Danny L Harle on making pop music



May 5, 2017 - Danny L Harle is a music producer from London. He is part of the label PC Music. He also writes and produces with pop artists. *RuPaul's Drag Race* season 8 finalist Naomi Smalls has a lip sync routine to his Tinashe remix.

As told to Hannah Street Elliott, 1387 words.

Tags: Music, Culture, Process, Collaboration, Identity, Inspiration.

How do you approach making "real pop" with people like Carly Rae Jepsen and Charli XCX versus making things for yourself or with your usual PC Music crew?

Pop isn't a genre. It's just whatever's popular, and then there are genres that are exasperated by the fact that they are popular. If something sounds like pop music it's the sound of a genre being exasperated. It happens to all sorts of electronic genres.

The reason I'm interested in pop is because it's so extreme… It pushes the immediacy of a genre of music to its most extreme levels. I'm interested in extreme simplicity and extreme complexity and extremely loud and immediate things. That's often exemplified by pop music. You find that in dance pop music as well.

I'm interested in dance pop because I'm interested in why people don't consider it to be the same as normal pop music. It makes sense in a club environment that dance music's a whole different, functional thing. But why do people consider it so radically different from a pop song?

Dance music forces you to come up with basically four words for your verse and three words for your chorus. I like that forced simplification.

Do you feel like you've changed as a producer over time? Or become more conscious of your output and how it's going to be perceived?

I still have no control over my output. All that's happened is that I've talked to a bunch of A&Rs now and they've given me these ideas about presentation of music, which I don't think are necessarily very good.

It feels like I'm doing exactly the same thing that I've always been doing. It's been proven time and time again that there's very little I can do to change that. The way in which music is received has always been about the way in which it's presented. Before PC Music, Alex [Cook] and I were interested in showing people a lot of the same tracks. And without the context of PC Music, people didn't know where to put it. They didn't have a compartment for it. That's not really something that I was that aware of at the time. Since then, it's become more apparent, that the compartmentalization of cultural commodities is as important as the things themselves, if not more important.

Do you work differently depending on who you are in the studio with, like a session with Caroline Polachek versus Carly Rae Jepsen?

To me, it's exactly the same process. I can hear each of their voices independently, and I can basically write a song comfortably for either of them at any point, because I can imagine exactly where their voice is.

When I'm writing with Caroline, I think she would agree that I am very heavily involved in the vocal melody. I'm very interested in these runs that she does and the very unique click sound that her voice produces. She's equally as involved in the production side of things. I consider it completely collaborative. She very much does the lyrics, though.

With Carly, the process is slightly different in that respect. It's more like I can hear her sounding good on a track so easily. I can hear the tone that would be correct. There are very few voices that I can hear resonating in my head and they both have them.

Working with different people on their projects, doing remixes and working on your own solo work… it's a lot to balance. How do you work efficiently?

It's an eternal problem, really, isn't it? The dream is the Burt Bacharach set up where he just goes into the studio at nine and by five, he's written a song. Just a song a day. But if your emotions are involved, there's no way of organizing it, really. I talked to Sam Rolfes about this as well, who directed my "Ashes of Love" video. He's interested in always being on a deadline, otherwise he's basically uninspired. It's interesting trying to second guess one's pressurized work ethic and trying to control it, because then you're sort of double bluffing with yourself.

How do you keep from burning out?

I like to watch YouTube longplays of people playing video games. I do that a lot. Turns out lots of producers do that. I usually have longplays running while I'm producing. I watch a lot of Nintendo 64 games or SNES games, but I quite like ambient games like *Shenmue*, like a Dreamcast, open world game and usually with no one commentating on it. It becomes an atmosphere. I like playing video games as well.

I can't take a break if I'm musically frustrated about something, it doesn't really work. Also the second I think I'm taking a break, I get an idea. I do sometimes put my computer in another city. Or in another building. Lock the building up. To get away. I go on holiday without my computer sometimes. That's a challenge. It's good for me I think. Often what happens when I do that is sleep for about 20 hours in a row… Just relieved from that subconscious pressure of the computer.

Do you get pleasure out of being busy all the time?

I like the way my dad is, which is that he just gets occasional classy gigs and the rest of the time he's just chilling out. Although my dad does work incredibly hard. That's the weird duality of it. I like the idea of being at an age where you have a greater span of time. No, what the fuck am I talking about? I really like having lots to do. [*laughs*]

Have you always been someone who likes to ask people for advice on early versions of your work or do you prefer presenting something when it's completely done?

I'm not a finished product kind of guy. But I've always had a very specific idea of what I like, and I've learned to take advice with a grain of salt. Ever since anything started going well for me, I started to realize that most people's advice actually has an agenda behind it. Very, very few people's advice doesn't. Even down to just talking about what a song should sound like or what sounds good.

It took me doing my entire music education to realize that music is about the end product, *the actual sound*. It should all sound really good. The way in which it's performed is largely uninteresting just as long as the music *sounds* amazing. That alone should be ruthlessly pursued. It takes so long to understand that in its simplest sense. Everything in a composition master's degree will make you think otherwise.

Like with me, I really like these sequences that you hear in baroque music, suspensions. I just spent a long time notating it, finding out how it works and exactly what I like in it. Now I use that all the time in my music, in chord sequences. There's so many other things in my music that I've got from here or there. That is what creates the tapestry of it.

What I realized is that you've got to like things personally. This isn't just generic advice—I listened to the music that I liked, figured out exactly how that was made, worked out how to do it and then did it for myself. If you're interested in fugues, certain kind of plug-ins, how to make something loud or how side chaining works… if you want to make a certain sound because you *really like* the sound of it, just go and find out how to do exactly that. Then you'll realize that you've accumulated a specific group of skills that is unique to

you, because it’s based on what *you* like and not what you’ve been told is the pinnacle of this or that type of music.

5 PILLARS OF EUPHORIC MELANCHOLY by Danny L Harle:

“Why Ask You”

“I See Right Through to You”

“Castles In The Sky”

“Taking Drugs?”

Bach Passacaglia in C Minor

Name
Danny L Harle

Vocation
Musician, Producer

Fact

Danny L Harle is a music producer from London. He is part of the label PC Music. He also writes and produces with pop artists. *RuPaul’s Drag Race* season 8 finalist Naomi Smalls has a lip sync routine to his Tinashe remix.

