

MA Commercial Music Producer

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A friend and early mentor once told me that “the role of a music producer is not to produce music, rather to collect, organise and present it”. I was reminded of this moment as I opened and assessed the brief presented to me at the beginning of this academic term. Putting together original work based on an analysis of researched rules and ideas would undoubtedly create new challenges for me, and I would need to remain objective throughout. I have dissected three genres I believe stand apart from one another, and aim to provide sufficient insight into my approach when capturing them in my original work.

For the first track in my portfolio titled ‘Almost’, I chose to reference ‘Orbit’ by Nao. Sitting loosely on the R&B spectrum, it was important for me to analyse small details in both the writing and production in order to accurately pinpoint the sub-genre that the song presents. In an interview with The Guardian, Nao (born Neo Jessica Joshua) coined the term ‘Wonky Funk’, explaining how she strives to bring the umbrella genre into a more modern landscape; *“Wonky funk was about how to translate that sound into 2016,”*⁽¹⁾

It became clear throughout my research that in order to achieve a sound worthy of a pop-partnered sub genre, the most critical demand was for a modern methodology in its execution. Orbit upholds traditional elements of its R&B ancestors; sultry backing vocals and live guitar teamed with strings performing travelling counter melodies. As the song develops it offers synths, 808 bass lines and heavily processed lead vocals. In a thesis by Holly Herndon, she argues that; *“electronically processed voice in live music performance may illustrate an understanding of computer music performance as an embodied experience.”*⁽²⁾

Vocal processing has become a major element in the production of modern R&B-Pop. *“Artists that blend the soulfulness of traditional R&B with its splintered subsets (trap, chillwave, hip-hop and electronica) have spawned the “future R&B” sound as we know it today”*⁽³⁾

Percussive instrumentation is often borrowed from ‘urban’ genres, with artists recently favouring Trap-style hi-hat patterns as a go-to for creating builds and rhythmic pressure.

Pinpointing and dissecting the typical structure within this genre holds few surprises, “*songs contain an intro, the majority feature a bridge, half contain a pre-chorus and outro, and none contain a prominent instrumental and/or vocal break within the mix.*”⁽⁴⁾ Although challenged by comparatively daring artists like The Weekend, the ‘ababcb’ arrangement is evidently one which we have come to expect from mainstream pop hits, showing no sign of change in the foreseeable future.

Knowledgeably, I approached my process by mapping out structure, then forming lyrics and chords using a piano to create a solid skeleton to build on.

My intent for the intro was to be clear, indicating the genre, mood and timbre of the track, so I used a pitch-shifted vocal sample treated with a stereo parallel delay, an open decay and generous feedback.

I knew I wanted to use a live guitar later in the track to incorporate the aforementioned live instrument element true to R&B production, so I decided to use a Serum synth called Felurian as a base sound for the chords; it had a nice attack and a staccato feel to it which would blend well with a clean pluck. The live guitar is introduced in the pre chorus along with backing vocals with the intent to create subtle build. I avoided any intrusive instrumental development here to keep the sultry R&B feel and leave space for the vocals. The lead vocal is thickened with Tape Delay & large Plate Reverb busses. I kept the signal paths fairly low to preserve the crisp, central position of the vocalist.

I used the chorus to capitalise on the modern marriage of sub genres I’d discovered in my research; processed hi-hats and stacked backing vocals to push energy, layered over a driving sub-kick & electronic snare.

In this section I also introduce an 80’s style ‘Sleepy Synth’ which on one hand I would claim as my own creative preference, however this addition of sound has been gaining credibility once again in 2020 through artists like The Weekend and Miley Cyrus, both huge placeholders in the global R&B and Pop charts.

I use the "Sleepy Synth" on two tracks, one contains chords, and the other a copied midi map from the bass pattern in order to blend and strengthen the 'stabs'. The bass line is performed on a live bass which is then fed through several digital processors, again keeping a blend between the two sounds. I used heavy compression and overdrive paired with a Grit pedal plug-in to add aggression and punch, which I hoped would achieve a necessary contrast between verse/pre & chorus. I carried some chorus elements and additional ear candy and vocals into the second verse and pre chorus to avoid losing too much energy.

The bridge gave me space to really experiment with vocal processing, particularly the method from my reference track, Orbit. I used iZotope's VocalSynth to imitate a harmony stack, along with a duplicate track with a formant applied at a -12 (octave). I fed both tracks through a heavy autotune bus with intent to push the vocal processing as far as it would go before the mix was at cost. Listening back to the mix I would argue I could have used this a little more, potentially in the choruses. The VocalSynth would have made for a nice effect on additional left and right leads.

The most debatable outcome in this particular track I feel is the drums. Compared to reference tracks, they lack a considerable amount of punch/bite. I feel additional sub layering and a wider mid-EQ on the snare would have made for a much heavier and more effective impact. I also question whether the final quiet chorus would have been more effective against a natural instrument like the guitar, plucking the chords to allow a better dynamic - that's not to say I don't feel the section works with its existing components, just that the tracks close could sound less abrupt.

For my second track, James Arthur, Lewis Capaldi and Tom Odell were a few of many artists I researched when looking for the answer to: 'what genre does a boy with a husky voice and a guitar, who writes modern folk-esque pop songs sit in?'. Unsurprisingly, the results were vague and conflicting. I found some interesting articles on a genre titled 'blue

eyed soul', which upon discovery raised some excitement, only to further learn that it's simply *"music created by white recording artists who faithfully imitated the soul music of the 1960s and later"*⁽⁵⁾.

There is very little in terms of characteristic discussion around this genre when it comes to actual music and production, (I could however now present you with a fantastic thesis on racial mass marketing and cultural appropriation in American Soul Music during the 60's), so I will henceforth use Modern Soul/Pop as my reference genre with relation to the artists mentioned. In most popular Soul songs, the beating heart can be heard in the form of *"emotional vocal delivery. This range(s) from forceful and high energy to sad, reflective and passionate. Driving rhythm with drums and percussion giving a steady backbeat on beats 2 and 4 (paired with) rhythmic, riff-based bass lines, rhythmic chordal parts on piano and guitar, (and a) typically brisk tempo around 120 bpm."*⁽⁶⁾

The structure of most popular soul music emphasizes an interesting tweak on a classic arrangement, utilising what is widely known as the 'b chorus'. Many songs essentially feature two choruses, the first containing a melodic paragraph, followed by the second, where a vocal hook is reintroduced over a riff or rhythmic instrumental. This is recognisable in my reference track 'Say You Won't Let Go' by James Arthur, as well as songs like 'Rolling In The Deep' by Adele, and 'Summertime Sadness' by Lana Del Ray.

These sections tend to be supported by backing vocals and percussion, with any additional instruments sitting further back in the mix. As a general rule, songs in this genre seem to be mixed a little dryer, with drums and vocals taking center stage (unless analysing a ballad in which case piano or guitar would replace the drums position in the mix).

Similarly to my approach towards 'Almost', I started by forming the song structure, this time prioritising the hook, or 'b chorus'. Based on the tracks I had analysed, I knew it should host a romantic theme and decided on 'please don't walk away' as a centerpoint, adding response lines between each repeat.

Both chorus sections are composed with mono-rhyming patterns and were fairly easy to pen once I'd decided the theme. I knew that keeping the concept simple and lyrically repetitive would be crucial so the artist could execute a big emotional delivery - anything too 'wordy' or complex would be distracting. In keeping with this, I decided to incorporate an anti-chorus in place of the bridge allowing a new performance angle for the vocalist.

I recorded a live acoustic guitar playing the chords and some plucked counter melodies using an SM7b to pick up warmth and low end. Originally I planned to program some chords using a midi piano because I didn't have a good enough space to get a clean live recording and I knew that further down the line in my mixing process this would cause processing issues. Fortunately a soundproof space became available so I got some last minute tracking done which really glued the whole sound together.

Once I had finished cleaning up the live comps it was fairly easy to get the drums and vocals sounding punchy. They would need to be central for the mix to conform to the sounds I had researched, so I used minimal panning, only tweaking the melodic instruments out of center. Specifically in the verses I wanted to highlight the kick and vocal, so I used a gate and hall reverb with a long decay on the snare and guitar which added atmosphere around the mix center without invading the space.

The vocalist has a warm tone to his voice so I used a parallel EQ to cut some additional texture around the 250/500 mark. In isolation it sounded great but was muddying with the guitar a little too much in the overall mix.

As the song builds towards the chorus, I add live percussive elements like hi hats and a ride to create natural build, again with plenty of low and mid cancellation in order to preserve clarity. The original piano is subtly reintroduced to add texture and ambience in the pre; I sidechained the channel through the kick in the chorus and separately directed it to a large reverb plate to mimic the role of a pad whilst retaining the live sound required of the style.

Considering this, I feel the overall song would have benefitted from an entirely live-studio recording. A full acoustic kit would have made for a more raw sound and a room mic rig would allow for less dynamic processing creating potential for a more natural sounding track. There are moments in the arrangement, (pre chorus for example), where I have added my own backing vocals - the track affords more play on this, especially if it were created with a group of backing vocalists within a live environment, which would allow more natural blending and texture due to proximity and room dynamic.

As an artist who works a lot in Sync, Avant-pop is a genre I have been exploring for a while and it made sense to dissect it further for my third and final track. Although this new-age hybrid of bizarre grunge and electronic dance presents itself at first glance as a complicated nexus of sound, *“AP does not translate into mere complexity (though it can be complex), and its most memorable effects are often the results of blunt simplicity”*⁽⁷⁾

Pioneered by artists dating back to the late 60’s, avant-pop has been described as *“a mix of frenetic chaos and dreamy ambiance...Bjork tempered that rush with beautiful strings and bright horns, blending the sci-fi bleeps with lush organic arrangements for a smart, heavenly feel.”*⁽⁸⁾

Structurally the rules are looser, however Gemini Feed does conform with a verse, pre, chorus and repeat similar to what you’d expect to hear from a mainstream pop record. The song offers a bridge section but it is more instrumental with minimal vocal samples, which is one of many indicators that it sits further left field and comfortably within the avant genre. Characteristically AP production is a theatrical, dramatic tapestry, using obscure drum samples and wide, engulfing bass to drive power and movement. The genre also looks heavily to experimental vocal processing, with delivery and subject matter taking a darker more sinister composite. Mid-range instrumentation rests more often than not on simple synth loops that rotate throughout a track, almost start to end. This is evident not only in the

work of Banks and producer BJ Burton, but also in tracks like If I Had A Heart by Fever Ray, Human by SEVDALIZA and many more.

In my track Poison Apples, I use a vintage piano sound on a loop with a long delay to create this effect. It continues throughout but drops out during the chorus so as not to conflict with the vocals when they move up the octave. I wanted to begin the track with this loop and avoid using anything else in order to adhere to the 'strictly simple' demands of a typical avant track.

The vocal sample heard introducing the impact into the second half on the introduction is my own voice. I sang a traditional indian scale, then used heavy auto tune and a formant/pitch shift to achieve the obscure processing effect heard in my reference track.

I wanted the context to move around a playful-darkness, and so I recorded big stacks of child-like vocals to act as a background hook beneath the impact section, literally taking influence from the idea of a horror soundtrack/sound FX.

These production elements are intended to mirror the lyrical concept of a darkness growing inside of someone, as if being overtaken or possessed by something more powerful. I take on this in several elements of the production; using the 'gasp' sample as the break before chorus two, layering foley and brass over transition impacts, even replacing the snare with a metal chain sound in the main drum groove during the verse. It seemed to be these steps in my process that pushed the track into a more experimental/theatrical realm.

I left the verse arrangement sparse focusing on the vocal and percussion. The backing vocal accents between lines are copied over to the following phrase and then reversed. I directed the whole vocal stack in this case through a sum and treated them as one instrument through processing with tight compression similar to what I would normally add to drum sounds. My intent with this was to prevent them from filling too much space, allowing for

more dynamic impact in the bigger chorus sections where the big stack vocal is reintroduced.

In the second (and final) chorus, I layered some heavily distorted electric guitar over the bass. Honestly I wasn't sure if it would end up being an immediate delete situation, but I thought it actually gave some needed aggression. Before adding it, the song felt like it was missing something climactic towards the end, and I'm really happy with how huge it became.

Upon revisiting this mix I would try to make the lead vocal sit more towards the front, as I feel there are moments when the lyrics are lost, particularly in the chorus and heavier sections. In the chorus this could be achieved by making more space in the mid-top EQ range that is occupied by the fuzz synth bass. I think a little less reverb on the vocals overall would help give them clarity too.

As a whole, creating these tracks was a challenging experience for me simply down to the fact that my background in production has always been somewhat selfish, choosing to learn and create based around the sound that I, as an artist, want to achieve. Nevertheless I enjoyed working to reference and found the process invaluable to my ongoing development. I have uncovered some problems in my workflow, which if approached differently would have improved the outcome of my final tracks greatly. Planning time for live recording will be something I take into future projects, with an understanding that in order to move upwards from my 'bedroom producer' status, I probably need to plan to leave my bedroom and organise advance studio time.

Despite this, I do feel I achieved three comprehensive productions to a good quality, all of which have a foot placed firmly in their reference genre whilst simultaneously offering originality. As a vocalist I'm glad I challenged myself to use voices other than my own - this broadened my understanding of mic and preamp selectiveness, and revealed how differently

the processing takes shape, particularly from male to female vocals. Personally I'm happy with the overall outcome of this project and feel I have achieved something I didn't feel confident in or capable of beforehand.

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