Clothes Maketh the Muso

Feel like your production techniques are dating your recordings? James Roche urges you to give your music a new suit of clothes.

Next time you’re in a shopping mall, take a look at the clothes different people are wearing. Are they fashionable? Maybe they’re generic, maybe unique, or perhaps just plain daggy. When you stop to really look at the huge variety of styles that people choose to present themselves in, you wonder how we can all be in disagreement about what makes a ‘good’ choice of clothing. Does one person know better than the next what constitutes a superior outfit? Do we all just wear what makes us feel comfortable? Why am I talking about all this in an audio magazine? Bear with me – the choices you make in your clothing probably have a lot to say about your creativity.

Teenagers always seem to be buying the latest fashions to hit the shops, and older generations usually think they look kind of weird. Middle-aged folks tend to wear clothes that help them blend in – being polite without shouting, “Look at me!” Retired couples mostly wear stuff from a bygone era – felt hats and shirts tucked into trousers with no belt, frocks with matching bonnets and white handkerchiefs.

Stop to think about it. Why?

When people make the awkward transition from child to adult, they learn a lot about the world in a short amount of time. Many of those things have to do with being accepted, fitting in, being liked. We often operate for the rest of our lives under these rules we create for ourselves in our early 20s. No wonder the retirement-home generation wears felt hats and frocks. It’s clothing from the 1940s and ’50s that they know works. They’ve stuck to it all their lives, with only minor adjustments down through the decades. Are you still making music using the rules you learned long ago?

What about the middle-aged people, the ones blending in and staying safe? Maybe they do this to avoid rejection, being branded odd, unpopular. Are you blending in and staying safe with your music? Are you attempting to avoid rejection?

Youth are always reinventing something – breaking down the old and constructing something new from the wreckage. A lot of youth fashion is about deliberately violating known and accepted rules – and doing it in order to achieve a creative result. How many rules did you break making music today?

Different generations operate under different paradigms. They use diverse models for what works. So too do musicians, and most of the time it’s an unconscious and unrecognised procedure. I’m challenging you to think about from what paradigm you make your music.

It’s a constant challenge for producers, mixing engineers, songwriters and artists to have an edge. Having an ‘edge’ is an almost universal goal. Somehow we all feel drawn to particular artists or art, products, advertising, unique characters or personalities if they have this mysterious ‘edge.’ Why? Well, it’s just, well… edgy. There’s a spark there, braveness, a quirk, uniqueness. There is, I would put it to you, evidence of the ‘youth paradigm’.

Let’s look at the opposite, and a little closer to home. How many times has a friend or a client played you some demos, and you’ve thought to yourself, “It sounds dated”, or “Generic and boring”? I bet you’ve felt that way a lot of times. Most stuff I hear isn’t bad per se; but it’s a failure nonetheless because it isn’t coming from the youth paradigm. Staying safe and generic, or operating under rules you learnt years ago, does not serve you. It makes you create boring, dated stuff, which although it may be nice quality, ultimately isn’t going to set the world on fire.

Everybody needs to be able to throw out the rules they know and start again. As a producer and programmer, I have to be able to stop using a technique that was really ace a couple of years back, because it now sounds like a couple of years back. It seems obvious doesn’t it? You’ll sound dated if you use a dated model for creating music. And you’ll sound generic and too safe if you borrow other people’s models for making your own music.

It’s tough to do – really tough. It’s like starting with a blank sheet of paper. If you throw out everything you know about how to make a song work, beginning again is a huge challenge. But you can do it. You are on a journey to a destination yet unknown, and the only way you’re going to get there is to start walking. If you pick up your foot for the first step and don’t know where to put it down, just be brave and get on with it. It’s a lot easier to correct your course once you’re moving than if you’re stationary.

Let me give you some practical examples.

Programmers:

If you always use a synth pad to make a nice blendy sound, don’t.
If you always put tambourine in the chorus to give it a lift, don’t.
If you never use that funny weird synth plug-in, do.
If you always have clean sounding drums, roughen them up.
If you never have guitar, or trombone, or kazoo, get them on your
next track.
If your tracks are always busy, ask yourself “How little can I put in this track?”
If you enjoy your reverbs, then switch them off and find another way.

Producers:
If you often work with a particular engineer or studio, go someplace else for a change.
If you always map out the track on piano first, and work to a click, get a band in and record them all at once.
If you leave the mixes until last, when everyone has gone home, do them throughout the schedule and include the artist in the process.
If you’re a guitars/bass/drums kind of guy, hire some world musicians for the next cut.
If you’ve never done a country record, or a classical record, or a dance record, get amongst it. It will broaden the mind, and you’ll feel the thrill of creativity again.

Songwriters:
If you always have four lines in the verse, and two verses before the chorus, tell yourself you aren’t allowed to.
If you start and finish the chorus with the title of the song, find a different way to make a hook.
If you always have a chorus, try making a song with only a repeating verse.
If you always write your songs in 4/4, write in 12/8 or 3/4 or 7/4.
If you always write alone, get company. If you never write alone, go to the beach and finish a song solo.
If you always write for your own gender, write for the opposite sex. (You’ll be amazed at this one.)

Artists:
If you always do one particular thing, such as angry rock, or dance, or forlorn ballads, try a new emotion to perform from.
If you only make music in your studio and never on stage, get up in front of people to explore your other possibilities.
If you always work solo, or only in a band, take working the other way for a test drive. You’ll find things in yourself you weren’t aware of.
If you’ve always ruled something out, get outside your comfort zone. Preconceptions are just self-imposed limits.
If you think you look too ugly/unusual/normal/young/old/fat, change what doesn’t serve you, and forget the rest.

There’s a saying that goes: “If you keep doing what you’ve always been doing, you’ll keep getting what you’ve always gotten.” You might think that’s a licence to ignore everything I’ve just said and never change. But you’d be missing the point. What you were doing when you first became satisfied or successful in your field was innovating. It is innovation you must keep striving for in your work, rather than making the music of your former self.
And leave your felt hat on the rear shelf of the car. It’s the best place for it.