

This is Studio Radicals with dCS Audio.

Kate Hutchinson: Welcome back to Studio Radicals, a new podcast series that meets the musical visionaries who are shaping the sounds of today. I'm your host, Kate Hutchinson. I'm a journalist and broadcaster, and over 8 episodes I'll be meeting some truly innovative minds, from leading producers and composers, to engineers and pioneers.

Kate Hutchinson: Ramera, I feel like we should start this interview with a vocal warm-up.

Ramera Abraham: You can do a typical, [sings] 123454321.

Kate Hutchinson: It's not every day I get to have an award-winning vocal producer help stretch out my vocal cords before an interview. But for this episode of Studio Radicals, I'm seizing the opportunity... Oh this is hard, I need to do this at the beginning of all my podcast interviews! Wow.

Ramera Abraham: You can do it slowly: red leather, yellow leather.

Kate Hutchinson: Red leather, yellow leather.

I'm in north London with Ramera Abraham, a vocal producer, recording engineer and songwriter who really gets great pop music. She's assisted on songs by Adele, Jess Glynne, Little Mix and Elton John, but has spent the past few years freelancing and helping up-and-coming artists to find their voice.

Ramera works closely with Platoon Studios, which is where we meet, and is a Studio Radical, even down to the tips of her fingers.

Ramera Abraham: Having my nails done is the best way that I can express myself in a studio environment. I want to be loud in some aspects of how I present myself, and continue to challenge what engineering and vocal production is.

Kate Hutchinson: Ramera grew up as part of a musical family in the Philippines, and studied classical piano and drumming from childhood. But she was also – unknowingly – setting herself up for a future in production.

Ramera Abraham: I always loved doing things in the vein of music production and engineering, without actually understanding or knowing what it was. Despite having done it for a lot of my adolescent years, always recording myself in GarageBand or Logic, making covers, like really terrible covers, and posting them on YouTube, without realising that I was doing arrangements. I was recording myself. So there's an engineering aspect there. I was breaking down different music production styles and arrangements when I was putting up those horrible covers of myself.

Kate Hutchinson: After she left school, Ramera went to Canada to complete an undergrad degree in law and music. But it was during a trip to London, playing tourist, that she chanced upon a sound engineering course that would pave the way for her studio career...

Is it true that you have The Beatles to thank – a little bit – for ending up in London?

Ramera Abraham: Oh gosh, I do, because I ended up going to Abbey Road Studios, just to take your classic picture at the crosswalk, everyone has to do it once, I was a tourist! You know, I had to do it, so I went and took my crosswalk picture and I walked into the Abbey Road shop, and they had a bunch of brochures and advertisements for the Abbey Road Institute. I picked up the brochure, took it back to Canada with me, I'd just gone through a breakup and I thought, I have absolutely nothing to lose by applying for this programme. And two months later, I was packing up my life and moving to London.

Did my engineering degree, and then after that I got my first job, which was with Spotify as their resident engineer. I like a small studio, very boutique. I got to work with a lot of writers and producers behind the scenes. And that was my first introduction to vocal production as well, and that's where I picked up that skill. And then one thing eventually led to another, led to me going freelance and picking up the Platoon opportunity. And then now we're here.

Kate Hutchinson: And the rest is history.

Ramera Abraham: Basically.

Vocal production is anything and everything that has to do with the vocal performance. But it can also be how the vocal sounds. It can be vocal technique. It can be effects, reverbs, delays, the plugins that you use to make the vocal stand out in certain sections, a creative manipulation of the voice. So, creating loops and samples. All of it is contributing to how the vocal feels when it's being performed.

Kate Hutchinson: What was it in particular that drew you to working with vocals?

Ramera Abraham: So I've always been a vocalist myself. It was just always something that was part of my musical tapestry. But I first started assisting a few vocal producers at the Spotify space that I mentioned. And when I got a sense of how they worked, I watched them be vocal coaches, performance coaches. Saw them be a really good friend to the artist, as well, in order to elicit a really beautiful performance from them.

And I just thought, wow, there's such a skill inherent to that job and I think I could do that, but I knew I needed to brush up on some of my other skills, so my technical skills as an engineer more so, because I knew that if I was going to be vocal producing and coaching and doing arrangements – all of which I had the capacity to do at the time – I would also want to engineer everything that I was vocal producing. Partially as a quality control thing, but also just so that the artist that I was vocal producing could be comfortable knowing it's just myself and them, and that they could trust me wholeheartedly with the project.

Kate Hutchinson: Was there a particular album or artist that really opened up production for you, that made you fascinated by sound?

Ramera Abraham: I have to probably default to a lot of the artists that I grew up listening to, and I have my dad to thank very largely for the music collection that we had, and consequently, all the things that made me interested in sonics and recording and how things were sonically presented on an album. So, The Alan Parsons Project, a lot of Motown, listened to a lot of The Temptations, Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson, anything else produced by Quincy Jones, and then the vocal greats, Nina Simone, Ella Fitzgerald.

Kate Hutchinson: Those are some quite big names and, I'm imagining, some very formative listening experiences. Have you carried those through to your career now? Are you still looking for those same sounds, or that same feeling that you got from those records?

Ramera Abraham: Yes, actually. And I think that happens most often with Michael Jackson and his records. I find that I'm always telling vocalists to give me a bit of Michael, be percussive with their delivery, use their voice as a drum, just be really rhythmic with their performance delivery, stuff like that.

I've always had an appreciation for so many different genres, and it just really depends on what mood I'm in that day, and that's what I'll put on. Sometimes it's an afrobeats day, sometimes it's a classical music day. And so I do try to not stay listening to one thing all the time. I'm not always listening to pop and R&B. I love my indie pop, and I love my afrobeats, and I love my classical, it just depends on my mood. So I try to lean into that as much as possible.

Kate Hutchinson: What about in terms of non-Western pop? How important has that been to you to expand your musical horizons?

Ramera Abraham: Well, it's been very important. Because one of the artists that I've been listening to that helped me broaden that horizon is Elyanna, and she is a Palestinian-Chilean artist, I believe, who creates beautiful music. And she's weaved the Arabic language and musical styles into what we would consider very pop music. Performance-wise, because she's also singing in a completely different language, she's enunciating different things. She's performing in a completely different way.

It's not just word by word, it's different vowels. It's the way she's singing different vowels. It changes from one tone to another, within singing a couple of letters, if that makes sense. There's so much more that goes on between the phrases than what I'd hear from a pop singer that's singing in English. And I feel like because that's so detail-oriented, from what my ear picks up anyways, it's something that I want to try to implement into my current workflow.

Kate Hutchinson: When we listen to a song, and we're feeling those feelings of the vocalist, the singer, it sounds so easy, almost. How challenging is it to draw those feelings out of a singer when you're in the studio?

Ramera Abraham: It depends on the person, to be honest. And it depends on how I decide to go about getting to know them that day. If it's the first time I'm meeting them, or if it's a longtime client, even, I like to start talking about the track from the onset. What made you want to write about this? Or if they only had like a light hand in writing the song, what drew you to it when you heard it for the first time? How can we relate it back to a personal experience, whether it's for me or for the artist, and we just sort of talk like we're two friends, because the most important thing is that they're going to feel like they can be vulnerable with me about whatever the song is about. And it kind of just becomes, not necessarily a secret, but something that is unspoken between us, like I just like to develop that sort of connection with the person. And I feel like that is the key that unlocks the vocal performance from the onset.

Kate Hutchinson: I mean, we've seen the films, haven't we, with the singer in the booth belting out a sad song, a single tear rolling down their cheek. How true is that? Does that happen?

Ramera Abraham: It does happen! It does happen. And those scenarios are so delicate because you want to be able to capture that performance, but I also want to make sure that the artist is feeling okay enough to continue. And I also have to make sure everything is working and sounding exactly right every single take, so that I don't mess it up on my end.

Kate Hutchinson: How does it differ working with groups like, say, a girl band, to working with solo artists?

Ramera Abraham: I feel like with girl bands, your goal is to create a sound on the record that is unique to the girl band. So that is something unique, because it's encapsulating the personality of the three or four or five women in the group, and then you, and then those people together create the image and create the sound, and that's something that you have to curate. But when you're working with a solo artist, it's just all about *them*, what they believe in and how they want their vision to sound, really. I think that's the biggest difference.

Kate Hutchinson: Can you talk to us about working with Little Mix? Because that sounds like it must have been very fun.

Ramera Abraham: Yes, oh my gosh. Little Mix felt like such a pipe dream when I was a runner, like I'd always watched them from a distance, and then eventually, when I got to assist in the last two albums, got to see their whole process up close. And I think with girl groups in general, every member has a different flavour, a different personality that they add to their performance. And just to the group in general, the goal of the engineers and the vocal producers would be to bring those personal elements of each person through in each song. And I think that's a challenge with girl groups in particular, because there's 3, 4 different people in that group, and each one has a different way that they a) express themselves, but b) can feel comfortable in a studio. So not only do you have to make sure that things are set for that person when they're in the booth recording, but that they're going to emote effectively on the day. And then when the next person comes in to record, you might have to change your setup completely, or maybe they're feeling some type of way that day, or having a bad day, for example. Whereas the other 3 or the other 2 maybe are having better days. You never really know. But *you*, as someone working on their music, have to be able to adapt to that environment and just be really empathetic, I think.

Kate Hutchinson: What's the key to an amazing harmony? Because girl bands are all about exceptional harmonies.

Ramera Abraham: Absolutely. It's the blend. It's got to be the blend of voices. When we're talking about girl groups, specifically, I think dynamics as well. When you've got a moving stack of harmonies, you could – not just sing it all at one volume, that one dynamic, rather you'd want to be really... what you want to do with harmony really is create the movement within the song, rather than just, here's a stack of harmonies. It's got to be like, here it is. You didn't even notice it was there, but it just suddenly lifted everything. I hadn't even realised... I didn't hear it come in. People also say something similar about drummers. The best kind of drummers are the ones that you don't realise are there. Because you've just been moving, you've been grooving along this whole time. But yet there have been ups and downs in the performance throughout. So I think adding dynamics is key.

Kate Hutchinson: But definitely you want the hairs to stand up on the back of someone's neck.

Ramera Abraham: Oh yeah, for sure, yeah, yeah, yeah. I want someone to hear all the dissonant harmonies that I've put in and just be like, Oh wow. That scratches an itch. That's the feeling I get.

Kate Hutchinson: Are there any particular types of voices that record companies are looking for at certain times? And how do you, with your work, respond to those trends that we hear in contemporary music?

Ramera Abraham: That's a really insightful question. I think with the work I do though, I have to stay very current with what I'm listening to. I kind of always am tuned into what's popular at the time, or who is up-and-coming. What I find is that currently, people are drawn to unique voices, voices like Lewis Capaldi, Henry Moodie, Myles Smith, Becky Hill, really distinct. And I guess in the same vein, perhaps it's looking for someone that has a voice – not just with how they sing, but also what they wanna say. And that the music that they're writing about is very relatable to what the world is going through now. What young people are going through now, specifically, too.

So I try to be responsive in that way by picking up on things that artists do with their voice that they might not be super conscious of, but maybe it's something unique to them that I've never heard before. And it's great because they don't realise it, but they have someone in the room whose job it is to find these things and listen out for these little ear candies. And I might say, Oh I loved this take, because you introduced a bit of a rasp here. And I heard it in some of the other words, like it elicits something really guttural. Can we lean into that sound that you've got a little bit more? But they might not even realise that that's part of their sound.

Kate Hutchinson: 'Cos I guess, on the one hand, you're responding to the voice that's in front of you. But on the other hand, you can hear when a new massive pop star bursts through with a distinctive voice – I'm going to say Billie Eilish, off the top of my head. And then you hear how that voice shapes pop music, and how the tone in new pop stars that comes through... not mimics, but reflects that, or is in that vein. Do you ever take an artist aside in a studio and tell them to sound more like themselves, maybe?

Ramera Abraham: Yes! Oh my gosh, I've done that a lot. I've asked artists like, can we maybe take the croaking out of that section, just sing it really straight for me and emotive and see what that sounds like? I'll be like, can you humour me for a bit? Can you try singing it like this? I just want to hear something. And they'll do it for a couple of takes and they'll be like, actually, you know what? Listen to this the way you did it the first time. And I'll listen to it now and tell me what you think. And most times they'll be like, oh, right, I see what you mean. Maybe I sound like I'm trying too hard in the first bit, or I sound a little too close to XYZ in that first half. But maybe we should lean into more of my sound.

Kate Hutchinson: Can you get a great result if you don't have chemistry and connection with somebody in the studio?

Ramera Abraham: I think you can't. Some people might argue otherwise. I feel like you could also say that you can absolutely achieve that, if the artist's vision is strong enough and they're in control of every aspect. But I just think that the best way to achieve that is when the artist has a vision, and every person that creates the music with them understands the vision and

understands what they can do to add value to then take it over the line and just make it better, enhance it before it gets to the finish line.

Kate Hutchinson: I know it's hard to pick one, but what's been your biggest career highlight so far?

Ramera Abraham: I would say that one of the biggest career highlights for me was winning Vocal Producer of the Year at the MPG awards in 2023 and that was definitely an out-of-body experience, because it wasn't so much me receiving the award as it was me having the opportunity to stand up in front of a room of all these people that I'd looked up to for so long, and being able to speak for a minute and a half about receiving this recognition.

Coming up as an assistant engineer, especially, felt like... because I didn't necessarily look like everybody else that was doing my job, that I might be trusted less, that I might be perceived a certain way, or whether that's because of my age or ethnicity or gender, I was up there thinking there's so many important things I want to say, but genuinely, I'm just grateful to be here in front of everybody and receive this, and also just get recognition for the thing that I never thought I'd be able to say was my full-time job. Which is crazy.

Kate Hutchinson: Why did you never think you'd be able to say it was your full-time job?

Ramera Abraham: Oh, in London, you just sometimes feel like such a small fish in a big pond, and imposter syndrome just takes over me so much all the time. I've got a lot better with it, I think. But it's not easy.

Kate Hutchinson: I mean, it has been quite a journey from starting out and coming to London, a little fish in a big pond, through to winning that award. How did you find your voice?

Ramera Abraham: As an assistant engineer, I felt like I couldn't have one, or I wasn't allowed to have one. You just keep your head down, do your job to the best of your abilities. I'm not going to be told if I've done a good job or a bad job. Just going to carry on, and hopefully someone will notice me. What I really had to do was come to terms with the fact that my personality was going to be my USP, and that artists want people on their team that know they're gonna add value to it by just being themselves, who align with what the project is about, and want to support the artists and the causes and the things that they care about as well. Artists want a team of people behind them that back them and believe in them, and it's what I would want if I was an artist.

So obviously in a commercial studio, you get everything from dad rock bands to a US hip-hop artist that's here touring. You get everything. And there's a beauty in that, because then I got to figure out what my niche was and where I felt the most like I could be myself, and Little Mix was a big part of that for me. Myself and the four women in that group were all kind of close in age, within five years of each other, and I saw myself... I was laughing at their jokes, having a good time in the studio.

And I started off very shy, as I would in most of my sessions, but I really opened up in the time that I was assisting on those two albums. And the engineer who I was assisting was so encouraging of me doing that, and of my learning, and he knew that I was just lapping up every moment of this. And he encouraged it. And so it took someone else that had come up from that

same route to also be like, yeah, Ramera, like you *can* do that, you don't have to sit there quietly. As long as I'm being useful during the session day, I could just be myself.

Kate Hutchinson: Was this person quite an instrumental mentor to you?

Ramera Abraham: I would say he was, yeah. It's the lovely Paul Norris at Metropolis. I don't know if he knows that I consider him a mentor, really, but it was just the simple act of being encouraging of someone who wanted to do what he was doing and get into that environment, but perhaps via a different way.

Kate Hutchinson: You also record your own music. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Ramera Abraham: To be honest, my artist project has been very neglected for a long time, because I've just been focusing on making music for everybody else. But I think that I'm still very much in the process of finding my sound. Trying to figure out what it is that makes me unique and stand out. I'm not under any sort of pressure, because I'm not managed, I'm not with a label, I'm not published, so it's OK. It's just purely my outlet, which is also a beautiful thing.

Kate Hutchinson: And isn't it true that your first single has some pretty big names on it?

Ramera Abraham: Yes. So my very first single, 'Nervous', which came out in 2019 I think it was, or 2020, I don't remember, has Jerry Barnes and Ralph Rolle from Chic on it. Jerry is the bass player and Ralph Rolle is the drummer.

Kate Hutchinson: Casual. How do you end up with two members of a legendary disco funk band on your debut single?

Ramera Abraham: That's hilarious, actually, because Jerry Barnes has been one of my biggest mentors in this industry. He knew me when I was a student at Abbey Road Institute, and I help him out with bits of editing here and there, but he mainly has showed me just what it's like to make music with brilliant musicians. I was doing an engineering session for them, just for some other tracks that he had in his back pocket, and he said to me, like, Oh, why don't you play some of your own stuff? And that's how they ended up playing on the song.

Kate Hutchinson: What has your job as a vocal producer taught you about how we express ourselves with our voice?

Ramera Abraham: What I've learned is that everybody has a completely different way of expressing themselves to another person. No two people are the same. No two voices are the same. Everybody's different. Every set-up that I have is completely different in some aspect, even if it's small. But some people express themselves by writing really *big* music and singing in a really big way. And other people express themselves by having smaller voices, in a beautiful way, and expressing themselves in little details and little ways of changing up the way they pronounce certain things, as opposed to like, I'm going to belt this part. I'm going to do this part in head voice. It comes down to pronunciation and diction and things, and it almost becomes like storytelling in a way.

This is also the biggest reason why I love vocal production, is because it's the most complex instrument, in my opinion, that's out there. And how a person feels on a particular day is going to affect the way that instrument performs. It's not like the way you'd set up a drum kit, and like a

drum kit. It's not how you would adjust your playing if you were playing the oboe or a clarinet, or anything like that. It's completely different. It's completely around the human emotion and how people express themselves. And that is going to produce the sound of your instrument, and subsequently you have to treat that instrument so carefully. The voice is the most complex out of all the instruments. Yeah, it's really an amazing thing to me.

Kate Hutchinson: There must be somebody who you haven't worked with yet, that you would love to sit on that sofa with and really get into the weeds and figure out what that song's about and chat to them for an hour about their day and their love life. Who is that artist for you?

Ramera Abraham: Beyoncé.

Kate Hutchinson: What would you do differently with Beyoncé? Beyoncé turns up to your studio and she's like, Hey, I want to cut a vocal.

Ramera Abraham: I'd probably want to do a completely a cappella record with her, and make it super cool, not a cappella in the sense that it sounds like a normal song and we've taken the track out. A cappella in the sense that we've taken her vocals and thrown them around and really messed with them and run them through bits of analogue gear to make something sonically interesting. Yeah, something that's almost like a soundtrack to a David Attenborough documentary or something.

Kate Hutchinson: Well, if anyone from *Planet Earth* is listening...!

Ramera Abraham: Please get on that.

This is Studio Radicals with dCS Audio.

Studio Radicals is co-produced by dCS Audio and me, Kate Hutchinson, with audio production and editing by Holly Fisher. The theme music is by Anna Prior. This episode starred Ramera Abraham. Check back for our next episode, where we're in Miami with Maria Elisa Ayerbe. "It's about being a troubleshooter, a problem solver, and it's about being a psychologist all at the same time." Head to dcsaudio.com/studioradicals and you can listen to playlists featuring all of the music we've talked about in the series and hear more episodes too.