

Audiovisual Music Production: Influence of the Natural World on Process and Works

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of work in progress on a practice-research project that involves the creation of a series of audiovisual musical pieces in which both the creative process and the works themselves draw inspiration from deep engagement with the natural world. The project aims and methods are presented, followed by a summary of the ongoing field review to situate the work. Six audiovisual compositions (accessible as a video playlist at the link below) are presented as works in progress and briefly discussed. Emergent findings are summarised as a set of principles that describe the music production approach and a set of research questions that will guide future work. The project speaks to a number of areas including the relationship of art to nature, the role of the contemporary music producer, audiovisual composition, liveness, aesthetics, sustainability and well-being.

Video playlist of creative works in progress: <u>https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLEf T-- c4UptppBielAE9xP2m5tJKKdJ</u>

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Contents

1. Introduction4		
1.1	Audiovisual Music Production Inspired by the Natural World	4
1.2	Overview of this Paper	4
2. Proj	ect Aims	5
3. Met	hod	6
3.1	Methodology	6
3.2	Audiovisual Music Production	6
3.3	Inspiration from the Natural World	6
3.4	Tools and Techniques	6
3.5	Sources	6
3.6	Collaboration	7
3.7	Lens	7
4. Field	d Review	8
4.1	Written Sources and other Media	8
4.2	Music and Audiovisual Work	8
5. Current Works		
5.1	No Time No Place Only Motion	9
5.2	Loops & Waves (Working Title)	10
5.3	Push Experiment (Working Title)	12
5.4	Euclid (Working Title)	13
5.5	Fingerpicking (Working Title)	14
5.6	Shield	15
6. Emergent Findings1		17
6.1	Audiovisual Music Production Approach	17
6.2	Research Questions	18
7. Con	clusion	19
8. Refe	erences	20
9. App	endices	22
9.1	Initial Collaboration Document	22
9.2	Lyrics: No Time No Place Only Motion	25
9.3	Lyrics: Loops & Waves (Working title)	26
9.4	Lyrics: Shield	27
9.5	Track Credits	28

1. Introduction

1.1 Audiovisual Music Production Inspired by the Natural World

The overall approach to music-making in this project is guided by the evolving role of the music producer (Moorefield 2010, Brett 2021), incorporation of audiovisual composition techniques (Harris 2021) and the influence of the natural world on both material and process (Ulvaeus and Rothenberg 2009). The approach speaks to themes around collaboration (Wilsmore 2022), liveness (Auslander 2022), mental health (Rubin 2023) and student engagement (Nerantzi 2019).

The approach emerged from working practices and themes identified in a practice-research PhD (Waite 2018) and album (National Trevor 2021) - and continues with a view to producing an album, music videos, audiovisual performances and associated written material over the next 24 months.

1.2 Overview of this Paper

This paper presents work in progress since 2019 in terms of

- Project aims
- Research methods
- Research questions
- Field review
- Current audiovisual works
- Emergent findings
- Conclusion

Accompanying audiovisual works in progress can be found here: <u>https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLEf T-- c4UptppBielAE9xP2m5tJKKdJ</u>

2. Project Aims

The project aims include:

- To establish an evolving set of principles guiding the author's current creative practice in terms of audiovisual music production.
- To develop and use this approach in the creation of a body of work at the intersection of popular and experimental music.
- To release the album on sustainable vinyl as well as digital single, album and video releases.
- To perform material created through in a variety of modes and settings such as acoustic performances, audiovisual sets, full band shows and work in progress performances.
- To engage students through modelling creative practice and the generation of teaching content and materials.

3. Method

3.1 Methodology

This project is an example of practice-research (Nelson 2013), involving repeated cycles of establishing research questions, field review, practice, reflection and writing, where the practice is an essential aspect of the process (Waite 2018). Insights will be generated through examination of individual works and the body of work as a whole.

The approach to music production will be presented as an evolving set of principles rather than a fixed philosophy or manifesto (Auslander 2022).

3.2 Audiovisual Music Production

The creative works produced through the project will be audiovisual in nature, in that there is an essential visual aspect to the composition process (Harris 2021). While the music will be released in audio-only formats, this will be accompanied by artwork, music videos and live performance visuals.

3.3 Inspiration from the Natural World

The music, lyrics and visual material produced will incorporate inspiration drawn from the natural world. In addition, so will the processes by which these are created (Ulvaeus and Rothenberg 2009). These processes will involve collaboration, incorporation of new technologies and immersion in nature.

3.4 Tools and Techniques

The work will be realised through the use of field and studio recordings; acoustic, electronic and virtual musical instruments; digital audio workstations (DAWs) such as Ableton Live¹ and audiovisual coding environments such as Max² and Touch Designer³.

3.5 Sources

In keeping with the project, the field review that situates the work will be drawn from academic and popular texts, newspapers and magazines, social and broadcast media as well as music and artworks from multiple disciplines and genres.

¹ See www.ableton.com

² See www.cycling74.com

³ See derivative.ca

3.6 Collaboration

Collaborations were set up by electronically sharing initial works in progress and a brief document containing commentary on each. Colleagues in the Music department at Falmouth University were invited to contribute (see Appendix 5.1). Studio sessions were then set up with those that were interested.

The recording sessions were deliberately designed to place the musicians at the edge of their comfort zone by not having listened extensively to the track beforehand and pushing them to the edge of their ability. This way of working is a search to create more visceral performances through being in a challenging yet highly rewarding state as detailed in *Feral* (Monbiot 2013). There was also no instruction as to what was 'correct'. In recognition of what could be a vulnerable situation, the author went to great lengths to create and maintain a professional, supportive, mutually-beneficial and enjoyable session. The priority for these of the sessions was to create an abundance of expressive material, with the onus being on the author to edit and composite multiple takes to construct coherent, complete performances. Collaborators were also invited to contribute to arranging, editing and mixing decisions.

3.7 Lens

The lens of the researcher is that of a white, male, middle-aged, middle-class 'DIY' music producer (Chilton 2022) and senior academic, creating (mostly) song-based music at the intersection of the popular and the experimental. Working in the music department of a UK university and living in Cornwall brings the privileges of access to other creatives, academics, technical facilities and outdoor, natural spaces. It is recognised that these factors introduce biases and limit the scope and applicability of this work.

4. Field Review

4.1 Written Sources and other Media

The field review will draw on material covering the relationship between music and nature such as Ulvaeus and Rothenberg's (2009) *The Book of Music and Nature* and Eli Maor's (2018) *Music by the Numbers*. The creative process and role of the contemporary music producer will be explored with reference to *The Producer as Composer: Shaping the Sounds of Popular Music* (Moorefield 2010), *The Creative Electronic Music Producer* (Brett 2021), *Coproduction: Collaboration in Music Production* (Wilsmore 2022) and *The Creative Act: A Way of Being* (Rubin 2023). Audiovisual strategies will be discussed with reference to sources such as Harris' (2021) *Composing Audiovisually: Perspectives on Audiovisual Practices and Relationships* and Toussaint's (2013) *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm*. These discussions will also be informed by interviews with artists on broadcast and digital media, for example Kahil El'Zabar (Peterson 2022) and Ryoji Ikeda (180 Fact 2021).

4.2 Music and Audiovisual Work

The field review will also include discussion of artistic works. Björk's (2011) album *Biophilia*, is an album of songs inspired by the natural world. Similarly, Hannah Peel's (2021) *Fir Wave* is an album of electronic music conveying a sense of natural forces at work (Rogers 2021). Artists on the Mesh label explore the intersection between music, art and science (Mesh 2023). For example, Max Cooper's *Yearning for the Infinite* (2020) is a collaborative, multigenre, audiovisual performance inspired by the concept of infinity. Ryoji Ikeda's 2021 exhibition combined several of his audiovisual works that also explore the links between art and science (Roberts-Komreddi 2021). The evocation of landscape, presence of natural timbres and use of symmetry in folk songs such as Nick Drake's *Five Leaves Left* (1969) and Gordon Lightfoot's *Don Quixote* (1972) will be discussed, as will the contributions of producers such as Brian Eno in terms of sonic world-building (Nast 2009).

A playlist of music that have informed the project can be found here: <u>https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4L7ImdDjLI1D4HRm5koKKj?si=4b772bd5ebcf48c0</u>

5. Current Works

5.1 No Time No Place Only Motion

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9w6KXCdMCKw

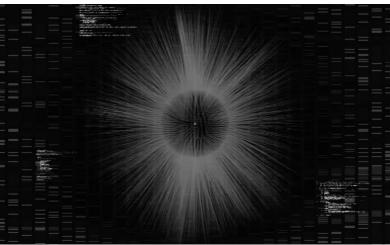


Figure 1: Visuals comprising an animated black hole and representations of data

This piece arose from experimentation with techniques for timbral manipulation of a synthesiser in Max for Live (Cycling74 2022), together with exploration of J Dilla-style off-grid drum patterns (Charnas 2022). Guitar and bass parts were added and the piece extended to create verse and chorus sections.

The piece was further expanded through studio sessions with a guitarist (Sam Murray) who was instructed to improvise over the track in a variety of styles, and a drummer (Robin Tyndale-Biscoe) who improvised over the track guided by breakbeat examples.



Figure 2: Guitar recording for No Time No Space Only Motion

Following the studio sessions, the recordings were edited into a set of pseudo-performances and incorporated into the track. Both the guitar and drum recordings had a significant impact on the direction of the track, informing its structure, dynamics and genre.



Figure 3: Drum recording for No Time No Space Only Motion

Inspired by Quantum/Einsteinian physics (Cox & Forshaw 2010) and a documentary on black holes (BBC 2021), lyrics were written (see Appendix 9.2) and sung by the author. To fit with the track, the verses were delivered in a style that had not been attempted before – intentionally placing the author in a vulnerable situation. To deal with the uncertainty as to whether this new style was appropriate, feedback was sought from another musician (Johny Lamb).

In keeping with the lyrical theme, visuals (see fig.1) were created from combining techniques from Touch Designer tutorials (The Interactive & Immersive HQ 2022, bileam tschepe 2020) with visualisations of data (Ikeda 2008) and black holes. Visual parameters are then controlled by the music through real-time MIDI mappings.

Further development of this piece will include extending and refining visuals elements and mappings and final mixing/mastering. There is also the question of how to present the piece live, which could mean a full band setup or reworking the piece in a more electronic style for a reduced line up.

5.2 Loops & Waves (Working Title) Link: <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnO9dkM7ABU</u>

This piece was inspired by observing overlapping wave patterns on a Cornish beach, and the traces left behind in the sand (see fig. 5). This led to the metaphor of layering guitar loops of different lengths that were generated from experimentation with a looping sections of a guitar melody on a Boss DD-6 delay pedal.

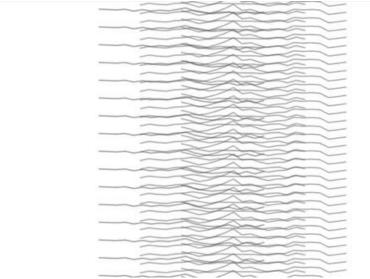


Figure 4: Spaces between lines represent lengths of different loops. Lines are animated by the percussion



Figure 5: Interference and ripple patterns at Crantock beach, Cornwall



Figure 6: Generating guitar loops with a Boss DD-6

The piece was further developed by continued exploration of the metaphor, both through direct observations at beaches in Cornwall and through secondary research that included documentaries such as BBC Scotland's (2011) *The Secret Life of Waves* and popular music

such as U2's (2015) *Every Breaking Wave*. This development included creating two contrasting sections, lyrics (see Appendix 9.3) and visuals partially inspired by the artwork for Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures* (see fig.4). The 'verse' sections of the piece evoke shallow waves washing across a beach (as in fig. 5), whereas the 'chorus' sections reflect deeper waves at the point of breaking. The form of the lyrics make use of diacope to suggest the combination of repetition and variation.

Further development of the piece will include more work on the visuals, recording vocals, mixing and mastering.

5.3 Push Experiment (Working Title) Link: <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=benvS9w-4K8</u>



Figure 7: Animated trees generated by L-system objects linked to song sections

This collaborative piece evolved from a short loop that was created following the use of Ableton's Push 2 to control Live's Analog software synthesiser. The initial idea included drums and guitar, which were stripped away following discussions with vocalist/technologist Andy Rushton. This idea was then extended to create a more experimental electronica track for Andy to improvise over with vocals processed in real-time with Korg Kaoss Pads and a Novation Mininova (see fig. 8). At this point, the idea of growing trees/forests emerged as a metaphor to guide the composition and track structure and to serve as a stimulus for Andy's improvisations.

Following the recording session, the material was edited to create a multi-layered performance. Visuals were created around the metaphor of growing trees that make use of the Lindenmayer system and were partially inspired by Stanley Donwood's artwork for Radiohead's (2011) *The King of Limbs* (see fig. 7). Further editing, arranging and mixing of material was carried out using the golden section as a guiding structural principle.

Future work will include opening up the work to more collaborators and extending the tree/forest metaphor to include roots and mycelium networks to generate more material.



Figure 8: Recording vocal & electronics improvisations

5.4 Euclid (Working Title)

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJPpaZb53Zs

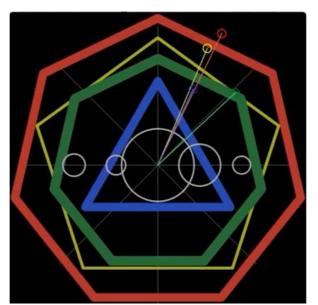


Figure 9: Visuals connected to a circular sequencer (coloured shapes) and percussion tracks (white circles)

Inspired by the audiovisual links between geometry, music and nature (Toussaint 2013, Maor 2018), this piece makes use of a Euclidean sequencer Max for Live device (alkman 2019) to drive the main musical elements and the visuals (see fig. 9).

The piece was developed by sending real-time note input into the sequencer to create verse and chorus patterns. The exact meter of the piece is deliberately ambiguous – it was created in 4/4 but feels more like 3/4. The visuals design borrows heavily from a concurrent interdisciplinary project with Johny Lamb and Kuldip Singh-Barmi (see fig.10). Audio from an improvised live performance of this project will be incorporated into this piece to explore the tension between the highly precise geometric shapes and more chaotic material. The system itself will also be adapted to create more wonkiness in recognition that nature rarely produces straight lines, perfect spheres or exactly equidistant points (Maor 2018).

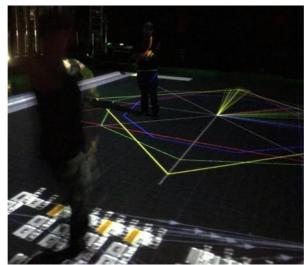


Figure 10: Interdisciplinary project with Johny Lamb and Kuldip Singh-Barmi using shared musical and visual elements

5.5 Fingerpicking (Working Title)

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eERP2rcGb5I

This piece arose through improvisation on an acoustic guitar. Inspired by the fingerstlye playing on songs such as *Cello Song* (Nick Drake 1969) and *Don Quixote* (Gordon Lightfoot 1972), the guitar part is a metaphor for a stream in a landscape. This metaphor forms the basis of the visuals (see fig. 11). The arrangement evolves as the song progresses, starting with the foregrounding of 'natural' sounds such as the guitar and percussion derived from field recordings (see fig. 12). As the song progresses, electronic sounds increasingly dominate. This is mirrored by visual effects which represent the presence of processes affecting landscapes over long time periods.

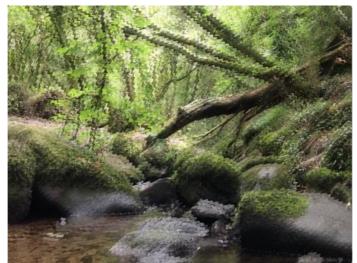


Figure 11: Videos of streams as a metaphor for the main guitar part with animated effects representing invisible processes



Figure 12: Recording percussion sounds on Castle Beach, Cornwall

Further development for this track include refining the visuals, writing lyrics, recording vocals, further exploring the relationship between the acoustic and electronic elements over the course of the song.

5.6 Shield

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r23Uiej3pEg

Like the previous piece, *Shield* arose from improvisation on acoustic guitar. Additional lead guitar was performed by Sam Murray, electronic drums were replaced by the live drums of Simon Poole (see fig. 14) and additional vocals were provided by Frankie Stevens (see fig.15).



Figure 13: Visuals made from an animated collage of textures showing natural decay arranged in a shield-like pattern



Figure 14: Drum recording with Simon Poole



Figure 15: Vocal recording with Frankie Stevens

The lyrics (see Appendix 9.4) were written loosely around the theme of isolation, but with more attention paid to the sounds and musicality of the words rather than their meaning. The influence of the natural world originally related more to the collaborative process of creating the track rather than the track itself, until the development of the visuals (see fig. 13), which feature photographs of weathered boat hulls. Here, the boat hulls are the shields protecting the occupants from the outside – and the patterns and textures on them are the results of gradual natural processes acting on human-made 'shields'.

Further work on the song includes additional lead guitar and vocal recording and visuals development before mixing and mastering.

6. Emergent Findings

6.1 Audiovisual Music Production Approach

Drawn from reflection on work to date, the creative approach for this project can be expressed as a set of principles that includes:

- 1. Embracing all aspects of the contemporary role of the music producer including composer, studio engineer, project manager, performer, content creator and interdisciplinary artist.
- 2. Collaborating with other artists at multiple levels including advisory as well as practical. Collaborative relationships can be highly flexible and may be specific to a single piece.
- 3. Recognising and allowing the agency of the tools, materials and spaces with which one is working.
- 4. Being in a 'natural' state of challenge at the edge or just outside of the comfort zone to facilitate risk-taking and expressivity.
- 5. Working across disciplines such as software development, visual art, photography, film and dance.
- 6. Allowing emergence, whereby material is continually shaped by practice, allowing room for input from collaborators, versioning and the sharing of work in progress.
- Exploring human-machine relationships through the embracing technology to allow concentration on more human aspects – and investigating the aesthetics of presenting natural elements alongside technological elements.
- 8. Prioritising process above perfection in recognition that music is ultimately about connectivity and state of being.
- 9. Seeking to draw inspiration through deep engagement with the natural world not just its surface features. This may be through further learning from secondary media as well as direct observation, immersion and interaction.
- 10. Conveying liveness and 'living presence' in recordings and performances e.g. through the use of relatable natural world metaphors, field recordings and a variety of recording environments.
- 11. Balancing life as a creative with personal and professional life e.g. through effective working in available pockets of time and situating work in relation to academic and popular discourse.
- 12. Recognising the wider ecology of creative works including previous work and experiences both within and outside of creative or professional life.
- 13. Exploring the tension between experimental and popular approaches.
- 14. Committing to healthy, sustainable and ethical practices.

6.2 Research Questions

Preliminary questions that have resulting from the work to date and currently guiding the research include:

Questions around the influence of the natural world on music creation

- How can the natural world inform the creative process?
- How can natural world inform deep as well as surface aspects of audiovisual music production at the intersection of popular and experimental music in terms of the generation of material and the structure for organising it?
- How can the physical/natural and the electronic/digital be successfully combined?

Questions around audiovisual composition and liveness

• How can audiovisual performances at the intersection of popular and experimental music be designed to enhance liveness across a variety of settings?

Questions around sustainability and well-being

- How can music production approaches promote sustainability in terms of environmentalism, economic well-being and mental health?
- What music production strategies can support balance with other aspects of life?

These questions will be developed in relation to both the body of work holistically and to the individual pieces.

7. Conclusion

This paper has presented an emerging approach to audiovisual music production that draws inspiration from deep engagement with the natural world. This approach focuses on the creative process and wider benefits as much as musical outcome, and includes interdisciplinary working as a key aspect in the role of the contemporary music producer.

Six audiovisual works in progress towards an album that show the applicability of this approach across genres and to both solo and collaborative working. In the author's view, these works demonstrate the potential of the approach to enrich both artistic outcomes and creative processes.

Emerging research questions have been formulated that will guide the development of current and new works, as well as the body of work as a whole. These questions link to several key aspects of music-making including the relationship of art to nature, liveness, aesthetics, sustainability and well-being.

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9. Appendices

9.1 Initial Collaboration Document

MUSSA Collaboration Project: Si's Sketches

June-July 2022 OneDrive link

1. Max Drones, Envelopes & Wonky Beats

This piece started through exploration of some new Max objects to drive sharplytransitioning synth drone textures, modulate with complex LFOs and generate rhythms from the resulting audio. The piece has a complex feel with multiple meters. Inspired by the natural world in terms of the combination of regularity and irregularity, 'timelessness' – and the drive to get back to the visceral, the struggle - and a harder yet simpler and more rewarding patterns of being as detailed in *Feral* (Monbiot 2013) and *Wanderland* (Reddy 2020).

Current development:

- Sam has recorded some guitar parts which I'm just edited
- I'm recording some live drums with Robin soon
- Currently working on vocal ideas
- Could use some more textures through field recordings / synthesis

2. Loops & Waves

Started in 2021. Answering the call to 'jam with nature' (Rothenberg & Ulvaeus 2013), this piece was inspired by seeing the interference of wave patterns at the shoreline on Crantock beach. Throughout the piece, guitar loops of different lengths captured on a hardware looper are layered. The second section is reminiscent of bell-ringing patterns with a simple melody superimposed on itself.

Current development:

- Working on visuals for live version
- Bass sound needs work / replacing
- Drums need work or replacing
- Needs vocals, perhaps re-arrangement and further production really open to suggestions

3. FlexGroove & Chordimist

Started 2020. Again, exploring combinations of regularity and irregularity through experimentation with a Max for Live device that bends time, another Max for Live device that generates complex arpeggios and re-recording through a Kaoss Pad. Current development:

Really open with this one – all suggestions / contributions welcome – particularly vocals

4. Euclid

Started 2020. Uses a Max for Live device to generate Euclidean patterns. Has an ambiguous feel – is actually in 4/4 though I've programmed some hats in 6s which is how I feel it. Current development:

 Really open with this one – all suggestions / contributions welcome – particularly vocals

5. KeysMgrFgr

Started in 2018. Inspired by sections of *A Geometry of Music* (Tymoczko 2011). Development:

• Anything goes!

6. Geometry

Started in 2021. Geometrically-informed harmonies and rhythms. Again informed by A *Geometry of Music* (Tymoczko 2011) and *The Geometry of Musical Rhythm* (Toussaint 2013). The visuals consist of superimposed shapes to represent the harmonic and rhythmic structures.

Development:

• Anything goes!

7. Strokes Emergnc

Created during Covid isolation in February 2022. Explores Euclidean drum patterns with the Max for Live device 'Strokes' and delay/granular effects with 'Emergence'. Development

- I'm currently working on some vocal melodies
- Some parts of the arrangement in the second half could be further developed
- All ideas welcome

8. Shield

Written at the start of my time at Falmouth in 2019 and recorded in Summer 2021. Came up with the riff during one of many evenings spent in the AMATA practice rooms. Vaguely about needing time alone. The most complete Development:

evelopment:

- There are some noise elements to be added
- Could do with more variation in the heavier 4/4 guitar section (more guitar?)
- Real drums would be ace
- Production

9. Massive & Beat Chugger

Started 2021. Exploring automating various parameters of the Native Instruments Massive X synth.

Development:

Anything goes!

10. PushExpt & Analog

Started 2021. Very quick sketch learning how to use Push and using it to do something with Live's *Analog* synth that I wouldn't normally do.

Development:

• Anything goes!

11. Morse Code Piece

This is a live performance piece currently under development with Johny & Kuldip. Typing generates morse code patterns which are converted to CV and sent to Johny's modular rig, as well as driving synths in Ableton Live. Typing gestures are captured and looped to generate percussive elements.

Current development:

- Figuring out live video input
- Currently working on ideas with Kuldip & Johny

9.2 Lyrics: No Time No Place Only Motion

Stay glued to the screen, fall down in the black hole Don't know what we're losing, can't tell if I've grown old Turn away from the twists of these catacombs Turning from turning to the forms that they assumed Passed by events and passing by horizons Crossed burning fences we didn't keep our eyes on Passing thoughts passing time recreationally Losing hearts losing minds more than occasionally If I is you, are they still me? Can we speak to our children of mystery? Take something away, like a dead bouquet Dying suns reconciled to a masquerade Where was before before? Into when does space expand? What hides in the dark and lays waste to future plans? Will always forever lose meaning until death precedes repeated re-seeding?

No time, no place only motion No mind, no self just A truth, a peace that I really don't know A start, an end and our love

Instant connections, continuity sectioned Not existing til mentioned, chasing youthful affections Kicking cans down the road it's so unnatural Fighting fires building visions with the collateral And the things you say... when I'm with you Will hide and distract from things we do And your pull on me is like my pull on you And yet somehow we'll manage still to struggle through And I'd be crazy to mess up a deal like that When the knives are out, the gloves are off and your words attack Faced with abrasion, space is evasion so I'll sleep with the light on and wake again with a face on

9.3 Lyrics: Loops & Waves (Working title)

There is no ending I see Just the story of where you have been The secrets once hidden now shown And I'm across and between not alone

And there's an arrival I see Into the story of where we've not yet been The secrets once hidden then lost and then known Are here, and I'm across and between not alone

Change Reform Rise and fall Reach out roll out Break and break again Seven stars awaken And through its quietus born

In each ending beginning I see As you turn to return to where you've not yet been. Before... The secrets once hidden then found, and then lost and then known They're here... you're not here... then I'm across and between not alone

Change Return Rise and fall Nothing's the same Break and break again Forsaking everything Only through its quietus formed

9.4 Lyrics: Shield

Shield is what it is what time it is inside it gives Through all that stays and all that's thrown away And all that's missed or saved for the next hour And all that time away what a time it is inside it gives As seasons change with all that's washed away To then or to never or saved for the best hour

Slow nice and easy-yo take another breath Don't have to lie on the right side all my days

Still no consequence no mark against not giving up again I can only take my time and all my days

Gone to the line lost in the noise seeing the signs So better just settle the brain down A shame it wasn't easier Whether feeling ready or not quite Whether feeling ready or not steady yet to lay a claim down Whether it's dramatic or it's critical Whether feeling ready or not quite whether feeling ready or not quite yet

Shield – is what it is what a sound it is inside it lives With all that stays and all that's kept away And all that's missed or saved for the next hour

Slow nice n easy-yo taste another breath Don't have to lie on the right side all my days

9.5 Track Credits

No Time No Space Only Motion

Simon Waite	Guitar, programming, vocals, recording, mixing, visuals	
Sam Murray	Guitar	
Robin Tyndale-Biscoe	Drums	
Loops & Waves		
Simon Waite	Guitar, programming, lyrics, recording, mixing, visuals	
Push Experiment		
Simon Waite	Programming, recording, mixing, visuals	
Andy Rushton	Vocals, electronics	
Euclid		
Simon Waite	Programming, visuals	
Fingerpicking		
Simon Waite	Guitar, bass, programming, recording, mixing, visuals	
Shield		
Simon Waite	Guitar, bass, programming, vocals, recording, mixing, visuals	
Sam Murray	Guitar	
Simon Poole	Drums	
Frankie Stevens	Vocals	