five songs a week over the course of three different weeks, the author learned the value of writing songs fast and letting go of attachment to everything that he writes. This allows for truly great ideas to come out and physically writing songs is the only way to get better at songwriting. Through songwriting groups, camps, exercises and collaborations, the author now has invaluable insight to how songs are written and how to guide the songwriting decision making process. Aside from learning how to write songs himself, the author can now bring these experiences to the table when producing for other artists.

Singing was a foreign concept to the artist prior to creating 5/23. This project served as motivation for the author to develop his voice and learn how to sing. Implementing practice schedules, collaborations and feedback sessions were crucial for Jamie to learn how to sing. Aside from being able to cut songs with his own vocals, he now has experience that will help when working with artists in future collaborations. Moving forward, these skills will provide an advantage when producing for other artists as well. Having first hand experience with songwriting and singing helps guide the production process just as much as it helps the songwriting process.

Lastly, the author deepened his skill sets with mixing. 5/23 was an ambitious project that aimed to occupy a sonic space that's only possible because of the current state of technology. This project required learning meticulous organization practices due to the demanding CPU resources of the digital processors utilized in the mixing process. This is a critical skill to have when dealing with multi-version, large scale mixing sessions.

6. Challenges

By far, the biggest unanticipated challenge when creating 5/23 was physically writing more songs. Initially, the author focused too much on planning for the songs and producing ideas for backing tracks than actually writing songs. If it wasn't for his advisor, Pablo Munguia, the author would not have overcome this challenge. Pablo pushed him to write more songs and share his works in progress. This is single handedly the biggest contributing factor to the quality of songwriting on this EP.

In terms of expected challenges, it was difficult for the author to dig in and write about vulnerable and emotional life experiences. Initially, the first few demos felt very removed from the feelings associated with the stories by telling them through the perspective of other people. It took time and encouragement for the author to face the fear of exposing personal and hurtful experiences from his life. By sharing his works in progress with songwriting groups, peers and his advisor, the author was met with warm feedback of his emotionally driven songs being easily relatable.

7. Future Ramifications

Aside from finishing the graphic art, which is being created by an artist named Michael Lucarelli, a marketing strategy needs to be developed. This project will be released on all digital streaming platforms and needs to be marketed to a range of audiences. There is no specific demographic that will appreciate this project, so marketing needs to happen across people who are interested in pop, hip hop, contemporary R&B and indie music. Consistent social media presence will be crucial in order to build genuine connections with the artist's audience.

One of the first priorities for the artist will be creating a social media schedule with a variety of content to engage their audience and build momentum for the release of this project. Jamie has met with a couple potential artist managers from the business program at Berklee Valencia to help hold him accountable with marketing endeavors. In order to adhere to a marketing strategy, the artist will identify data-driven benchmarks to meet at certain time intervals to measure the success of his marketing efforts.

8. Conclusions

5/23 delivers a soulful, heartfelt story about relatable subject matter that is hard for many people to talk about. It incorporates elements of contemporary pop, hip hop, R&B, jazz and electronic music in a way that is unique to the artist. Upon listening to this EP, it is hard to compare it directly to any single genre, artist, or producer because of its range of musical and sonic influences. This is an EP that stands out because of its originality, attention to detail, simplicity and relatability. This experience cultivated new skills in songwriting, singing, producing, and mixing for the author that will be forever applicable to his work in the future.

9. Appendix

Timeline

Week	Dates	Objective (Deadline Date)
Fall Week 10	11/11 - 11/17	CE Proposal 1st Draft (11/14) Develop Storyline (11/17)
Fall Week 11	11/18 - 11/24	CE Proposal 2nd Draft (11/28) Develop Storyline (11/24)
Fall Week 12	11/25 - 12/1	Present CE Idea to Peers to Gather Collaborators (11/29) Theme for Song #1 (12/1)
Fall Week 13	12/2 - 12/8	Theme for Song #2 (12/8)
Fall Week 14	12/9 - 12/15	CE Proposal Due (12/12) Theme for Song #3 (12/15)
Fall Week 15	12/16 - 12/22	Theme for Song #4 (12/22)
Winter Break Week 1	12/23 - 12/29	Songwriting Exercises (12/29)
Winter Break Week 2	12/30 - 1/5	Songwriting Exercises (1/5)
Winter Break Week 3	1/6 - 1/12	Songwriting (1/12)
Global Career Summit	1/13 - 1/19	Songwriting (1/19)
Spring Week 1	1/20 - 1/26	Consult With Songwriting Peers (1/20)
Spring Week 2	1/27 - 2/2	Produce Songs 1 and 2 (2/2)
Spring Week 3	2/3 - 2/9	Produce Songs 3 and 4 (2/9)
Spring Week 4	2/10 - 2/16	Final Proposal Due (2/15) Record Vocals (2/16)
Spring Week 5	2/17 - 2/23	Prototype #1 Recording Vocals (2/23)
Spring Week 6	2/24 - 3/1	Finish Production Post Vocal Tracking (3/1)
Spring Week 7	3/2 - 3/8	Feedback Implementation (3/8)

Spring Week 8	3/9 - 3/15	Feedback Implementation (3/15)
Spring Week 9	3/16 - 3/22	Songwriting (5 new songs) (3/17)
Spring Week 10	3/23 - 3/29	Prototype #2 Present 5 New Songs (3/29)
Spring Week 11	3/30 - 4/5	Feedback Implementation (4/5)
Spring Week 12	4/6 - 4/12	Feedback Implementation (4/12)
Spring Week 13	4/13 - 4/19	Songwriting (4/19)
Spring Week 14	4/20 - 4/26	Songwriting (4/26)
Spring Week 15	4/27 - 5/3	Prototype #3 Present 4 new songs (5/3)
Spring Week 16	5/4 - 5/10	Feedback Implementation (5/10)
Semester Break	5/11 - 5/17	Send out songs for bass, sax and guitar accompaniment (5/17)
Summer Week 1	5/18 - 5/24	CE Paper (5/24)
Summer Week 2	5/25 - 5/31	CE Presentation Rehearsal (5/31)
Summer Week 3	6/1 - 6/7	Initial CE Presentations & Defense Revisions, as needed (6/7)
Summer Week 4	6/8 - 6/14	Deliverables Prep (6/14)
Summer Week 5	6/15 - 6/21	Coasting because I will have been prepared (6/21)
Summer Week 6	6/22 - 6/28	Final CE Presentation and Defense Final CE Submission (6/26)

Budget

ITEM	PROPOSED BUDGET
MATERIALS (disposables)	
Hard Drives	\$400
Memory sticks	\$50
Memory cards	\$100
EQUIPMENT	
HARDWARE	
SM7b MICROPHONE	\$400
COMPUTER	\$5,000
ABLETON PUSH 2	\$900
SONY A6500	\$1,500
CAMERA LENSES	\$1,500
SOFTWARE	
PRO TOOLS (subscription) 120 days	\$80
ADOBE CC (subscription) 120 days	\$120
ABLETON LIVE	\$800
PERSONNEL	
MUSICIANS (4 x \$75 x 4hrs)	\$1,200
MIXERS	\$2,000
EDITORS	\$2,000
CO-PRODUCERS	\$2,000
STUDIO	
BERKLEE AKSS \$250 x 2 days	\$500
HOME \$150 x 14 days	\$2,100
CATERING	
MEALS \$15/person x 4 x 4 meals	\$240
OVERHEAD	
RENT (3 months)	\$1,200
POWER (3 months)	\$240
WATER (3 months)	\$120
GAS	\$XX

INTERNET x PHONE (3 months)	\$150
FEES	
YOUR FEE	\$10,000
YOUR PARTNER'S FEES	\$8,000
TOTALS	\$40,600

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