

Berklee College of Music

First Personal Nineties R&B Soul EP

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Supervisor: Elysha Zaide

by Gan Xu

Valencia Campus, Spain

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Abstract

For this project, the artist Gan Xu made the first personal EP with 5 tracks including four full-length tracks and an outro. The purpose of this EP was to express the artist's emotion and stories throughout this year in Spain, with its main theme of love, pain and growth. The genres focused on R&B, Soul, and Ballad. This EP would also be a brand new chapter and meaningful journey for the artist Gan Xu transforming from a physicist to a musician.

Keywords: R&B, Soul, Ballad, 90s, creative project, EP.

1. Introduction

This CE project was about composing, production, recording and mixing of an original EP that will lead up to an official release. The main purpose of this EP was to show the artist's own colors and emotions as an R&B and ballad musician. Before going to Berklee, the artist released singles "Right Now", "New Way", and "Sky View" that showed the artist's music intention, ambitions, as well as the mental growth process in the last three years. While in this EP, the artist Gan Xu told a complete love story following an emotion line from struggling to uncertainty to happiness.

The first song "Parallel" was a prelude of the third track "Diagonal". It was a sentimental song that showed the struggling in a relationship between the artist and a girl. The lyrics was telling the artist himself to stop tangling on the imaginary love because the thoughts of the artist and the girl were so different like two parallel lines and could not reach each other.

The second song "Feel It" depicted a color and emotion between darkness and brightness. It was a bridge between the second song and the third song. The artist combined a Pink Sweat-style modern R&B and Babyface-style retro classical R&B. The lyrics expressed that lovers should not be afraid of uncertainties of the future because love is always the cure.

Unlike the struggling in the first song "Parallel", the title song "Diagonal" was a turning point of the relationship and the lovers started to accept and understand each other. The lovers found their common ground and finally fall in love with each other. The electric piano and guitar, which ran through the whole song, created a dreamy and relaxing vibe. Also, the monologue of the girl near the end of the song promoted the emotion line that reflected closer and sweeter relationship between the lovers.

The fourth song “Love Recipe” depicted a candlelight dinner scene where the lovers showed their hearts to each other and shared future wishes in a beautiful night. The gentle strumming of acoustic guitar and arpeggio of grand piano created a sweet and wonderful scene of the lovers snuggling against each other in a starry night.

The last song “Movie Scene” was also a sweet love song that continued the ballad soul vibe of last song. This song depicted a memoir that the lovers flipped through their photo album and reviewed their sweet and wonderful experiences. Also, those memories show the artist’s growth in this relationship.

2. Review of the State of Art

Among plenty of R&B artists worldwide, the author always got inspirations from R&B artists like Babyface, Pink Sweat, Crush, and Brown Eyed Soul. As mentioned above, the author wanted to create a Babyface’s 80s old school Soul R&B vibe for this whole EP.

Babyface is one of the founding fathers of the best hits of modern U.S R&B. Many people might think babyface’s classical R&B is out of style because R&B in nowadays fuses many chill-pop and trap elements. Though, his sound and style actually never fade out. He produced many R&B albums in recent years, like “Yours Truly” by Ariana Grande¹, which is also one of the best albums all time. He also self-produced his latest album “Return of The Tender Lover”, which inspired the author throughout the process of making this EP.

Besides Babyface, the author was also heavily influenced by Korean R&B pop music. Crush and Brown Eyed Soul were two of the Korean artists who inspired the author in both production and singing technique. In Crush’s latest album “From Midnight to Sunrise”, the title song “With You” conveyed the contradicting feeling when people fall in love with each other. Even the lyrics was about sweat love stories and feelings, but the

¹ “Babyface (Musician),” Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, June 9, 2020), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babyface_\(musician\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babyface_(musician)).

chords sound unstable and even sad. This unstable and controversy feeling was actually very common in a relationship, and the way Crush expressed this feeling in this song inspired the author. This concept was similar to the first song “Parallel” in the EP, so the author wanted to use “With You” as a reference to learn the arrangement and the skill of developing emotion line using sorrow vocal melodies.

Another Korean R&B artist that influenced the author was Brown Eyed Soul. It is a soul group of four men who all grown up in church listening gospel and soul music. They had persevered the 90s R&B vibe in their works for twenty years, and they were considered as the most influential R&B group in Korean music history². Their latest album “It’ Soul Right” was a creative album fusing 60s Motown instrumentation with the emotion from Korean traditional music. The author tried to learn and fuse the originality and purity of this soul group into the author’s own tracks. Their latest album gave inspiration to the author for writing melody lines and creating a retro vibe in the last song “Movie Scene” in the author’s EP.

3. Description

For Composition, the author used Sibelius, because it can lay out lead sheet and full score for recording sessions in a great manner. The author used it instead of Finale because Sibelius’s shortcut is faster and more convenient. For arranging and programming, the author chose to use Ableton Live to finish either an instrumental or a demo as a reference for later recording sessions. Ableton always provided the author with more inspirations by its straightforward session view. Furthermore, its warp mode and built-in plugins are powerful for flipping and experimenting with samples. Lastly, for recording and mixing,

² “Brown Eyed Soul (Band),” Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, December 23, 2019), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brown_Eyed_Soul_\(band\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brown_Eyed_Soul_(band)).

the author used Pro Tools to record vocals, guitar, keyboard and other instruments.

Most hardware the author used were for recording purpose. The author did two sessions in AKSS recording vocals and backing vocals for track 1 and track 3. The engineers Yuhao Gao and Gan Xu used Euphonix System 5 Split Console as interface, Brauner VM1 and Neumann M149 for vocals because they bring warmth and crispiness to the artist's vocal. They also used Neve 1073, Neve 517, UA 710 as preamps; Moreover, for compression during tracking, they used Teletronix LA-2A. They compared it with two other compressors including Universal 1176 and Distressor, and found that LA-2A had its unique silkiness that fitted the artist's vocal best. The engineers didn't use hardware equalizers because software EQ can give more control.

The engineer Gan Xu also tracked guitar parts of the second track in Studio B and C. The artist invited Junsoo Ji in CPPD program to collaborate. He used his own PRS guitar and pedals. The engineer actually used two different amps: Fender 65 Deluxe Reverb and Orange Crush 20 RT for different parts. Orange provided more brightness and clean drive while Fender Reverb brought a warm body tone which suited R&B songs. For microphones, Gan Xu used a combination of Neumann U87 and Royer 121 so that he can balance the presence from the first one and warmth from the second. Furthermore, another track was recorded through pure DI box so the engineer can add software amp and other effects to control the overall guitar tone.

After the special COVID-19 situation, the artist Gan Xu recorded the rest of the vocals at home using his own MXL CR89 microphone and TASCAM UH7000 as interface. Because Gan Xu's bedroom was not a great acoustic environment, he put carpets under the mic stand and as well as on the wall so that the sound reflections were reduced. Also, Gan used iZotope RX7 spectral de-noise to learn the background noise profile in the sections that he was not singing. It worked well and cleaned the vocals while not losing much high-frequency content. The reason Gan used iZotope RX7 de-noise instead of

Waves X-Noise is because RX7 used more cutting-edge and latest technology and the quality was distinctly better than the Waves one. Also, RX7 de-noise had more functions and parameters to control the overall quality. After all vocals had recorded, Gan tuned the vocals using Auto-Tune and Melodyne. He used Melodyne first to fix most of the problems and then used Auto-Tune for fixing some small problems that could be done perfectly by using the free drawing mode, which was not included in Melodyne. Lastly, Gan used Pro Tools and Waves and built-in plugins to mix the tracks.

4. Innovative Aspects

In this EP, the artist Gan Xu tried to fuse Korean emotions into his Chinese lyrics. Based on the artist's experience listening to Korean music, he noticed the tone of Korean rhymes were softer than Chinese, and also the melody lines were more dynamic than those he heard from Chinese pop songs³. So, it took the artist a great amount of time to modify rhymes and melodies so that the songs would sound fresh to Chinese audiences while still keeping the main character of Chinese language. As for arrangement, Gan used some drum machine samples and percussions that people usually heard from the 80s records. Though, instead of adding much wobble effects and warmth to make the instruments sound like in 80s, the artist decided to keep their modern flavor while creating an overall retro vibe with the arrangement and his vocal expressions.

5. New Skills Acquired

It was stressing to finish an EP in around three months mostly by the artist himself. As for arranging, the artist pushed himself to achieve the sound that really fitted well with other sounds in the project in such a short time. To achieve that goal, the artist listened to more songs not only from

³ "Korean Language," Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, June 15, 2020), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_language.

streams like Spotify but also from websites that he could purchase samples and stems, like Splice and Tracklib. Then, the artist categorized the stems and payed attention to their functions and frequencies. During weeks of audio editing, the artist layered and fused multiple samples with their own functions, such as rhythm, textures and melody. This new skill of using plenty of samples into the production provided him another way of thinking and making music. Instead of using mostly midi and VST plugins to compose a whole song, tweaking stems and samples was gradually becoming a main fashion and trend in pop music production. So, the artist actually learnt to add more sampling into his production.

Furthermore, as the artist Gan Xu recorded some guitars through different guitar amps with Jungsoo Ji, he noticed a way that could make better stereo guitar sounds in both width and tone. For the first take, they tracked the guitar through DI, Neumann U87 and Royer 121 at the same time through Fender Reverb Amp. After that, they used Orange Amp to re-amp while keeping the same mics with the same distance to the speaker cone. By using the pure DI track, they could make sure that even the subtle performance details maintained the same. As a result, when they panned the two tracks from Fender Amp to the left and the other two tracks from Orange Amp to the right, the overall guitar sound was richer and fuller. What's more, after this experience, Gan Xu learnt and used this skill on other instruments like backing vocals and pads.

6. Challenges, both expected & unanticipated

The biggest challenge for the artist is the coronavirus and quarantine. Due to this condition, Gan need to change one of his songs that recorded half-way. His third song was a pop ballad song based on funky guitar and drums and vocal. The artist only recorded the chorus part of guitar, drums and vocals in AKSS and studio B. During this quarantine, Gan sent midi files and score to the guitarist to record in his home through his own interface, but the result turned out not well. The quality and tone of the guitar just couldn't compete with the previous recording. And sometimes the artist was not satisfied with performance itself. It was time-consuming to find

another guitarist and redo the whole process again, so Gan decided to keep this song in the future and made a new track that could be achieved through programming easily. The artist didn't want to degrade his work because of this exhausting situation and the lack of device, and he can re-record the whole song in a studio with a different band that might turn out to a much better result. In short, it was better for the artist at least to start a new track instead of sticking with one track that he was resistant to continue during some specific circumstances. That was the solution the artist came out to overcome this challenge.

7. Future Ramifications

Because the artist changed his CE project and had only three months to finish the whole EP, he didn't have enough time to think about making a second music video, publishing and marketing. The artist's next step is to contact a Chinese established music publisher or directly sign a contract with Chinese music streaming service, like NetEase or Tencent, which are the two biggest online streaming services in China. Then, he'll also do some promotions through TikTok to increase his fan base.

8. Conclusion

Combining the gentle sadness in the first track "Parallel", the uncertainties of the love in the second track "Feel It", the falling into love in the third track "Diagonal", the sweetness in the fourth track "Love Recipe" and imagination of the future in the last track "Movie Scene", this EP told a complete love story with a happy ending. It was based on the artist's emotion line and love stories during this year in Valencia. As for future plan, the artist will do promotion and try to sign a contract with music publishers to get his EP heard by more people.

9. Appendix

I. Timeline

Table 2. Timeline from Spring Semester

Timeline	Work
February 15 th to March 1 st	Decided how many tracks should be included in this EP and found references and themes for each song.
March 1 st to 15 th	Finished the arranging of one song and recorded the chorus part of that song, including drums, bass, guitar.
March 16 th to 31 th	Went back to China and quarantined at hotel; Changed the third song of the EP and came up with instrumentation that could be done through only programming.
April 1 st to 15 th	Finished half of the arranging of the second and third track; recorded the vocals of two half songs.
April 16 th to 30 th	Edited and tuned the vocals recorded before; Finished the arranging of the fourth track.
May 1 st to 15 th	Finished the rest of arranging part of the second and third track, and recorded the vocals left.
May 16 th to 30 th	Edited and tuned the vocals and did rough mix for the four songs; Decided to add a song did in the first semester as the fifth song.

II. Budget

ITEM	PROPOSED	REAL
MATERIALS (disposables)		
Hard Drives	\$300	\$300
Dropbox (Individual Plan)	\$99	\$99
Memory cards	\$75	\$25
EQUIPMENT		
HARDWARE		
Microphone	\$100	\$0
Canon EOS 700D	\$600	\$0
Laptop	\$2,500	\$0
MIDI Keyboard	\$150	\$150
SOFTWARE		
ABLETON	\$449	\$449
Adobe Creative Cloud	\$19.99/month	\$120
	(6 months = \$120)	
STUDIO		
BERKLEE daily x # of days	\$100	\$0
HOME daily x # of days	\$0	\$0
TOTALS	\$4,473	\$1,143

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