

I SWEAR I HEARD THIS...

Craig Hamilton

... in my head first. I remember exactly where I was, and what I was doing. I was in the kitchen, washing up. I like washing up. It's a process with a start and an end, and there is a sense of achievement provided by the evidence of your efforts. Clean plates where recently there was a mess and chaos. Like ordering your thoughts, and creating a clear argument that is convincing to others. Or writing something.

Process is important, as is a sense of achievement. But I'll get back to that.

I was washing up, and my mind was clear. Focused on the task, but not really. I was in what they call flow. And then, out of nowhere, there it was. A fragment.

It is hard to describe the fragment. It was part melody, part words, all raw material. An idea. I knew this feeling. It had happened before. It was the kernel of ... something, and I liked it sufficiently to pursue it. So I let my mind wander with it, to see where it would take me. This is where the process begins, and the promise of a sense of achievement. It's also where the trouble usually starts. Trouble that takes more than one form, but I'll get back to that.

There, then, in the kitchen, elbow deep in warm water and slowly processed dishes, the fragment of raw material that might be an idea, popped into my mind. I know this feeling. It has happened before. I know that you have to act on these things, if you want to turn them into songs and a sense of achievement. And you have to act fast and decisively.

What happens if you do not act immediately? The fragment floats away, like a soap bubble, and then it pops and then it's gone forever. You can wrack your brains for days afterwards, but you'll never get it back. Like a dream you wake up from but can't quite remember. Someone once said, about ideas like this, that you have to claim them, otherwise they float off in the ether and Paul Simon gets them.

This one was mine, and Paul Simon has enough, so I needed to grab it.

I pulled out my phone, and opened the voice notes app, and sang the fragment of an idea that might be a song and a sense of achievement, and I caught it in the device like an errant spook in a Ghostbusters trap, mainly to remember, but also to ensure that Paul Simon would miss out on this one.

The act of doing this is crucial. Not only to capture the fragment of the raw material that might be an idea that might be a sense of achievement that doesn't belong to Paul Simon, but also because it kickstarts a process. The song now exists, but it is not complete. You wouldn't start the washing up and then stop; you'd be left with some clean, and some dirty dishes. The process

would not complete, and that would lead to all sorts of trouble, not least a missed opportunity to feel a sense of achievement.

What happens next? You run with the fragment, and turn it into a verse. You discover there is something like a broader lyrical idea contained within the fragment. Or, rather, the fragment leads you to an idea. The fragment becomes two lines, and then a verse. And then another verse, with a similar rhythm and vocal. A melodic pattern follows. Then a switch up that might be a bridge, might be a chorus, might be a dead end. But it starts to take shape.

Sometimes the water in the sink is still warm when all the parts are found. More often than not, there are days and sometimes weeks of washing up before the final piece of the jigsaw falls into place. The fragment of an idea that floated in on a washing up bubble is now a song that doesn't belong to Paul Simon, and then the trouble really starts.

The song exists, and it may well find its way into a notebook or a document, or a fuller version played into the same voice notes app. But it's not complete. There is no sense of achievement. There is a long way to go, and the sense of achievement is delayed, removed, and dangled like a carrot. There is work to do.

A basic template is created in Logic. A rudimentary rhythm, a structure, basic chords, a guide vocal. This is all part of the process, and - if you're lucky - the song improves. Harmonies and melodies begin to emerge. It's bounced into a file and sent to the others.

Parts come back (but sometimes they don't) and are slotted into place. The scaffold of the template is removed, leaving only the 'proper' musicians. We're a long way from the washing up bowl, but not much nearer to a sense of achievement. There is more trouble, and more work, to come.

Mixes fly back and forth, harmonies and percussion are added and removed. You start to get sick of it, because how many times can you listen to a 3 minute pop song in a short space of time without that happening? I bet this even happens to Paul Simon, with his melodies and ideas that arrive on the breeze. So, you step away for a while, losing focus. But then it starts to gnaw at your mind, like unfinished washing up, so you drag yourself and the rest back to the process and cajole with the promise of a sense of achievement.

Eventually, it's done. And then two things happen.

First, the finished song makes its way to others. Others who have not been at the coalface. One of those people will likely say, "That sounds a bit like..."

...because it will, because they all do, in one form or another. It's a mathematical and cultural inevitability, with our limited number of chords and our 3-minute structures. But that's ok.

And then you will tell them, and yourself, "I swear I heard this in my head first", but you will have to admit they are right. You *did* hear it in your head, but you heard it on the radio first, in some faraway, long-lost kitchen of another house, with another pile of washing up in front of you. The essence of the song, or a fragment of its melody, lodged in the brain and lay dormant for a

while...but then awoke, here, today, and forced you into action that consumed you for hours, days, weeks, months, and maybe even years.

The second thing that happens is...there is no sense of achievement.

You knew there wouldn't be, because you've been here before. This is not because you have created something that already exists. You can make peace with this.

No, the reason there is no sense of achievement is because the result - whatever that may be - is not the goal; the achievement is finding joy in the process.

Learning; listening; reading; writing; washing up.....the act of doing these things is the reward. Everything else is details.

The only thing to do now is to go back to the washing up bowl to try to achieve the serenity of Fairly Liquid flow, and to will into existence the conditions that allow you to intercept another delivery on its way to Paul Simon.

If you're lucky, and that happens, you'll have a need to start the process again.

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