

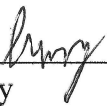
Chasing Authenticity: The Transformative  
Power of Music Production

by Eliza Neiman-Golden

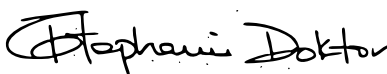
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When I was nineteen, I started to write songs under the name Tiny Tomboy. I had played guitar since I was eight and loved shredding Santana solos (which, looking back, I butchered horribly). However, with the exception of singing “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” in a dive bar when I was a pre-teen and a cringeworthy rap about cheeseburgers for my middle school talent show, I had never really used my voice to make music before. When I started writing songs, I was incredibly insecure about my voice, but soon realized it was easier to sing them myself than to find someone else to do it. Tiny Tomboy was my way to experiment with singing, songwriting, and music production. As I became more passionate, it grew into a band, and now, an album. When I was looking back at the work I have done for this album, I stumbled upon my old demos, some of which I recorded as early as the summer of 2018 when this project first began. Listening back to them gave me a great sense of pride for how much I have improved as a musician and producer. However, I also wondered if the finished versions of these songs were missing some of the scrappy charm of the original demos. Was it just nostalgia, or did the songs lose something when I brought them to the studio?

Demo creation is an important part of my songwriting process. A demo, or a rough recording of a song, is often self-recorded using basic, accessible recording equipment and contains minimal instrumentation. Unsigned artists can send demos to record labels in the hopes of getting signed and recording a full-length album in a studio. Artists—both signed and unsigned—also use demo recordings as references for the studio recording and live arrangement of their songs. When I made this album, I first created a demo version of almost every song I recorded. I sent these recordings to my band so that we could work out a live arrangement together and also used them as building blocks for my studio recordings. Most of the finished versions of the songs on this album retain at least one element from the original demo.

I sometimes find that I prefer the demo of a song to the studio version. Why, when a producer spends hundreds of hours sculpting a song into its ultimate form, would I prefer the version that was thrown together in two minutes? The answer lies partially in the concept of authenticity. In *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music*, Barker and Taylor argue that “the quest for authenticity, for the ‘real,’ has become a dominant factor in musical taste.”<sup>1</sup> We are drawn to music that we perceive as real and honest, and as Dolan argues in ‘... *This little ukulele tells the truth*’: indie pop and kitsch authenticity, low production value makes music appear more authentic. She writes that “the lo-fi sound not only acts as a self-critique, but as a self-justification - it declares through its production that it is unpretentious.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, demo recordings are not trying to be fancy, and they are also not hiding anything.

Take “Garden Song” by Phoebe Bridgers from her sophomore album *Punisher*, for example. The album version of the song is made up of muddy, stuttering, plucked guitars, a soft kick drum, and delicate vocal harmonies.<sup>3</sup> The production is complex but subtle and suits the song well. And then there’s the demo, a voice memo recorded on Bridgers’s phone, the sound of a whirring AC competing with her guitar and voice for attention. The listener feels as though they are sitting in the room with her, listening to a confession. Although the album version is good, the bare, lo-fi quality of the demo gives it a sense of authenticity that the smooth production of the album obscures.

What is the purpose of music production, then, if it can so easily diminish the authenticity or vulnerability of a piece of music? It is important to keep in mind that authenticity is not always an artist’s end goal. If an artist wants to make people dance, the drums and bass have to

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: Norton, 2007), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Dolan, “‘... This Little Ukulele Tells the Truth’: Indie Pop and Kitsch Authenticity,” in *Popular Music* 29, no. 3. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 465. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40926945.465>

<sup>3</sup> Phoebe Bridgers, “Garden Song.” (Dead Oceans, 2020).

be mixed so that they feel intense and driving. Similarly, if an artist makes mainstream pop music, their vocals need to be crisp and present. That said, if an artist wants to create the most emotionally resonant music possible (as is often the goal in indie rock, the genre I would use to categorize my music), good production can bring a song that extra mile. In “I Know the End,” another song from Phoebe Bridgers’s *Punisher*, the production and arrangement of the end of the song make up its emotional core. With blaring trumpets, punchy, saturated drums, and guttural screams, Bridgers makes the listener feel as though they are hearing the apocalypse, an effect that certainly would not have been achieved with Bridgers's soft voice and guitar alone.<sup>4</sup>

There are several different approaches a producer can take to make a song more emotionally impactful. Producer Steve Albini famously liked to spend very little time on production, making the song as true as possible to the live sound of the band.<sup>5</sup> He made many influential 90’s rock albums this way, including Nirvana’s *In Utero*, Pixies’s *Surfer Rosa*, and PJ Harvey’s *Rid of Me*. Many people had qualms with Albini’s production on *Rid of Me*. In Rolling Stone, Rob Sheffield wrote, “I bought *Rid of Me* the day it came out, put the CD on, and wondered what the hell was wrong at first – her voice seemed to be mixed way too low. In ‘Rid of Me,’ the opening song, she’s barely audible for the first two minutes, until it suddenly explodes into top volume.”<sup>6</sup> However, Albini’s production aesthetic is part of what made the album great. The balance of Harvey’s voice in the mix made the listener feel as though they were being swallowed alive by distorted guitar and the album’s extreme dynamics created a unique

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<sup>4</sup> Bridgers, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> David Peisner, “Let It Bleed: The Oral History of PJ Harvey's 'Rid of Me',” SPIN, May 1, 2013, <https://www.spin.com/2013/05/pj-harvey-rid-of-me-oral-history-steve-albini/>.

<sup>6</sup> Rob Sheffield, “PJ Harvey's 'Rid of Me' at 25: Rob Sheffield Pays Tribute,” Rolling Stone (Rolling Stone, June 25, 2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/pj-harveys-rid-of-me-at-25-a-salute-to-her-funniest-nastiest-master-piece-628969/>.

sense of excitement.<sup>7</sup> Without these unconventional production choices, the emotion of Harvey's songs would have been muted.

On the other hand, sometimes a song benefits from big, glossy production. John Congleton's work on Angel Olsen's album *All Mirrors* is just that; the album is flush with intensely beautiful string arrangements, crisp vocals, and kick drums that punch you in the chest. It perfectly underscores the drama of the songs and keeps the listener rapt.<sup>8</sup> A year after releasing *All Mirrors*, Olsen released *Whole New Mess*, which contained most of the same songs but stripped down to just voice and guitar. While her songs were certainly still beautiful, the album was not nearly as impactful. The song "What It Is," which on *All Mirrors* featured pumping drums and swelling strings, fell flat. "Lark," *All Mirrors*'s six-plus minute epic opener, dragged.<sup>9</sup> It was Congleton's complex, layered production that brought the album to life.

When I produce music, I usually try to channel John Congleton's style of production. I tend to enjoy listening to music that is complex and layered, allowing my ears to discover something new with each listen. However, is that style always what best suits my music? When I listened to the demo version of my song "Sunburn," I questioned my approach. I was struck by how emotionally impactful the choruses of the demo were compared to the studio version. In the demo, the choruses consist of rough, double-tracked vocals, bass, spare MIDI drums, a reverby FKA twigs sample, and a sparkling arpeggiated synth. The relatively simple arrangement highlights the moodiness of the sample and the vulnerability of the vocals.

However, in the studio version, the choruses are flush with big, cymbally drums and, in addition to the synth and sample from the demo, at least eight layers of vocal harmonies, bass, two guitars, and a layer of bass that is distorted and pitch-shifted to sound like a guitar. The many

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<sup>7</sup> PJ Harvey, *Rid of Me*. (Island Records, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Angel Olsen, *All Mirrors*. (Jagjaguwar, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Angel Olsen, *Whole New Mess*. (Jagjaguwar, 2020).

layers of instrumentation seem to blend together and the sample and synth that shine in the demo are lost in the mix. The chorus feels powerful and driving, but is that how it should sound? The lyrics of the chorus, “Don’t say it’s over now,” are a sad meditation on all the memories I made before COVID shut the world down. The arrangement of the demo feels truer to that feeling. Why, then, did I go so big on the studio version? Answering this question requires a deeper analysis of my process of creating the song, from the songwriting stage to the final mix.

I got the initial idea for what eventually became “Sunburn” when I heard the FKA Twigs song “Cellophane” in the fall of 2019. I loved the timbre and expression in her voice and was inspired to sample it. I opened a new Ableton project and dragged the song into Simpler, the Ableton sampler that allows you to play a sample like an instrument, assigning different pitches to each note on your keyboard. Simpler also allows you to warp the sample, which means that you can change its pitch without changing its speed. I played the sample without warping it, meaning every note on my keyboard played the sample at a different tempo, the higher the note the faster. I liked how it sounded when I played lower pitches and the sample slowed down. However, I could not get any two notes to play in time with each other, so I bounced the MIDI track to audio and then desperately moved around warp markers to try and conform it to the metronome. The result was a really cool stuttering effect and a markedly offbeat piece of music. Because the music I created did not conform to the Ableton grid, I had a lot of trouble adding parts over it. I added in some kick drums, some clinking sounds (also a sample from the “Cellophane” music video), and recorded a little bit of bass. Then, like most musical ideas I have, I abandoned it.

I only resumed working on the song when, a year and a half later, in Dr. Aharony’s Projects in Digital Music class, we had to analyze “Cellophane” for a homework assignment. I

remembered the project I had started so long ago and decided to revisit it. Listening to the piece with fresh ears, I heard it not as a song itself, but as an intro that would lead into a fast, beat-driven verse. After copy and pasting the offbeat, warped version into the project as an introduction, I created a new section that used the sample in a faster tempo playing different chords. I programmed a beat on a MIDI 707 Drumkit and then recorded a bassline.

The hardest part of writing the song was figuring out the hook. I spent a couple of hours looping the song and singing over it until I finally found a melody I liked. Then, I needed to figure out what the song was about. I thought that the sample sounded like it could be saying “Say it’s over” (it’s really saying “cellophane”) and based the hook off of that line. From that point forward, the piece turned into a song about my pre-COVID memories. I wrote the lyrics and recorded scratch vocals that I double-tracked. Finally, I recorded some arpeggiated synths, sprinkled them throughout the choruses and breakdown section, and the demo was complete. I did not put much effort into programming the drums, mixing the vocals, or even getting a solid take of the bassline because I knew that I was going to re-record everything in the studio anyway. Perhaps that attitude contributed to the demo’s sense of authenticity. I wasn’t presenting a polished version of myself but a rough draft.

I am much more of a perfectionist when I enter the studio. I will keep recording until I get the perfect take, or at least enough takes to stitch something perfect together. I recorded the drums for “Sunburn” first. My band’s drummer, Sam Seymour, came in and played a similar beat to the MIDI drums during the verses and a more energetic part during the choruses. Ironically, the section of “Sunburn” that in the finished version is just vocals and drums was a fluke. Sam, having only heard the demo a few times before he stepped into the studio, accidentally played the wrong part during what was supposed to be a chorus, realized his mistake, and turned it into a

breakdown section, stopping for dramatic effect and coming back in with the correct chorus part the second time around. At the time, I did not like what he had done and asked him to play the “correct” part for the rest of the takes. However, after I got home and was editing the drums, I realized that his mistake helped the song feel more dynamic. It let the song breathe and then created a big burst of energy when the rest of the instruments came back in. Bringing in another musician, an important part of the studio recording process, transformed the song from the narrow version I had in my mind to something bigger and livelier.

Mixing the drums, on the other hand, was a nightmare. I was searching for a drum sound similar to the MIDI drums I initially had in place. I liked the fat, dampened sound of the 707 snare, but I wanted the excitement of a human drummer. Unfortunately, I recorded an incredibly snare and tom-heavy song with a horrible-sounding snare and floor tom. No matter how much processing I put them through, the result was always disappointing. I couldn’t achieve the crisp, punchy drum sound I had in my head and, in the end, had to overlay an artificial snare sample in order to even get close to the drum sound I wanted. Why even record live drums if I couldn’t get them to sound as good as a sample? The variety and “humanness” that a real drummer adds to a song is very hard to replicate with samples. The breakdown section of the song would have never even existed without Sam’s drumming. In retrospect, I could have solved my problem by swapping out the snare drum and floor tom for better quality drums as I did on subsequent songs.

The process of recording and mixing the bass for “Sunburn” was much easier. I sent the song with Sam’s drums to my band’s bass player at the time, Christian Olsen, who played essentially the bass part I had written but added in some cool fills (perks of bringing in talented musicians). When I was mixing the bass, I wanted a really present and driving bass tone because the verses were very minimal and relied on the bass for their momentum. Fortunately, the bass



Christian sent me already had a great tone and I did not have to do much to it in order to achieve the sound I wanted. I duplicated the bass track and created two separate layers; one which was responsible for the low bass frequencies and another which was more saturated and focused on the higher frequencies, giving the bass more presence in the mix. Later on, I decided the song needed even more drive so I duplicated the bass again and pitch-shifted it up an octave. I then ran it through two different distortions, adding a phaser to one of the tracks and chorus to the other. These tracks acted as overdriven guitars which I used to bring out the bassline in the second verse and to give the chorus more drive. The bass sound I sculpted ended up being an integral part of “Sunburn,” giving the verses more character than the plain bass in the demo afforded them.

The next piece I tackled was vocals. I decided to record three main vocal layers instead of two in order to create a stronger, thicker vocal sound. I panned them slightly left, slightly right, and center, and processed each layer differently to create more dimension. One layer had a little bit of distortion on it, one had some slapback delay, and all of them had a little bit of tape echo. I also added in a fourth track where I sang playful repetitions of certain lyrics. I used EQ (equalization) to cut the low frequencies and processed them with delay so that the repetitions would sit in the background. The vocals in the chorus are supported by four-part harmonies, which, even after taking Tonal Harmony the block before, I used absolutely none of my music theory knowledge to write. I recorded each harmony based on what sounded best to my ear and processed them with some basic EQ, compression, and reverb. Why record so many harmonies and vocal layers if the demo vocals were so expressive? Part of the answer lies in my insecurity about my own singing. If I hide my voice behind a wall of harmonies, it is harder to hear the imperfections. However, in some of my other songs—“Pentagram Tattoo,” for example—the

harmonies accentuate the expressiveness of my voice rather than hide it, so to say I was simply trying to hide my voice is unfair. I like the atmosphere and texture that the harmonies give the song, and now I can't hear the song without that last repetition of "Say it's over" at the end of every chorus.

The last instrument I recorded was guitar. I recorded three guitar parts for this song, an unusually low number for me (I was struggling with a wrist injury at the time). For the first guitar, I dialed in a modulated delay sound with my pedals and played a minimal part to contrast with the vocal melody during the verses. During the choruses, I doubled the vocal melody. For the second guitar, I used a clean tone. I played a part during the second verse that contrasted with the first guitar and a more rhythmic part during the choruses. I processed these guitars very simply, using EQ to boost the high frequencies and make them sound brighter, and panning them so that they traveled from side to side, giving them a sense of movement.

The third and final guitar part in the song is the fuzzy guitar solo during the bridge. That section did not contain any guitar in the demo and originally I was not planning on adding any, but I was really into the Monosynth setting on my Zoom MS-50G pedal at the time and was curious to see what I could do with it. Although the raw sound of the guitar was already inspiring, I processed it heavily to make it sound even more intense. I used several different types of saturation and also duplicated the guitar and pitch-shifted it up an octave to really emphasize the high end and give it more presence. I then panned the octave and the original guitar to different sides to give it more dimension. I put more distortion on the group and added a subtle tremolo. Even after all that, I still felt like it wasn't big enough. I duplicated both the original and pitch-shifted tracks and put a different distortion on them that made them sound grainier. I then blended these four layers together. What resulted was a somewhat unhinged,

jagged guitar solo that sounded more like a synth than a guitar, and instantly transformed that section of the song.

It is also worth talking about the way I mixed the synths and the FKA Twigs sample, although not much changed between the demo and the studio version. I processed the sample with several different delays and reverbs to make it sound atmospheric. I used EQ to take out a lot of the low end and emphasize the highs, helping it sit well in the mix. The song also contains two synths, one which comes in during the choruses and another that first enters during the guitar solo. Software instruments like these synths can sound robotic because they do not have the subtle changes in tone and texture of acoustic instruments. I used multiple types of automation to make them sound more alive. I designed the chorus synth using a plugin called Serum and recorded it using an arpeggiator. I then automated a filter to bring in more high-end as the chorus progressed. The automation of the filter made the performance more dynamic, the synth growing brighter throughout the chorus. The solo synth was an Ableton preset that I modified slightly. I also recorded it using an arpeggiator and used a lot of volume automation to play with its volume throughout the song. I also automated a vibrato so that on certain notes the synth would waver in pitch and feel unstable.

Even after I recorded and mixed all of the instruments, I was left with a few problems to solve. One of the problems I ran into was in the last chorus where the drums play a halftime beat. When the drums went into halftime but nothing else in the mix changed, it felt underwhelming. I needed to make this section hit harder. I added a sample of a ride cymbal and then reversed it to add a little extra chaos in the high end of the mix. I also put a tremolo on the vocals to make them feel bouncy and like they were disintegrating. The key to getting this section to hit,

however, was in the bass. I put another, more intense distortion on the bass so that it would feel explosive and take up more space in the mix. Suddenly, the section came to life.

There are many ways in which the finished version of “Sunburn” surpasses the demo. First, the live drums (as opposed to the robotic MIDI drums of the demo) add excitement and punchiness. The natural variations in volume and hits that are not quite on beat make the song sound more human. The guitars are a nice counterpoint to the melody during the verses and the pitch-shifted bass adds a grainy, driving texture to the second verse. The jagged, fuzzed-out guitar solo catches the ear and upends the listener’s expectations, and the vocal processing adds dimension to the mix. Finally, although the vocal harmonies are dense, the layers interact with one another in an interesting and beautiful way.

The fully-produced version of “Sunburn” is, without a doubt, a higher fidelity recording than the demo. The instruments all sound more like how they are “supposed” to sound. The bass is deep and crunchy, the vocals loud and present. However, after all the work that I put into it, did I make it better? The studio version is certainly more danceable, more dynamic, and to my ear, more sonically interesting. However, the demo feels much sadder and perhaps truer to the emotions that the lyrics express. The imperfections in my voice and unbalanced mix make it sound more honest. But is authenticity what matters most? Is it not equally as important to create a track that makes you want to move? This is where, as the artist, I need to take a step back. Given my affinity for demos, I do plan to release my demo album into the world at some point. Then it will be up to the listeners to decide what resonates with them. With the exception of one lyric about sardines, it is the same song, after all.

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