

Distant Music

An autoethnographic study of global songwriting in the digital age.

SHEILA SIMMENES

SUPERVISOR

Michael Rauhut

University of Agder, 2020

Faculty of Fine Arts

Department of Popular music



Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the path to music creation and shed a light on how we may maneuver songwriting and music production in the digital age. As a songwriter in 2020, my work varies from being in the same physical room using digital communication with collaborators from different cultures and sometimes even without ever meeting face to face with the person I'm making music with. In this thesis I explore some of the opportunities and challenges of this process and shine a light on tendencies and trends in the field. As an autoethnographic research project, this thesis offers an insight into the songwriting process and continuous development of techniques by myself as a songwriter in the digital age, working both commercially and artistically with international partners across the world.

The thesis will aim to supplement knowledge on current working methods in songwriting and will hopefully shine a light on how one may improve as a songwriter and topliner in the international market. We will explore the tools and possibilities available to us, while also reflecting upon what challenges and complications one may encounter as a songwriter in the digital age.

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1. Introduction

Through the process of songwriting across several platforms and cultural barriers, this thesis seeks to better understand myself and my work while explaining to the reader the details, thoughts and theory that occurs through a dialogue with myself in the form of an autoethnographic¹ layered account (Adams, Jones, Ellis 2015, p.85). This practice of relating theory with practical application in the creation of music, intertwined with digital communication and cross-cultural collaborations, will aim to shine a unique light on a songwriter's process in the new era of music creation.

In the title of this thesis, *Distant Music*, I seek to describe the somewhat elusive process of songwriting in 2020, which I have found to be a web of collaborations both in the same room² and over a distance, applying digital means of communication. The title also hints to the globalization of songwriting, where we today write music both for and with artists and songwriters from all over the globe - sometimes without ever meeting in a physical space. Furthermore, in this thesis I may use the term *distant music* when referring to making music with partners over a distance.

In the age of digital communication and the connectedness provided by global social media, there are now endless possibilities to engage in creative practices with anyone, anywhere on the planet. In this thesis I will present the outline of a roadmap depicting how this process might occur in practical work internationally, combining the creative art of music making with the hands-on methods of writing, recording and editing music – while composing with musical partners situated in other countries. Exploring the intimacy of music making, without ever meeting face to face.

During the last few years of my work, there has been four elements of the songwriting process in the digital age that has stood out to me, and that I will attempt to research further and present to the reader;

¹ For details on autoethnography, see Chapter 3.1.

² Whenever mentioning the room in this thesis, I refer to being in the same physical space; the studio, rehearsal space, etc.

1. The potential fragileness of commitment when all communication is digital. A tendency that I have called the *unintended fade out*³.
2. How I may experience it to be an extra value added to being in the same room as my partners, and how it affects our communication, workflow and future collaborations⁴.
3. The importance of understanding and decoding cultural context when working with international collaborations - as the digital age allows us to connect with and work with partners from all over the globe⁵.
4. The influx of digital tools and technological development and how it impacts the way we create music⁶.

As I am working with this thesis and putting this situated knowledge into words, I harbor a hope and intention that it will prove useful for other composers and lyricists aiming to improve their work, and provide a basis for future research.

1.1 Background For Choosing This Theme

I wrote my first song when I was thirteen years old. Melody and lyrics came instantly. I wrote the words down and could remember the melody every time I read them. (This is still the way I write music, as I have yet to master musical notation). It was a simple melody and I never really understood how it appeared. It was like listening to the radio, but in my own mind.

As I grew older, I found a creative outlet in the company of other composers and improvisers in the underground jazz and hip-hop scene in Bergen. We were a diverse group of musicians, poets, rappers, producers and singers who gathered at jam sessions and house parties where we jammed and improvised. Not like jazz musicians who often improvise over a set scale or certain jazz tune, but we would get up on stage in front of the audience and start completely from scratch. One person would start with an idea, and the others would follow. It could start with a drumbeat, a bassline or a guitar lick – and ended with a brand new song, complete with lyrics, never heard before - and never to be heard again (as we rarely recorded the sessions).

³ For more information, see Chapter 4.

⁴ For more information, see Chapter 5.

⁵ For more information, see Chapter 6.

⁶ For more information, see Chapter 7.

Since then, I have composed music applying a plentitude of different techniques, and also exploring a vast multitude of genres. I have worked with musicians and composers building new songs from scratch, starting with a single element as a lyric, chord progression or rhythm; to beat-based music production and conceptualized projects. Working with different musicians and composers, I often found myself amazed and intrigued by the different methods other creators implemented while making music. In the beginning I assumed that music creation was a singular exercise, equal to all composers, but I soon learned that there are countless ways to make music – each one affected by the composers and collaborators, mood, habits, musical and cultural background, quirks and personality. I have participated in song camps, where songwriters and producers are placed in different groups and through intensive sessions create several radio ready demos over a short amount of time, and in one-to-one writing sessions with producers and songwriters. My work has resulted in a diverse collection of released songs with artists in Norway, Japan, Germany, Brazil and South Korea, accumulating millions of streams worldwide. While many of my peers identified themselves within a certain genre and continued to specialize further within the confines of that field, I found myself unable to settle down in a specific area. For many years, I tried to find “my” genre and where in the musical plethora I would belong as a performing artist. But my music continued to bounce from reggae to rock, hip hop to jazz, country to electropop – and identifying myself as an artist in any of these genres became increasingly difficult. Discovering that I could write music for other artists instead of trying to fit in myself, was a great relief to me. The eclectic nature of my music and writing that had been such a challenge to maneuver as a performing artist, became one of my greatest strengths as a songwriter. With my chameleon-like approach to writing music, I was able to connect with and convincingly write for artists in a great variation of different genres, including country, soul, urban, house and K-pop.

The creation of music has continued to fascinate me. From the intuitive and sudden music that occurs in my mind, the collective improvisation and in-the-moment composition by my creative collective and friends in Bergen – to commercial songwriting where the goal is to produce a number of commercially viable hits or syncable⁷ songs in a short period of time.

I have been intrigued by the union of collaboration. How things can “click” into place or stagnate and be slow as mud while trying to sort out a particular chord progression. How some

⁷ A song with a high probability of being placed in TV, film, games and other media.

collaborations just work, and others will not. How to navigate a musical relationship with your collaborators, taking in your inherent differences, similarities and unique identities while finding a common expression and intimacy in music.

In 2019 I became a mother, and my ability to travel with the aim to work with people face-to-face and to participate in song camp and sessions, suddenly became more restricted. Because of this, I grew curious as to how I could further explore music making as a songwriter without ever meeting my collaborators in person. I was also fascinated with the intricacies of international communication, collaboration and composition across languages and cultural backgrounds. I have worked with composers from Norway, Sweden, Albania, England, Germany, Nepal and Brazil, and each collaboration has demanded a certain cultural de-coding and adjustment to how I perform my role as songwriter and topliner.

I have had a longstanding artistic relationship with Brazil since moving there in 2007 to work as a volunteer at a children's centre in Pindamonhangaba, near Sao Paulo. Soon, I accidentally found myself a full-time member of a Brazilian reggae band, and from there I dived deeper into Brazilian music traditions such as bossa, samba and maracatu. Since then, I return to Brazil often and continue to collaborate with musicians and artists in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. In 2015 I released the album “Wake Up Love”⁸ in Brazil with native composer and bass player Peter Mesquita, and in 2018 he joined me in Norway to record my debut album “Love Was Easy” at Kongshavn Studio with Bjørn Ole Rasch as producer.

Through my collaboration with Mesquita and other international producers and musicians in Germany, Austria, England and USA, I have been intrigued by the intricate and subtle act of balancing cultural differences and musical tendencies and aesthetics. How may we understand our differences and communicate fluently despite the distance – both culturally, linguistically and geographically? What are some of the potential benefits and challenges as we embrace the new tools available to us in the digital era of music making and communication?

1.2 Why is this study relevant?

Music is never just music. In every context both as an experience for the listener, and in the act of creation – the music conveys a communicative value as it paints with sound, vibe, emotion,

⁸ For more information, see Chapter 6.1. The title track from this release is also included as Attachment 1.

connection and the mind of the creator and recipient who "also is connected to other people and their history, to language and learning, memory and association, habit, culturally constructed values, convention, physical interaction, occasions, situations, shared experience (...) and many other things that linguistically we deem to be 'outside' of individuals" (DeNora, 2013, p.6). Therefore, reflecting upon how we interact and create music together, also offers valuable insight into human interconnectedness and culture, as well as current trends in digital communication and songwriting.

Writing music with domestic or foreign collaborators is an important tool to not only grow as a songwriter, but also to increase your chances for commercial success. A study showed that on average it takes 4.64 songwriters to produce the biggest chart-topping hits, and numbers reaching the double digits are not uncommon. DJ Snake feat. Justin Bieber with "*Let Me Love You*" lists 11 different people on the writers' credits. In 2016, only five songs of the Top 100 were credited to only one writer (Sutherland, 2017). Collaborating with other writers can be one of the key factors to songwriting success, and the tools available to us in the digital age continues to open new doors.

Making music in the same room, or digitally over the internet; I believe that understanding the tendencies, work methods, challenges and opportunities of songwriting in 2020 is an important key to ensure good working relationships, progress both for the music industry and for the individual songwriter.

1.3 Research Interest

In this thesis I will apply autoethnographic exploration ⁹ in order to investigate the following:

Global songwriting in the digital age – what are some of the tendencies, work methods, challenges and opportunities of songwriting in 2020?

Including:

- How has the digital age impacted communication and commitment in relation to musical collaborations?
- What may be lost when moving from a physical to an exclusively digital workspace, when we are no longer in the same room?

⁹ For details, see Chapter 3.1.

- What are some of the challenges one may encounter when working internationally with partners of a different cultural, political and linguistic background?
- What does the digital toolbox of the songwriter look like in 2020, and what challenges and benefits may it contain?

These research questions stand as support beams to my underlying intentions as a student, researcher and musician, which is to give a fraction of the answer to: How may I become a better songwriter and collaborator to my international partners?

By analyzing and becoming more aware of my own artistic process and collaboration with others, I argue that this awareness itself as an autoethnographic layered account provides a valuable basis for further analysis and situated knowledge, which in turn may benefit any reader who themselves aim to grow as a songwriter or to conduct further research in this field.

1.4 Covid-19: Perspectives From A Global Pandemic

I would be remiss if I failed to comment on the current situation, as these extraordinary times come directly into play with the subject of my master thesis in regards to digital solutions and global connectedness.

As I am writing this, Norway is in lockdown due to the threat of the Covid-19 virus. Universities are closed, preschools are shut down and all cultural or sporting events are cancelled as we hold our breath awaiting the flood of the pandemic to wash over the world. The social and economic impact is overwhelming, and I cannot begin to count the lives lost so far.

The culture and music industry were hit hard, as all concerts, tours and travel had to be cancelled. People lost their income for the next 6-9 months in just a few minutes, as travel was banned and crowd restrictions were implemented. Everyone turned to the only world in which we could still gather and connect with each other; the internet. Concerts and even festivals were broadcasted online, and people donated what they could afford to support the artists. Digital connectedness became the new normal.

The very subject of my master thesis was brought into a new light, as the importance of having digital alternatives in order to keep making music became staggeringly clear. Up until this point, I had viewed distant music making as an alternative to making music in the room together, but now that it has become the only option, I have also become more aware of the loneliness of a purely digital process.

Though the digital solutions and possibilities that I will describe in this thesis is absolutely promising and has a lot of potential, I believe there is still a way to go in terms of quality software and satisfactory tools to ensure a music making process to continue through a worldwide crisis such as the one we find ourselves in with Covid-19. I do believe that in the aftermath of this situation, new technologies will be brought forth to support the industries that have been most vulnerable during this crisis, to ensure that we have viable alternatives in the future. As for right now, we continue to create. Perhaps a bit slower, perhaps with a few more challenges – but motivated and persistent.

2. Framework and Literature

In this chapter, I will present examples of the existing theoretical background for this thesis, and draw from pre-existing literature to exemplify how my research may find its place in the overall plentiful and developing field of musical research.

Locating large quantities of specific literature on the new trends and challenges appearing to us in this age of global songwriting and digital communication, proved to be rather difficult. There is literature and theories available on digital communication, cross cultural context and songwriting, but there was little to be found on existing material where these elements were woven together. “*The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*” by John Seabrook (2016) invites us into the realm of commercial song writing. It paints a detailed and interesting picture of the industry and some of the main players in it, but it does not focus on writing over a distance. Paul Zollo explains in his book “*Songwriters on Songwriting by Paul Zollo*” (2003), the process of songwriting and music making through a series of interviews with some of the world’s greatest songwriters. It is a wonderful contribution to the literature on the craft, and though it does not focus on digital communication and songwriting over a distance, it does provide valuable insight into the mind of songwriters of our time.

In this thesis I have turned my focus towards the digital sphere itself, and searched through online media outlets such as music industry blogs and magazines to find new and recently updated information about my topic. I have also looked at related fields such as cross-cultural communication and digital communication (Varner & Beamer, 2015).

For planning and deepening my understanding of the research process itself, I have explored theory and literature from social and gender studies (Harraway, 1988), as well as art – not limited to music, but including other disciplines such as for example visual arts (Daichendt, 2012).

2.1 Perspective

While approaching this subject, dealing with artistic research matter and all the unavoidable subjectiveness accompanying such work, I found it valuable to build upon the work of researcher and feminist Donna Haraway, who recognized how all research, interpretation and production of knowledge and theory is fundamentally affected by the background, culture, history, biases and privilege of the researcher. “..it is obvious that all aspects of the production of knowledge are situated and this situatedness must be taken into account” (Engelstad & Gerrard, 2005, p. 1). She

formulated the concept of *situated knowledge* to address the above mentioned school of thought considering the unavoidable relation between the researchers personal background and how it may come into play with the interpretation and results. The situatedness of the researcher does not render the research in question invalid, but it enlightens the importance of viewing research and theory as situated knowledge in the context of the researcher or author.

Therefore, my reflections and findings while working on this thesis is unavoidably entangled with my own background and experiences, and must be considered in relation to my artistic and personal being, as well as author and researcher.

For this reason, I have provided an overview of my own background and connection to the theme in the first chapter of this thesis¹⁰, providing the reader with a detailed picture of my own relationship to music and experience with international and professional songwriting. As I myself is an integral part of my own research, understanding my background and motivation must be considered instrumental to legitimize the context and validity of my findings. My ambition for this thesis is to shine a light on how the digital age is having an impact on songwriting, and what opportunities and challenges we meet when conducting cross cultural collaborations in music. This may be useful for other songwriters, researchers and anyone interested in communication and new developments in creative work.

2.2 Limitations and Structure

When planning my master thesis and project, I initially desired to build it around new and ongoing collaborations with predominantly Brazilian composers, and explore the process as it proceeded while composing and recording a new album. Due to time restraints and some uncertainty around what would be a realistic timeline for me and my collaborators, I found that it might be risky due to the level of dependency on external factors. After some consideration and consultation with my supervisor Michael Rauhut, I decided to approach the thesis work as retrospective autoethnographic research. This allowed me to include earlier works and relevant experiences, and opened up for a greater analysis of a completed process to which I could build the basis for my research.

¹⁰ See 1.1.

As with any creative work, songwriting is a highly individual process, even when being performed in collaboration with others and through semi-structural forms. Every song, idea, and collaboration is uniquely shaped not just by the background and work habits of the participants, but also the fleeting and ever changing vibe in the room, state of mind and mood of the creator. Every song, spark or idea has its unique identity and delivering it to its final form is the art of discovering it piece by piece, word for word until it is complete. Therefore, this thesis will evidently be limited to a snapshot in time encompassing solely the compositional process of the works in question, and provide no standardized answer to how this work is universally performed. It will however provide a framework into how the compositional work is performed and reflected upon my myself, as an artist and creator in my current position as a songwriter working with international collaborators.

The unforeseen circumstances in the spring of 2020 with the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic has also had an effect on this thesis and added limitations on planned activities. Interviews with individuals in songwriting had to be cancelled due to travel bans and new priorities, as the entire industry dealt with the social, economic and health threat of the fatal virus. For my thesis work, I have had to adapt my schedule to a less than ideal number of working hours as preschool for my daughter was shut down, and not being able to leave my home means that I have increasingly had to rely on digital information and source data from online media.

These limitations can be valuable to be aware of while exploring this thesis, as it provides a deeper understanding of the background and nature of this work. Nevertheless, I believe these limitations to be acceptable and of no relevant harm to the resulting data and findings provided in this thesis.

3. Method and Research Design

In this chapter, I will introduce my research method for this thesis, explain why this particular method was chosen and why I believe it to be best suited to myself and the material I wish to convey to the reader. I will also include research dilemmas and obstacles that one might encounter when applying said method.

As I was planning my master thesis, I spent a lot of time considering how to translate my own experiences and accumulated personal data into a mold that would meet the demands of academic writing and research. My field of interest and my work is deeply entangled and rooted to my own personal background and practice as an artist and songwriter, and I can not write about it without acknowledging my situatedness¹¹ and background. The traditional format of the very master thesis itself appeared to me more like a maze and a straightjacket, than something that would naturally and organically combine with artistic expression and research. It is my observation that in the realm of music and art, the material itself is often immensely subjective, and there is no strictly logical way to process the artistic endeavours. Therefore, I believe it is of value for the academic sphere to welcome and explore newer methods for research, including first person accounts and autoethnographic analysis from the researchers themselves.

For this work, I have chosen a *retrospective autoethnographic layered account*, supplemented with research materials and relevant literature.

3.1 Autoethnographic Research

Autoethnographic research is a relatively new addition to the field of research, and it has not been without controversy that the method gained popularity in social, anthropological and artistic studies. There are several reasons why it can be valuable as a means of research, and for me it was a relevant method that allowed me to convey and translate what has mainly been my experiences and collective data from my own years of working in the music industry as an artist and songwriter. It has allowed for communicating my accumulated knowledge into a structured shape from which others may learn and use a supportive beam to their own research and development. As arts and music is a subjective field of creation, a fairly subjective research

¹¹ For more information, see Chapter 2.1.

method such an autoethnographic layered account allows room for a rhizomatic approach and in my opinion a more natural way of analyzing and communicating knowledge.

Autoethnographic research has been defined in varying degrees by different researchers since the term first surfaced in 1975 by the anthropologist Heider (Chang, 2008, p. 46). In this thesis, I look to the definition explained by Ellis & Bochner in 2000, who describes it as compiled by the three elements “Auto”(self), “Ethno”(culture) and “Graphy”(knowledge). They point to how the different researchers or examples of this method, may apply a variation of value on any of these elements to create the preferable mixture for their field of interest (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740).

For my own research and situation, this means that I will utilize analysis and reflection upon self-observations, connected to the culture and position I hold within the field of music and songwriting as an artist and composer. This allows me to apply details from my accumulated knowledge and personal experiences as a participant in the field in which I am studying.

A “layered account” can be described as a method that “juxtapose fragments of experience, memories, introspection, research, theory and other texts. Layered accounts reflect and refract the relationship between personal cultural experience and interpretation/analysis” (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015, p. 85). The supporters of this research method also advocate for the positive effects of ethnographic research by placing value upon the personal experiences, the power and craft of storytelling to relay information and representations.

For my own research, this means that I have tapped into notes, voice-memos, recordings, past experiences and reflections to construct a broad tapestry of data from which I have distilled my findings.

3.2 Research Dilemmas and Obstacles

The critics of autoethnography as method points for example to the lurking subjectivity of the method and the pitfall of excessive focus on the self. I will limit this exploration of the critics to what may be applicable to the work in this thesis. Some relevant focal points for the critics may be:

- Me, myself and I. Failure to properly situate the self within a broader cultural context, may open for critics to paint the work a self-portrait more than an autoethnographic study (Chang, 2008, p. 54-55).

- The researcher may be distracted by excessive storytelling and insufficient analysis and reflection. Elaborate narratives may get in the way of properly translating the experiences into purposeful data (Chang, 2008, p. 54-55).
- Relying on one's memory for data collection is not without risk, as our minds are forgetful and may fill in the blanks with imagination. "Memory is selective and shaped, and is retold in the continuum of one's experience" (Muncey, 2005, p. 2).

Being aware of the criticism and understanding why concerns may arise in connection with this line of research, is important not only so that I may defend my work, but to enable me as a researcher to understand the potential shortcomings of my findings, and consequently attempt to evade fallibility.

There has been some debate on how to properly pursue research on art and applying artistic endeavours in the halls of academic thinking. I agree with the views put forth by James G. Daichendt, who has criticized that art in the academic world has been forcibly adapted to objective parameters, only to fit an existing mold. While the goal should rather be to create new understandings of how to conduct art research. "I invite you to see art production as a type of inquiry, reflection, interpretation, commentary, and thinking process that has transformed the way we understand the world and ourselves." (Daichendt, 2012, p. 5)

Some of the counterarguments against the critics, has pointed out that most research may have the same level of potential misrepresentation, when it relies on a researcher's correct relaying of data.

"Data gathered and reported by the field researcher within the rubrics of accepted academic methodologies is just as suspect as any autoethnography, and perhaps more so, because the autoethnography does not purport to be more than it is" (Dauphinee, 2010, p. 812).

Therefore, as I pointed out in 2.2, this thesis is limited to providing you with a snapshot in time, of how this digital and distant songwriting process has been. As my own perspective is the most honest and accurate I can provide you with, I present it to the reader humbly and aware of the limitations that accompany this work.

4. The Unintended Fade Out

In this chapter I will discuss one of the challenges that I have faced while constricted to using only digital means of communication. It has presented itself repeatedly throughout my work, and I believe I am not unique in struggling with this particular tendency when dealing with *distant music*. It may also present itself in other relationships and projects, but I will focus on the impact it has in the sphere of songwriting and musical collaborations.

While working with long distance partners, I became aware of a phenomenon that occurred both in myself and also seemingly with several collaborators. I experienced that there was a higher degree of unexpected and unintended termination of projects due to lack of follow through and sense of obligation. Even though some of these projects were of seemingly high interest from both parties involved. In this thesis, I have called this tendency for *the unintended fade out*.

The unintended fade out has a lot in common with another phenomenon in the age of digital communication. If you have ventured into the realm of online dating perhaps, you might be familiar with the term and act of *ghosting*. Ghosting is the act of terminating a social or romantic relationship by not responding to any messages or calls, thus making yourself unavailable to the person you wish to avoid (Lefebvre et al., 2019, p. 9). They are both relatively new tendencies in how one may terminate a relationship or connection in the digital age, in a manner that might be considered rude and socially unacceptable if conducted in the physical space face to face. Even so, I will argue that there is a distinct difference between these tendencies in regards to intent and area of occurrence. Ghosting is considered a conscious act with the intent to terminate contact, with social and romantic connections. The unintended fade out, is without the intent to terminate contact and I hypothesise that it mainly occurs in the professional realm.

4.1 Out of Sight – Out of (My Head) Mind?

The tendency of a potentially fruitful collaboration being lost due to lack of perceived obligation and commitment in the sphere of digital communication, has occurred several times during my previous work. It was surprising to find that even exciting and promising collaborations with commercially successful and potentially lucrative projects were also prone to the unintended fade out. This became embarrassingly apparent in the following example.

4.1.1 Experience I

A few years ago, an Austrian producer and artist got in touch with me to write and perform a topline¹² for his house and nu disco project Satin Jackets. At the time, he was the biggest artist I have gotten to work with so far, and I was excited by the opportunity. The first round of writing went well. He sent me some instrumental tracks and I recorded vocals at my home studio that he mixed into the final version. The result was a house/nu-disco track; *Out Of My Head*,¹³ released in 2008 and has since reached over 500 000 streams on Spotify, and was later featured on the compilation *Milchbar Seaside Season 10*. Yet when it was time to initiate a new project with this producer, I found myself procrastinating to the point where suddenly too much time had passed, and the connection was lost. I remember feeling nervous when faced with the task of just opening my computer, connecting my home studio, or picking up a pen to start writing. During our first collaboration, I had struggled to deliver vocal tracks from my home studio with a sufficiently high audio quality. I feared that I would disappoint him again. Either with not being innovatively enough with my melodic and vocal imagination, or providing him with an audio recording that sounded dull and poor. It was just easier to wait a little longer to build up my courage, postpone it for a day or two - which quickly turned into a week, a month - and if I'm being honest, it has now been three years since our last contact. The strange thing about it, is that it was so easy for me to “forget” it. The commitment felt so frail, as if it existed in a different layer of my reality. One that could be more easily discarded and overlooked. A digital realm, second to the real world, and therefore a little less worthy, a little less “real”.

¹² Topline refers to the melody and lyrics.

¹³ Single by Satin Jackets, Eskimo Recordings / N.E.W.S. 2018.



Illustrasjon 1: Single Cover - *Out Of My Head* by Satin Jackets, Eskimo Recordings / N.E.W.S. 2018.

4.2 Why we fade out (and how to avoid it)

When analyzing my own reaction and experience of the event described in 4.1, I believe there may be several factors that come to play in these situations. There are three elements that stand out to me as significant when facing the potential pitfalls of the unintended fade out. Here, I will describe them individually, and subsequently offer my suggestions to how one may avoid unintended fade outs in future collaborations.

1. **Fear of failure** – Being aware of any fears or underlying emotional responses that might keep you from performing the desired task, allows you to take action and face them.
2. **Out of sight, out of mind** – Not meeting your collaborator in everyday life, or being reminded of them by seeing common colleagues and acquaintances, may make it easy to keep prioritizing other tasks that feel more urgent. To keep the project fresh in mind, you may remind yourself with something visual on your desk, and if possible book online meetings with your collaborator and have video calls. Seeing and hearing your music making partners, may render the connection and commitment more “real” and motivating.
3. **No deadline = death** – In the busy everyday life of any creative field there is more often than not, a myriad of different projects and tasks to be done. This often means that the project with the most urgent deadline will be pushed to the front of the line, while projects that do not have a deadline will have to wait until the artist has time and opportunity to pick it up. This time and opportunity may never come as new tasks with luring deadlines continue to arise. If you want to ensure that your project does not perish in the abyss, make sure to set deadlines along the way and keep oversight of your progress. It may be helpful to set up regular online meetings with your collaborators to keep each other accountable and make sure a proper timeline is followed.

A study performed by Carnegie-Mellon University at the dawn of the internet in 1998, examined the social and psychological effect of introducing the internet in 73 different households. They found that even though the internet was used largely for communication, the increased usage correlated with decline in social circles, as well as increase in depression and loneliness (Dreyfus, 2001, p.3). Though a lot has happened with the development of the internet and the way we use it since the nineties, it does provide some context as to how digital communication can be limiting in building and maintaining social and professional connections.

The combination of these social and psychological factors may affect some of these collaborations and projects, leading to an unintended fade out and termination of the project. Being aware of this threat, may help artists and songwriters to secure a successful collaboration by implementing deadlines, frequent check-ins with partners and address any perceived shortcomings of performance and fears of failure.

5. In The Same Room

With the goal to better understand music making over a distance, I thought it useful to explore its counterpart – music making face to face and working in the same room. This work can take many forms and may include two people strumming on a guitar and writing lyrics together with pen and paper, a band working out a new song in their garage or a group gathered at a song camp, pumping out potential hits. In this chapter, I will present to the reader some of my reflections and experiences from songwriting in the same room as my collaborators. I have studied notes, log entries and former work, looked at my own experiences in these situations, and compared them to work situations where I have been making music with distant partners in other cities, countries or continents. There is a great difference in how I remember these sessions, and several contributing factors to why the music making in the room may come across as a somewhat richer experience overall.

5.1 Building Relationships

It has been my repeated experience that getting to know your collaborators and having social interactions with them, may often have a positive effect on the artistic work and also increase the chances of future projects together. Simply spending time with your collaborators, also allows you to take advantage of what is known as *the mere exposure effect*. Researcher Bob Zajonc coined the phrase to describe the phenomenon of how the more familiar you are with a person, product or element – even a song – the more you are disposed to like it (Markman, 2008).

5.2 Writing for an Artist

When writing for another artist, it may be helpful to have the person in the same physical room. With the artist available, the songwriter has the ability to quickly try out new ideas with the voice and range of the artist herself. It is also beneficial for the artist who can contribute to choice of theme, participate in the writing and in general develop a stronger sense of ownership to the song which in turn may increase the chances of the song being chosen for release. When the artist has writers' credits on the track, it may also add motivation for publishers and management to push the song forward, as it secures added income opportunities for several involved parties. Knowing your collaborators well, may also make it easier to successfully communicate or interpret occurring ideas and meet potential challenges. It also makes it easier to determine when a musical collaboration may be unproductive and best avoided in the future.

5.3 Maneuvering Social Dynamics

Being in the room gives you the advantage of being able to observe, identify and adjust according to occurring mood changes both positive and negative. When I enter a new group or collaborative constellation, I find it useful to identify which role I might assume to best compliment the group dynamics, and adjust my involvement to suit the situation regarding the personal and professional qualities of the other songwriters and producers. For example; Does this group need someone to drive the work forwards, focus on lyrics and let someone else manage melody, give input on production or take a step back to make more room for the other participants? Working in the same room as your collaborators allows you to observe non-verbal cues that may help you understand when someone reacts positively or negatively to an idea. Early detection of particularly negative reactions means that you can intervene and possibly stop a collaboration from derailing due to conflict, and make positive suggestions to steer the project in the right direction.

5.3.1 Experience I

Entering a collaboration at a song camp, I noticed some signs of difficulties between me and one of the other songwriters on my team. We had not met before, and I got the impression that she was somewhat distant towards me and did not interact directly. This made me feel somewhat insecure and uneasy about our communication and upcoming collaboration. I decided to nip it in the bud and invited her to have a conversation before entering the studio. I opened up and said something similar to: “So, I feel a bit nervous about working with you, because I kind of got the impression that we might have some bad vibes between us. Could we talk about it? Because you seem so cool and I'm so excited to work with you!”. To me, it was incredibly scary to be so open and straightforward about it. But it paid off. She was surprised, but seemed relieved that I brought it up. We were able to speak openly about the dynamic between us and what might have caused it, and eliminate any tension before starting the session. The conversation even sparked what became the theme for the lyrical content. Because of this awareness, we were able to not only have a successful session, but it became a positive social interaction and I now consider this songwriter a friend, and look forward to future collaborations with her. The resulting song was released on a major label and has reached over 1 500 000 streams on Spotify alone.

5.4 Broadening Your Palette

Being in the room, you do not only receive the finished result of someone's recorded contribution, but you are able to listen in as they try out different ideas, sounds and directions. You get to swim in the pool of ideas being produced by the people around you, and to pick up new ways of thinking and to approach a piece of musical work. I never fail to learn something, every time I write with a new person. Writing with and learning from new people, allows you to broaden your own palette and further develop your own unique toolbox for music making.

5.5 Flexibility

In contrast to digital music composition over a distance where files are being sent back and forth, when you are in the same room you have instant and unlimited access to making changes in the beat, instrument, arranging, time signature, tempo and other elements of the song. You can also record a vocal idea right away to explore how it works in the mix, and the producer may for example work with the mix and production with a recorded chorus, while the songwriter continues writing the verses and so on. This allows for increased effectiveness, regardless if the instrumental track is pre-made or not.

5.6 Immersive Experience

Another aspect to music making in the room, is that depending on where you live, it might require some travel. The music making experience will then not only include what happens in the room, but also the surrounding environment.

When I travel to Brazil, Germany or even Oslo to write music. I get to explore a new city, check out local coffee shops, culture, art and people. I may meet with old friends, make some new ones, go to concerts and make new experiences.

These experiences and impressions are then added to the library of imagery and emotions that I may draw upon later when writing new music. Writing about life, means that we must also be a part of it. We must be present and partake in the current waves of culture and society, so that we may contribute to it.

5.7 The Room vs. Distant Music

Though there is undeniably a myriad of opportunities for distant songwriting that arises due to the digital age, the elements that I have described in this chapter does shine a light on the value

that songwriters may find by being present in the same room. The opportunity to build relationships, to work directly with the artist you might be writing for, to maneuver the social dynamics with more ease, expanding your musical horizon, to enjoy the flexibility and the immersiveness of the experience. These are all elements that may be taken into consideration when planning future projects and whether to prioritise making distant music with the tools of the digital age, or harnessing the qualities of being in the same room.

6. Lost In Translation – Decoding Cultural Context

In this chapter, we take a closer look at international collaborations and how decoding cultural context may play a central part in understanding the process, the communication and may affect the end-result. We will take into consideration how my own cultural and linguistic background as a Norwegian come into play as these experiences unfolded. I will look closer at two different experiences working with composers and artists from another cultural background; South-Korea/Japan¹⁴ and Brazil. When working with international partners, it is not just the language that might present itself as a challenge, but understanding the cultural context and difference in relevant references may play an integral part of successful collaboration and music making. Terminology that might make sense while working with Scandinavian musicians and producers, might have a completely different meaning when communicating with collaborators from South America or Asia. The process of decoding cultural context is equally important while working in the physical presence of your collaborators, as when working together digitally. Though, in the physical space you have more contextual information to analyze. As described in chapter 6.3, being in the same room as your collaborators allows you to read their body language and pick up on non-verbal cues. It might not protect you from making the initial mistakes on clumsy communication or unintended faux pas, but it does minimize the time it takes for you to understand that you have misstepped and allow you to attempt to rectify the situation.

6.1 Brazil: Accidental Rudeness and a Cheesy Guitar

In 2015 while working on my mini-album *Wake Up For Love* with a producer and musician in Brazil, we encountered communicative issues when describing the desired sound and role of different instruments in the mix and final production. The process was interesting as it highlighted some of the potential pitfalls of distant music.

6.1.1 Experience I

While working on a mini album and collaboration with my musical partner Peter Mesquita based in São Paulo, we were preparing and producing six songs. The initial songwriting process had started while I was in Brazil and we wrote the basic sketches with vocal and guitar. After that, I

¹⁴ The artist is from South-Korea, but the song in question was intended for the Japanese market and released by Universal Japan. The cultural background of both territories has therefore been a consideration in this case.

returned to Norway and Mesquita took over the production, arrangement and recording of instruments. After receiving the studio instrumental files from him, I recorded vocals in Norway on top of them, and we continued to send files back and forth until the album was finalized.

During this process, there were a few elements that I felt got in the way of me being completely happy with the end result. I was still new to the techniques of production and arranging, and not yet fully trusting my own intuition. Though I might not have agreed completely with the direction of the tracks in terms of sound and instrumentation, I found it hard to precisely pinpoint what I wanted to change and how. This was amplified by what I realized was a disconnect in terminology between us. What was widely considered as “modern” and “cool” in one territory revealed itself to be different things, and some of the same elements could be perceived as “cheesy” and “outdated” in another territory.

The disconnect we encountered in how we interpret the terminology, may also hint to the differences in cultural and musical opinions on aesthetics. What suited the demographic in the Brazilian music scene, might not work for Scandinavian radio stations and vice versa. A compromise was made, and the mini album was released exclusively for South-America, with the intent to in the future change and remix the tracks for a later Scandinavian release.

Other communicative issues also arose around how we would speak to each other and our expectations for workflow and time-management. We encountered a pragmatic versus relationship-minded focus. As a Norwegian, I have experienced having my intended effectiveness in communication, to be perceived as rude and too direct by collaborators, when I have failed to adjust my manners of speaking to the culture of my collaborative partners.



Illustration 2: EP Cover, *Wake Up for Love* by Sheila Simmenes & Peter Mesquita, JazzHouse 2015.

6.2 Japan: Too Much Black Magic

When it comes to creating music directed at a particular artist or market, it has also proven useful, if not of utmost importance to understand and respect cultural context. Being aware of cultural norms, taboos and even the political climate of the relevant regions may impact the potential success or downfall of a song, especially in regard to lyrics.

6.2.1 Experience II

In 2018 I worked on the song *Voodoo*¹⁵ intended for South Korean artist Taeyeon, a K-pop star and member of SM Entertainment's worldwide girl group success Girls Generation. We wrote the lyrics around the concept of being “enchanted by the voodoo of love”, including terms and imagery such as:

Excerpt:

Give me that voodoo, black magic voodoo

I'm so enchanted by you

-

Let me linger here under your spell

Give me heaven with a chaser of hell

-

We could turn the lights down low

Leave me spellbound

You can put the devil in me

-

Put that voodoo on me

If you're feeling lucky

I Wanna feel the pins and the needles¹⁶

The shivers all over my body

Put that voodoo on me

Make me feel breathless

¹⁵ The demo of the song is included as Attachment 3.

¹⁶ Ref. to a voodoo being pricked by needles.

Keep dripping, drippin, drippin

*That wonderful **voodoo***

that you do

-

Give me forever in your arms

***Black magic** loving until I see stars*

-

*Ya, you got that uncontrollable, **magical***

attraction got that, fly unbeatable

***mystical**, affection.*

-

so lay your lovin' on me, let me be your dolly

*Imma be the best one, tasting just like **molly**¹⁷*

¹⁷ Synonym for the recreational drug *Ecstasy*.

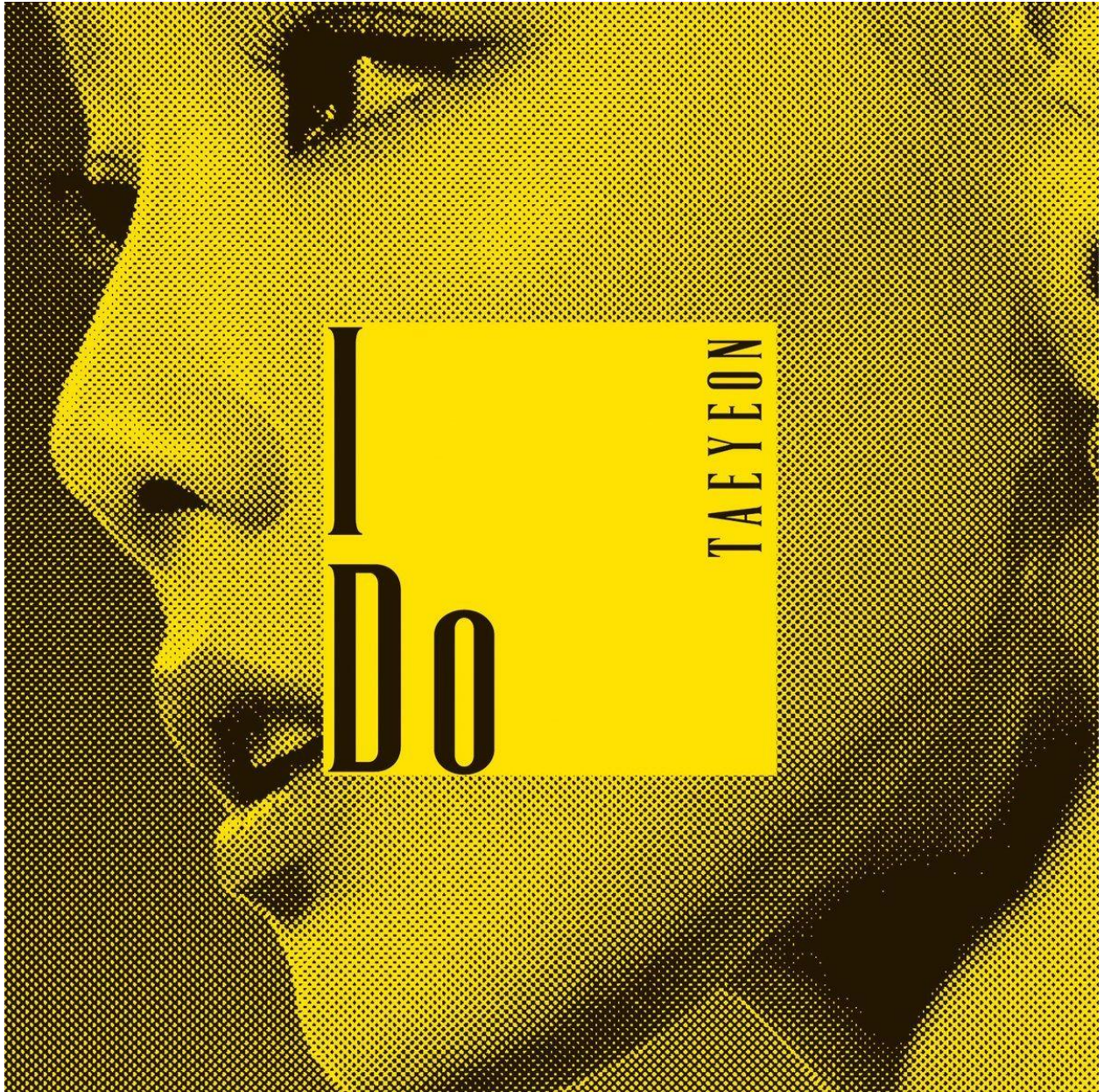


Illustration 3: Single cover, *I Do* by Taeyeon, Universal Japan 2019.

The original lyrics for the song “Voodoo” contain several references to voodoo, black magic and a hint of drug use with the mention of “molly”. Even though this rarely presents a problem in most western territories such as Scandinavia, Great Britain and the USA, it is problematic in several Asian countries which culturally inhabits a greater degree of superstition and religious beliefs. When writing for the Asian market, foreign songwriters can expect to have the songs rewritten or translated by a native lyricist. These re-writes usually change the majority of the lyrics, but keep the main theme, title and some punchy keywords in the text that are catchy and

that makes it easy for international listeners to sing along to, and that also emphasizes the theme of the track.

Wolf – EXO

Excerpt:

Hey 확 물어

그다음 막 막 흔들어 정신 잃게

Hey 자 안 해 본 스타일로

저 큰 보름달이 지기 전에 해치워라

그래 wolf 내가 wolf awoo

(Ah 사랑해요) 난 늑대고 넌 미녀

그래 wolf 내가 wolf awoo

(Ah 사랑해요) 난 늑대고 넌 미녀

...

Written by Kenzie / Nermin Harambasic / William Edward Simister.

Wolf © Universal Music Publishing Group, Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd.

What Is Love – TWICE¹⁸

Excerpt:

I wanna know 사랑처럼 달콤하다는데

I wanna know 하늘을 나는 것 같다는데

I wanna know know know know

¹⁸ Written by J.Y. Park. What is Love? © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC.

What is love? 사랑이 어떤 느낌인지

I wanna know 하루 종일 웃고 있다는데

I wanna know 세상이 다 아름답다는데

I wanna know know know know

What is love? 언젠간 나에게도 사랑이 올까

...

When we received the news that Voodoo would be recorded and released by Taeyeon for the Asian market by Universal Japan, we expected the lyrics to be re-written or translated, but to keep the main theme “voodoo” as the hook. Instead, the lyrics had been completely changed, even adding a new English title and hook-words unrelated to the original version.

I Do – Taeyeon¹⁹

Excerpt:

Do you, do you love me?

知りたいのに

言葉には出来ない

臆病なままの私

Do you, do you love me?

聞かれなくても

Yes I do, I do, I do

いつも yes I do

Say I do

乗り込む night train

それとも air plane

¹⁹ The final version of the song is included as Attachment 4. Written by Sheila Simmenes, Sebastian Aasen, Boots Ottestad, MEG.ME & Celine Helgemo. SM Entertainment/Universal Japan.

どれでもいいわ

今すぐだってどこへだって

心は飛んで行く ah

...

As the song was being released in Japan, a country with old traditions, myths and a large degree of superstition, it is grounds to suggest that this may be the reason for the unexpected change in lyrics and concept.

6.3 When Music is Forbidden

The political situation at any given time is also important to factor in when working remotely with international collaborations. As the artist and songwriter Pål Moddi Knutsen describes in his work with the album *Unsongs* (Knutsen, 2016), there can be strong reactions to musical collaborations or the choices we make as to play or not to play in countries involved with national or international conflicts. In some countries, even entire genres may be forbidden – which is the case with “..hip-hop in Iran, black metal in Saudi-Arabia and drug related ballads in Mexico” (Knutsen, 2017, p. 47). The reactions to “crossing the line” can be surprisingly severe. The Kurdish singer Nûdem Durak was in 2015 sentenced to 10 years in prison for singing in her native language to children, charged with “spreading of propaganda”. Her sentence was later increased to 19 years without any additional charges, and she is not expected to be released until 2034 (Voice Project, 2020).

Though these examples are extreme, they do point to the importance of putting your collaborations and communication into the correct cultural context to avoid unpleasant surprises or conflicts with your partners.

6.4 When Yes Means No

When communicating across cultures, there are great variations in the level of directness one might experience. In linguistics, there are many examples of potential misunderstandings between high- and low-context cultures. In a high-context culture, there is a greater emphasis on non-verbal communication, such as gestures, reading between the lines and recognizing the context of the situation to interpret what is really being communicated. While in a low-context culture, the focus is on the actual verbal communication. Norway for example, is a low-context culture. Japan, however, is a high-context culture where there are layers of etiquette and

underlying rules of communication that must be recognized in order to correctly interpret the communication. The context is therefore important to consider in order to appropriately address someone. Even “yes” and “no” can at times be a mystery to a foreign collaborator. In many Asian cultures (of which most tend to be high-context), “yes” can mean anything from an actual “yes, I agree and will do what you have asked”, to “yes, I am listening”(but do not agree and will not comply) – so basically “no” (Varner & Beamer, 2005, p. 155).

Therefore, we may conclude that there is much to gain from developing a good understanding of how to decode cultural context, to avoid that our music, collaborations or intentions may get lost in translation. From the possible interpretations of the creative content, national laws and conflicts – to a simple “yes” or “no”.

7. The Songwriters Digital Toolbox

In this chapter, we will explore some of the new tools available to the songwriter in the digital age, and how they may impact the way music is being made in 2020. There is a vast amount of new online apps, forums and digital tools becoming available every day, and many of these have proven extremely helpful when developing ideas, sketches, finding collaborators and communicating with musicians, songwriters and producers all over the world. If you are approaching music for the first time, or looking to further develop your skill set, learning everything you need to know about songwriting and music production has never been easier. There are web-based solutions and courses available for almost anything you could imagine, such as Udemy²⁰, Masterclass²¹ and online universities, and a lot is available for free on the most well-known major platform for online learning and entertainment – YouTube.

Due to the ever-changing and expanding pool of resources available, I will not aim to describe them all in this chapter, but I will attempt to outline an overview of the more commonly used tools – including the ones I frequently apply in my own workflow and how I use them. By doing so, I aspire to provide the reader with a broad impression of how digital solutions are affecting, influencing and changing the way that we write music, while shedding a light upon the limits and opportunities in the songwriter’s digital toolbox.

7.1 Writing The Song

There is an abundant array of apps to help you with songwriting, with different degrees of user-friendliness and new ones seem to pop up on a weekly basis. Personally, I use a combination of recording ideas on my iPhone’s native recording function, and writing down lyrics in Evernote²². If I get stuck on a rhyme or need some lyrical inspiration, I try *rhymezone.com* or listen to some lyrically talented artists, read poetry or make a temporary lyric that I can come back to and change later. I find it important to keep the workflow going as much as possible and not linger too long around a difficult part of the song. Spending too long getting “stuck” may result in stagnating the whole process, whereas I prefer to just keep going and then come back to rewrite

²⁰ Online learning platform with a myriad of different courses and disciplines.

²¹ Membership based online courses by some of the world's most well-known thinkers, performers and athletes.

²² A notation app that syncs between several devices. Allowing you to access and edit notes on your PC, smartphone and tablet in real time.

it later. In my experience, the right lyrical or tonal solution might reveal itself given a little time to marinate in the back of your mind. Then I use SongKeyFinder²³ to identify a suitable key, and Suggester²⁴ to find a chord progression that fits the direction that feels right for the song. I might also listen for reference songs on Spotify or YouTube and may try to sing the topline over an already existing song to examine if maybe the song could benefit from a different structure, key or vibe. Trying out the topline over other pre-existing songs, functions as a method to try out different arrangements, rhythms and styles for the new topline.

7.1.1 Experience I

I wrote the song *Pretend* in the style of a pop or singer/songwriter-track, complete with a chord progression using the recording function on my iPhone to record the topline, the Evernote app to write down the lyrics and SongKeyFinder and the Suggester-app for locating a suitable key and chord progression. Upon finishing it, something did not feel completely right about it yet. Playing it in my head, I found (to my surprise) that I wanted to try out a Latin reggaeton rhythm. I opened up YouTube and found two songs from Columbian singer and reggaeton performer Maluma. I played the songs and applied my topline over it, adjusting the notes and rhythm to fit the track. Not only did I discover that the reggaeton rhythm was absolutely perfect for my topline, but also that there were elements from the key and chord progression that added a new and interesting layer to the song. My idea was transformed from a simple singer/songwriter tune, to a danceable, more engaging and commercially viable track.

7.2 Artificial Intelligence and Songwriting

There have been numerous attempts to create an artificial intelligence (AI) that can master writing songs completely without human input, and though AI has conceived some convincing electronic tracks, it will take a little more time before an AI can completely take over the role as a songwriter complete with lyrics and overall message. Although, we would be amiss if we did not mention the honorable attempt by Nimrod Shapira and his team who fed hundreds of Eurovision Song Contest-songs into a deep learning program which then created the hilarious hit *Blue Jeans and Bloody Tears* – entirely written and composed by AI (though with a helping human hand giving the finishing touches and curating the results). In 2020, the Dutch

²³ An app that analyses melodies from an audio signal and suggests what tonal key may be applicable.

²⁴ An app that aids you in finding chords that work together, after selecting the desired tonal key.

broadcaster VPRO invites us to the The AI Song Contest where European teams of musicians, artists, scientists and developers will compete to create the next hit with the help of their own AI (Music Ally, 2020).

7.2.1 Amadeus Code

Amadeus Code is an AI-powered songwriting assistant created to work together with the songwriter for developing ideas and demos. It creates royalty free melody lines, chord progressions and beats, ready for the songwriter or composer to edit and manipulate into a finished work. This means that you can choose to collaborate with a fully digital partner when creating your music. At this point in time, the Amadeus Code has some limitations and the resulting songs displayed on the developer's website appear generic and lacking in quality in terms of commercial viability and sound quality. The app may be used for creating simple sketches which is then re-recorded in the studio or by an external producer and it provides an endless collection of sounds, melodies and chord progressions to get you inspired. Also, the app allows you to export the MIDI-files and use your own plug-ins and instruments, which effectively remedies the issue of the low-quality audio in the app itself and allows for easy adjustments of the beat using your own DAW²⁵. The app also features a Tinder-like swipe function, where you can swipe up until you find a beat or melody that interests you. This app does remove some of the romance of songwriting, but it is undoubtedly interesting to see where this technology is heading next.

7.2.2 Evoke

Amadeus Code is currently beta testing their slightly more scary 'little sister', in the form of Evoke Music – an online licensing platform for music and sounds for use by content creators in TV, film, commercials, podcasts and more recently for social media content by influencers and vloggers²⁶. All created on command by an AI and in direct competition with the millions of musicians that make a living off sync and licensing²⁷ in the same market. Instrumental and electronic music for use in this market often does not require the same standard as songs for

²⁵ Digital Audio Workstation.

²⁶ Video bloggers.

²⁷ Licencing the right to synchronize audio material to video.

artists, streaming and radio, thus providing a suitable field of commerce for the AI created by the team behind Amadeus Code and Evoke Music.

7.2.3 Boomy

Boomy is another fresh AI on the market that has taken the idea one step further, by integrating digital distribution to all relevant platforms, including Instagram and Tik Tok²⁸. They encourage the user to teach the AI what music she likes, and then tweak the track with options for tempo, intensity and more, using the simple mix features and effects available on the platform. Once the song is finished, you can pay a one-time fee for the rights – which then allows you to use the track as you please.

While the creative field has long been considered safe from the advances of technology, musicians, songwriters and producers might not be safe for long (undoubtedly the topic of another compelling master thesis at this very moment).

7.3 Finding Collaborators

We find ourselves in a place in time where getting connected across the world has never been easier. Social networks and online platforms for showcasing your creative work have exploded in the last few years, and there are many options to choose from when searching for your next collaborator. If you want to get in touch with or discover a potential new songwriting partner or producer, you can check out the online music sharing platform Soundcloud where many up and coming producers and songwriters share their demos, or if you want to get in touch with more advanced songwriters – you can always check the credits on Spotify for songs you like, look up the writers and start following them on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, where you can easily direct message them and pitch a collaboration.

7.3.2 The Rise and Fall of Social Music Networks

In recent years there has also been an explosion in music centered social media apps, where music makers and music lovers could get in touch and collaborate, including the Norwegian Telia-partnered Museai in 2015. The company was aiming to be the next big thing in songwriting and collaborating and had a huge campaign fronted by the artist ARY and producer

²⁸ Popular social media platforms.

Carl Louis with the track “Telescope”. Five years later, the app is no longer available on the app store and its existence is nearly scrubbed from the internet. Museai is not alone in failing to successfully interpret what users desire from a music making or musical social media app. On the 2013 MIDEM list of the most promising music start-up that year (Bryant, 2012), not one is widely known and used today in the industry, and most (if not all) have ceased to exist. These apps and platforms could have been useful for long distance music making, but failed to accumulate a sufficient number of active users which is the key for a new platform or music social media app. A few apps like Bandwith and Bandr are still active but struggling with keeping up the necessary number of users on a global scale. User feedback on Google Play indicates that the apps struggle with not enough users for people to find what they are looking for, hence rendering the app use(r)less (Google Play, 2019).

7.3.3 Vampr – Tinder for Musicians

One music social media platform success story is the networking app Vampr. It has been widely described as Tinder, or LinkedIn for musicians, where you can perform detailed searches for collaborators by tweaking the settings according to what you are looking for, including age, area, genre, role, etc. The app has so far accumulated over 5 million unique connections in over 180 countries, and are planning expansions to include other creative fields such as art, photography and video. While currently there might not be a large number of users from Norway, Vampr offers a fast and easy way to find potential collaborators all over the world.

7.4 Vocal Production

Vocal Production describes the process of adding vocals to a track including the planning, recording, arranging, mix and effect work applied to end up with a finished track that represents the desired sound. Vocal production also means refining the vocal track; removing unwanted sounds and pauses, fixing time and tempo, tune vocals, gain automation and EQ²⁹. The term includes everything the vocal recording needs before it is ready to be mixed in with the rest of the track. Though these manipulations may be performed with analog hardware in traditional studios, today this process is mainly performed digitally using software applications.

²⁹ Equalizer; soft- or hardware that allows you to boost or diminish selected frequencies on an audio signal.

While reflecting on my past and present work as a songwriter and topliner, the importance of vocal production stands out as a valuable tool for communicating ideas, especially when working with cross cultural collaborators. I am not a producer, nor have I acquired adequate skills for creating radio ready demos. My strengths are in concept, lyrics and melody. But to successfully convey my ideas, the importance of mastering the art of vocal production has become fundamental.

7.4.1 Communicating Ideas

When working with other songwriters and producers face to face in the studio, I can with ease articulate my ideas by singing, tapping or otherwise illustrating what is going on in my head. It might be helpful to describe that when I write or play a topline in my head, I hear it complete with chords, rhythm and arrangement – but do not know the name of the chords until I recognize them being played on the piano. Utilizing my voice is the best method I have to convey the music in my mind. By mastering the available tools of vocal production, I can to some extent inform my collaborating partners how I imagine the other elements of the song to play out. For example, I may record myself singing the bassline, brass-arrangements, the drumbeat, synth-lines and other elements of how I wish to develop the song. The producer, or whoever I might collaborate with, can then play out the same lines on the intended instruments and insert any missing components.

7.4.2 Retaining Vocal Signature

A songwriter or artist may often have a clear idea of how they intend for the vocals to sound like. This may for example be ideas on arrangements of the backing vocals and how much (or how little) they should blend with the main vocal, to how they should be treated with EQ, compressors and other digital effects. By mastering the skills of vocal production, it protects the intended vocal-idea and signature of the topliner or artist in question.

7.4.3 Workflow

Time is of the essence. Especially when working with cross cultural compositions and commercial songwriting. The deadlines are often short and there is great pressure to deliver as much as possible, as fast as possible. When you are able to provide a solid vocal production yourself and can send vocal tracks ready to be put into the final mix, you can save your collaborators a lot of time. Time that they can spend on the instrumental and final mix, ensuring

both of you the best possible end-result. This increases the chances of getting a song picked up by an A&R, artist or music supervisor, and also makes you a more attractive collaborator.

7.5 The Next Step

The next big thing in digital music production might be solutions for real time online music collaborations. At the moment, there is no software or internet connection that allows for musicians and songwriters to play together in real time, due to signal delay. This means that digital music writing is limited to recording and sending files back and forth, or limited to only one person playing or singing at any time. The Spotify owned online DAW *Soundtrap* does allow for more than one person to work together in the same project in real time, but does not deliver a solution on how to play or write together in real time while working over a distance.

Since the whole world has recently been confined to our home offices and digital sphere for work and communication, it is not unlikely that great advances in real time communication might be on the horizon. Hopefully we might soon have solutions for eliminating (or diminishing until rendered irrelevant) signal delay to the point where music can be made in real time with collaborations over the internet.

8. Final Reflections

In this thesis I have presented a collection of observations and reflections in the form of an autoethnographic layered account and drawn connections to relevant theory and literature. The content gives the reader an overview of my experience and process, which may provide the basis for individual self-examination and growth for other songwriters and composers. As self-centered and navel-gazing as the retrospective autoethnographic method has been accused of being, it is through reflection upon ourselves, our art and existence that we gain a greater overview of our work and may nurture further development as creators of music.

8.1 Interpretation of Results

From being alone in a room with a guitar, to global communication and co-creation with the help of digital tools and interconnectivity. The new possibilities that the age of communication can offer us, do come with a trade-off. Communicating with partners on the other side of the earth can be challenging, and much can get lost in translation – both due to linguistics, and in the way we interpret the auditory material being sent back and forth through the internet.

There is also the threat of discontinued collaborations caused by the very lack of proximity³⁰. It may be easy to “forget” or not prioritise the projects you have with long distance partners, because the connection appears less real or urgent, than when working with people closer to you.

The boundless opportunities given to us by the means of digital communication creates important and meaningful connections and new ways to approach songwriting. Every day, there are thousands of songs being written through the process of sending files back and forth over the internet, skyping and collaborating despite being on separate parts of the planet. Not only are we able to create and collaborate with composers and lyricists anywhere on the globe, but we can search, listen to, be inspired and influenced by music and genres that were previously unavailable to us. As someone who still remembers the world pre-internet, it is incredible to observe how one can now access Bhutanese folk music from the nineties, or the latest K-pop hit in just a few clicks.

Initiating this thesis, I was greatly enthusiastic about digital collaborations, due to the great possibilities it provides. After diving into my own work and conducting the following

³⁰ As examined in chapter 4.

retrospective autoethnographic research, I discovered that even though my digital collaborations have often been commercially successful, it is the work where I have been in the same room as my collaborators where I feel the work has had a greater impact on my development as a songwriter. The value of learning while working and enjoying the process, should be considered when planning future work and collaborations. It is a value that I admittedly have failed to reflect upon in the past, where my focus as a songwriter has been purely on making as much music as I can, with as many people as possible. While digital collaborations do a great deal in achieving a high level of production, and expanding my reach, it may fall short when compared to the overall value of creating music together in the same room.

I would like to distill my findings to the following statements describing the core of my discoveries:

- Not meeting or knowing your collaborator face to face, may lead to unintended fade-outs³¹.
- If the goal is to grow as a songwriter, be present in the room³².
- De-coding cultural context is important to ensure a successful collaboration³³.
- The rise of digital solutions and AI offers both new opportunities and possible threats to songwriters and producers³⁴.

My findings offer some insight into the process of distant music and songwriting in 2020, and how one may optimize collaborations for a global reach and cross-cultural productions. It shows how though it may be tempting for logistic and economic reasons to rely solely on digital collaboration, the value of actually meeting face to face and being in the room together may still remain preferable whenever possible.

Through this thesis I have shed a light on current working methods in distant music, and reflected upon new trends and tendencies in the digital development of songwriting and music production. Although this thesis can only testify to my own experiences and data, and though

³¹ For more information, see Chapter 4.

³² For more information, see Chapter 5.

³³ For more information, see Chapter 6.

³⁴ For more information, see Chapter 7.

songwriting is a process that differs greatly from person to person - I believe there is some general value to these insights. I hope my contribution to the field may prove useful to anyone wishing to know more about the songwriting process in 2020, may it be for their own artistic development and purpose, or to provide building blocks for their own research in this field.

8.2 Further Directions

Throughout this thesis, I have identified some of the challenges that may occur with distant music in cross-cultural collaborations and compositions, and what skills it may be beneficial to cultivate in order to optimize the chances for a successful collaboration. It is far from a complete picture, and for future research it would be interesting to compare my findings with other, similar projects. Potentially I would also like to look further into the differences between creating music in the same room vs. over distances, by a mix of field work and long-distance composing with the same collaborators, and then evaluate the results – and also look at the content of the songs. The lyrical work and the stories we tell through song. What do we have in common, and what sets us apart when it comes to the way we phrase and work with our lyrical content?

The way we create music and the advancement of communication, software and global interconnectivity, continues to grow and develop. In a world shaken by polarizing ideologies, where the great differences in lifestyle and opportunities have grown more visible across the globe by the social media and where we have encountered the isolation of lockdown following the Covid-19 pandemic, there is great value in everything and anything that can draw us closer together instead of pulling us apart. The creation and sharing of art made from cross-cultural collaborations helps us unite with a shared voice, and promotes our shared humanity, thoughts and feelings. Music matters.

Writing our stories through song, is one of the great gifts humans have continuously developed through our existence. Learning about how we perform the art of songwriting, and new opportunities and techniques for such work, is important not just for the act of creation itself – but for how music has the ability to impact our minds and hearts.

The songs we make. The stories we tell ourselves and others through art, make up the threads of the tapestry of human history and existence.

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Attachments

1. Wake Up Love - Sheila Simmenes & Peter Mesquita
2. Out Of My Head - Satin Jackets
3. Voodoo - Demo
4. I Do - Taeyeon