

Berklee College of Music

VV:
**Exploring Self-Love through a Second-
Generation Lens**

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Master of Music in Music Production, Technology, and Innovation

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“The most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely.”

- Carl Gustav Jung

Abstract

This Culminating Experience Project is a creative project consisting of a visual EP, titled ‘VV’. The purpose of creating this EP derives from the lack of South Asian representation in Western media, and the desire to utilize South Indian Classical music, more specifically Carnatic music, with popular music such as the RnB and Electronic genres. Utilizing information from cross-cultural studies, the EP thematically focuses on second-generation (the children of immigrants) identity and self-love.

This project was multifaceted in nature and challenging as it required the author to engage in the following with limited prior experience: producing, songwriting, experimentation with hybrid recording techniques, electronic production, mixing, video production and editing and collaborating with others.

The main body of work is a five-track EP, and features self-produced, self-written music that explores themes such as identity, heritage, mental health, and love in the context of navigating through two cultures as a second-generation British Asian immigrant. The music falls into the genre of Alternative RnB and Electronic music, but also feature elements of South Indian Classical music. To accompany the music, there are two music videos that illustrate the themes further. ‘VV’ requires further development, but nonetheless fills an evident gap within contemporary music.

Introduction

The project 'VV' came into essence after realizing that there was a severe gap in the market for Indian Classical and contemporary pop, electronic and RnB fusion music.

The title 'VV' refers to the author's numerological number, a double 5, which is supposedly one of the luckiest combinations. In Sri Lankan Tamil culture, the ethnicity of this author, numerology plays a key role in identifying one's path and future success.

Thematically, the EP focuses on navigating between Sri Lankan and British culture as the child of Sri Lankan immigrants in the UK, as well as self-love and self-belief. Thus, naming the EP 'VV' is apt in its cultural and personal connotations. Ultimately, the end goal was to create an EP consisting of songs that fused together Carnatic South Indian Classical music with contemporary pop genres, and that discussed the issues of cultural identity and self-love. The author/creator of this EP is a credible source as she has experience of both cultures and a strong understanding of both styles of music.

Furthermore, her undergraduate dissertation within the field of cultural studies focused on South Asian representation in the western media and how this has evolved in a post-colonial and post-9/11 context to necessitate more 'second-generation' (those born and raised in the host country but with immigrant parents) representation.¹ Thus, the project is both relevant and necessary in contemporary society.

¹ Baheerathan, "Postcolonial to Post 9/11: Changing South Asian Representation in the Media."

Review of the State of the Art

Whilst there is a vast array of music within the genres of Alternative RnB and Electronic music, very few artists fuse these genres with South Indian classical music. There are several successful artists who have incorporated South Indian classical music, or used Indian instruments, with other genres. For example, the classical Sitarist Anoushka Shankar has created fusion pieces in which she mixes classical Hindustani music, with the music of Jazz singer Norah Jones.² Nitin Sawhney has created an array of film scores that incorporate Indian elements, and much of his work, most notably his song 'Homelands', mixes classical Indian music with Flamenco and other world styles.³ In a more popular and contemporary context, the electronic artists Jai Wolf and KSHMR have achieved great success through their subtle incorporation of Indian elements in their music.⁴ Both Jai Wolf, and KSHMR, are American-based artists who largely credit their heritage as a huge influence in their music.⁵ Second-generation artists who have fused South Asian styles with RnB and pop music include the British-Pakistani singer Zack Knight and the British-Sri Lankan singer Arjun.^{6,7} However, their music is more relevant to the Bollywood style and does not incorporate classical Indian music. British-Sri Lankan singer MIA (also known as Matangi, or Maya) often explicitly discusses political issues in Sri Lanka.⁸ Her style of using popular genres and creating universal music to put forward a minority's struggles have inspired this project greatly. More recently, Indian-American singer Raveena has incorporated Indian visuals and references her culture visually in her music videos, but her musical style does not

² Shankar and Jones, *Traces Of You*.

³ Nitin Sawhney, *Homelands*.

⁴ Erik, "KSHMR Is The First Producer To Combine These Styles In His Latest Song."

⁵ Chakraborty, "KSHMR."

⁶ Zack Knight, *Galtiyan*.

⁷ "Arjun Coomaraswamy."

⁸ Phillips, "Matangi/Maya/MIA Review – Combative Musician Shows She Is Director of Own Life."

include classical Carnatic features. British actor and rapper Riz Ahmed often addresses controversial issues and largely focuses on South Asian representation in his work, particularly in light of the rise of Islamaphobia.⁹

The South Asian diaspora is relatively new and thus, South Asian influence, although present, is not prevalent in the music industry. This project seeks to fill a relatively empty gap in music that lacks second-generation, particularly South Asian second-generation identity. For the children of immigrants, who must often navigate between two cultures, there exists a lack of representation in the entertainment industry. This project provides music that highlights these issues, and creates a relatable narrative to those in this situation. This visual EP aims to be universal, accessible music that represents the under-represented South Asian second-generation.

⁹ Reed, "Hear Riz Ahmed Honor Pakistani Heritage on New Song 'Mogambo.'"

Description

This project consists of five songs and two accompanying music videos. Ableton was used to produce the tracks, as Ableton provides a fast, creative flow with electronic music production and Pro Tools was used to record as this is industry standard and allowed professional-level recording sessions to take place. The five songs within the EP are: 'Intro', 'Home', 'Expectations', 'Mirror' and 'Heartbeat'. 'Intro' is a track that features all the instruments prevalent and sets up the theme of the overall EP, utilizing the lyrics "It's time to focus on me, on who I want to be." 'Home' refers to gratitude towards immigrant parents and their sacrifices, and features an accompany music video containing childhood home video footage and a small documentary-style interview with the author's family regarding their experiences as immigrants. 'Expectations' is a song about self-love in the context of romance whilst 'Mirror' is a song focusing on self-love in the context of social media and body-image issues. 'Mirror' also features a music video that uses projections and a kaleidoscope mirror to distort the subject. 'Heartbeat' is a song written from the perspective of having a panic-attack. Each song features both Pop and Carnatic melodies with RnB/Hip-Hop rhythms, and features Carnatic Violin and Flute.

Innovative Aspects

As explained in the review of the state of the art, the incorporation of South Indian Classical music as a fusion-genre remains limited and largely restricted to more classical genres such as Jazz and Flamenco. This project is innovative in the way it combines Carnatic South Indian Classical music with the more contemporary genres of RnB and Electronic/Pop music. This fusion occurs through the inclusion of instruments such as the Carnatic flute, the Carnatic Violin and the Tabla. As well as this, the singer includes improvisation in the Carnatic style in the background vocals of a few of the songs.

Further innovation occurs in its subject matter, as it tackles the idea of ‘second-generation identity’ – this refers to the identity and narrative of the children of immigrants growing up in a country that their parents were not born in. This is a matter that has begun to make appearances in recent Television shows but is yet to thoroughly infiltrate the music industry. Additionally, the author discusses mental health within the lyrics of the music and combines this with the references of British-Asian identity to reduce stigma and discuss a topic that remains relatively undiscussed and taboo in the British-Asian community.¹⁰

Finally, the project contains an innovative element through artistic content in its video production. It utilises a manually-built kaleidoscope using acrylic mirrors and combining this with projections onto the subject to create a distorted and reflected image. Through this method, I was able to raise questions of cultural identity visually.

¹⁰ Bell, “Why We Need to Talk about Suicide in the Asian Community.”

New Skills Acquired

Through this process, the author acquired a plethora of new skills. Prior to this project, the author possessed very few skills within the fields of music production and video production. As a result of undertaking this EP, new skills acquired include the ability to utilise three of the most prominent Digital Audio Workstations: Pro Tools, Logic and Ableton Live. In Ableton, Sound Design skills were developed, mainly with the use of the wavetable synthesizer 'Serum'. Furthermore, the author acquired new skills of audio engineering, through the acquisition of recording knowledge and spending hours upon hours in the studio with a more experienced recording and mixing engineer. The author, despite having no previous experience, gained an understanding of signal flow, stereo recording techniques, microphone choices and polar patterns, as well as the benefits of using outboard gear in a studio.

Camera skills were developed and enhanced, with a greater understanding of videography and how to make the most of manual settings, as well as the benefits of using software such as Magic Lantern when shooting with Canon cameras. Additionally, new skills in Adobe Photoshop, After Effects and Premiere Pro were acquired through the video production process and knowledge of Resolume Arena was acquired through experimentation with projection mapping. The plethora of new software skills and technology understanding will increase overall employability.

Challenges

This project comprised a plethora of challenges, both expected and unexpected. From its conception, the project was difficult as it was multi-faceted in nature and necessitated collaboration with others in order to fulfil each job. Additionally, the author had very little prior experience of music technology and studio recording.

To overcome this, the project became a collaboration with a mixing and recording engineer who was creating a portfolio for their Culminating Experience project. Whilst the engineer conducted the recording sessions and took the lead with technology and aided the author, the EP appears on the engineer's portfolio as an entire project. Further collaborations with more-established producers and artists also occurred to help bring the author's vision to fruition and gain insight to form a realistic approach when making the EP.

The biggest challenge occurred when the creator of the project began to undergo severe personal struggles in relation to their mental health. Due to these struggles, engaging in these new, overwhelming tasks became almost impossible and several months out of the academic year were lost. These issues became such a hinderance that, at several moments, the project seemed unlikely to be carried out.

To overcome this challenge, the entire project had to change as the initial plan (that included more videos, original animations, projection mapping and a live performance) had to be reworked into a more feasible idea. Thus, the project was simplified and became much more music-centric, with the main focus being the songs themselves and the quantity of videos was reduced significantly. Furthermore, the author, also the artist

in this case, included the themes of mental health and the trajectory of self-love in addition to the aforementioned socio-political references to British-Asian identity. As the artist herself endured these struggles and began a journey towards self-love and acceptance, the EP became about these themes and became reflective of this personal narrative.

Future Ramifications

The project requires further work and can be developed. The author will collaborate further with the same engineers, and other, new engineers, to improve the mixes. The author believes that, with more time, the project can be developed to be of a higher quality before being released on streaming platforms. As the author will also return to the UK, there will be many more opportunities to collaborate with more Carnatic musicians, dancers and artists. In London, there are a vast quantity of accessible and diverse resources, and due to this, the project will be able to include content that is more specific to the British-Asian community.

Ultimately, once released, this project will contribute to the presence of South Asian Classical-fusion music in contemporary culture, whilst addressing the rising theme of 'second-generation identity' and reducing the stigma around discussing mental health. Furthermore, this project will act as a foundation for the author's artistry and as a portfolio that can be used for career opportunities and advancement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the visual EP 'VV' is innovative and fills a gap in the industry, but must be expanded upon and improved in quality to reach its full capacity and to be entirely effective. The project is significant as it is both universal and relatable in its approach to identity and self-love, whilst discussing the relatively undiscussed topic of second-generation identity. In addition to this, it is personal to the author and establishes the groundwork for the author's artistry and acts as an introduction to the author's music style. 'VV' is a project that is innovative, personal and heartfelt in nature and highlights the potential for Indian Classical melodies, instrumentation and rhythms to be used in popular music production.

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