

CMP: FOUNDATION ASSIGNMENT / ESSAY COMPONENT

TOMA LAZAROV - 2012085

Introduction

For this foundation assignment, I decided to analyse indie-pop, house and future bass tracks, to then create and produce three songs of my own, matching those musical genres. This essay will provide insight into the production process and outline key aspects of my methodology in the completion of my tracks.

Track 1: 'Something About You' (Indie-Pop)

Indie-pop music is a “type of independent guitar pop music with a DIY ethos” (Whitehouse, 2019, p.16). Whitehouse suggests that the genre is driven by “alternative production methods” and that indie music, in general, encompasses a “notion of authenticity”, therefore making it “personal, live, youthful, organic, self-made, original, and motivated by concerns of artistic expression rather than commercial acquisition”. She explains that “nostalgia is embedded within indie pop”, and this drew me to explore contemporary indie-pop tracks which, along with mainstream popular music have in recent times shifted to a familiar and nostalgic 80s sound. An example of this shift is The Weeknd’s no.1 hit single ‘Blinding Lights’ which was critically acclaimed for its “retro and modern” stylistic blend and “neon glow of 1980s synth-pop” (Fitzmaurice, 2020). Moreover, “the ‘80s revival has been witnessed through many artists over the last decade, such as La Roux, Lady Gaga, Mika and Little Boots” (Watt, 2017).

Indie-pop bands such as The 1975, Blossoms and The Magic Gang have all tapped into this sound as of late, using instrumentation and production techniques that ooze 80s pop nostalgia. Tracks such as ‘If You’re Too Shy’, ‘If You Think This Is Real Life’ and ‘Think’ are great examples of this. Airy synths resembling those from a Roland Jupiter 8 (a synthesiser that defined the sound of the 80s, featuring on Michael Jackson - ‘Thriller’, Tears For Fears - ‘Songs For The Big Chair’, The Cars - ‘Heartbeat City’), huge and spacious brass and string sections, gated reverb snares and big soulful harmony parts are being used increasingly in indie-pop music.

I decided to focus my analysis on The 1975’s ‘If You’re Too Shy (Let Me Know)’ because it retained a lot of the indie-pop sound through its catchy simple rhythm guitars and vocals that were authentic and personal. It also incorporated a lot of 80s inspired instrumentation and production such as the pulsating synth bass and reverby, soulful brass sections. The vocals rang true of the indie-pop genre because they were slightly raw in delivery and the vocal production style was dirtier, not entirely clean or fronting

the song, with delay and reverb creating a vocal texture that was more part of the soundscape of the song, rather than a standout focal point of the composition like it is in traditional pop music. The song was written and produced by the vocalist Matty Healy and drummer of the band George Daniel, retaining the DIY, organic and personal aesthetic of Indie Pop music that was mentioned by S. Whitehouse.

Production Process

Essentially, within my own song production, I wanted to capture the main live band feel of indie-pop music whilst also using some inspiration from the 80s sound to be in line with the current industry trends of this genre. Indie-pop music is usually radio-friendly and straightforward, so I decided to go for a standard 4/4 time signature at 122BPM and a verse, pre-chorus, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus structure. Despite a live acoustic drum sound and amplified electric and bass guitar recordings being an integral part of indie music (**AllMusic, 2011**), considering that what was required of me was to create pre-production standard demos for the assignment, I thought that acoustic midi drums and DI electric and bass guitar recordings run through amp emulator plug-ins would be sufficient.

With indie-pop being “guitar pop music” I decided that the guitar parts needed to be a primary focus of the production. I acquired the help of guitarist Oliver Ivan for the performance of these parts, using a Focusrite 2i2 audio interface to record them in my home studio. In terms of the guitar sound, I wanted something that sat in-between clean and distorted, so that I could take into account suitability for both indie-rock and pop characteristics of the genre. Therefore, I ended up settling for a balanced ‘crunch’ sound - ‘Small Brownface Crunch’ through Logic’s stock amp emulator plug-in (Appendix 1).

I then used a low cut EQ filter to remove frequencies below 200hz to minimise muddiness in the mix and create space for instruments such as the kick, bass and pad (**SoonVibes, 2019**). This was also similar to the way that guitars sat in the mix for the song I analysed - ‘If You’re Too Shy’. Moreover, I recorded doubles of all guitar parts which allowed me to pan one left and one right, creating a wider stereo mix, additional space for low-end frequencies to sit in the centre of the track and a harder hitting, saturated guitar. Lastly, I used a VCA compressor, which is effective for rhythmic elements (**Douglas, 2020**) and with it being a type of analogue compression, it allowed me to emulate an older sound, fitting in with the 80s vibe.

Another main focus for this track was the drums because they carry a lot of weight in a band recording. However, due to the fact I was using MIDI drums, I was aware it would be a difficult mixing process. I wanted modern, punchy rock drums, so I decided to use Logic’s MIDI ‘Heavy Kit’. Using the ‘Edit’ section in ‘Drum Kit Designer’, I tuned and dampened the kick and snare to my liking, which made it quicker and easier to mix (Appendix 4).

I used FabFilter's 'Pro-Q 3' EQ plug-in for maximum detail in EQ manipulation, reducing harsh frequencies, boosting others for punchiness and taking away anything below 30hz - frequencies which are not heard on regular speakers or headphones but still muddy the mix (**SoonVibes, 2019**) (Appendix 2). I also utilised FabFilter's 'Pro-C 2' for compression, using great sounding 'Punchy Rock Kick' and 'Snap Snare' presets (Appendix 3), as well as overdrive, which helped the kick and snare gain more impact and cut through the mix.

There was a particular mixing technique that defined the drum sound of the 80s, and that is gated reverb (Phil Collins - 'In the Air Tonight') (**Vox, 2017**). Drums with gated reverb have also been making their way back to indie-pop and chart music (Bleachers - 'Don't Take The Money' and Blood Orange - 'You're Not Good Enough') because of the big, punchy sound that is produced. Therefore, utilising a bus (for greater control, quicker mixing process and lower CPU usage), I used Valhalla's Vintage Verb on the 'Big Ambience Gate' setting to give my snare that similar big 80s and modern indie-pop sound. I also put other instruments such as guitars and synths through a reverb bus to create the feeling that they are all in the same space, as well as to gel the track together.

There was specific instrumentation in the chorus, such as the '80's Fizzy Synth', 'Luscious Sweeping Pad' and Soprano Saxophone sample (which I cut up and edited to create my own lead part) (Appendix 5), that I chose for their 80s aesthetic and to try and replicate a little bit of the overall feel and production of 'If You're Too Shy'. Again, I removed many of the lower frequencies to create space in the low end.

The vocals were written and recorded by myself on an AT2020 condenser microphone. Similarly to the guitar, I captured multiple good takes of each part so that I could layer the vocals and achieve a vocal thickness and texture resembling that of 'If You're Too Shy'. As I recorded with a very basic microphone in an untreated room in my house, there was a fair amount of vocal processing to be done to achieve a good quality vocal that sat in the mix well, including two types of compression, a de-esser, stereo delay, and a noise gate (Appendix 7). One technique I used, in particular, was putting the vocal in a smaller reverb space before sending it through the big space reverb bus. This created a spacious and ambient feel, especially with panned vocal doubles and harmonies.

Track 2: 'Fallin' Out of Love' (House)

H. Rietveld describes house music to have the format of a repetitive 4/4 beat, usually between 120 and 140bpm and as a "functional type of dance music produced specifically for the use by DJ's, designed to take the dancing crowd out of this world" (**Rietveld, 2020, p.9/10**). House music was a reinvention of the dance genre that was born out of Chicago, where the youngest producers and DJ's began playing disco

records over hard-hitting electronic dance machines, shortly after disco had begun to lose its popularity in the late 70s (**Vox, 2019**).

“If there is a defining instrument in house music, it is the Roland TR-909”, which was the evolution of the 808 and was unique because its cymbals and hi-hats were samples of real drums (**Vox, 2019**). The TR-909 was a commercial failure, and only 10,000 units were sold, but this made it more accessible for the young DJs of Chicago who were all broke (**Vox, 2019**). It ended up defining the genre because it had “the perfect storm of the massive kick drum, belting clap, snare drum that you could do perfect little rolls on and those sloshy four or five-bit cymbals and hi-hats” (**Vox, 2019**). The perfect example of this is the 80s staple house hit ‘Ride On Time’ by Black Box. If the beat of the 909 is taken away from that track, a lot of the “thumping drive” that characterises house music is gone.

In the late 80s, different house sub-genres began to form. For example, deep house, which “leaned heavily on soulful vocal samples and spacious synthesisers”, and Italo disco which relied heavily on “the upbeat rhythm of a digital piano” (**Vox, 2019**). Some would call ‘Ride On Time’ a classic Italo disco track because of precisely this bright, offbeat piano, which is used as a type of “powerful rhythmic guitar”. “House music has had a considerable influence shaping pop music since the late 80s” (**Rietveld, 2020**) and I wanted to ensure I was using house music elements in a commercially viable way through intertwining them with pop. I decided that I would analyse the deep house track ‘Piece Of Your Heart’ by MEDUZA and use it as a primary point of inspiration for my song. It achieved massive mainstream success in the summer of 2019, reaching no.2 in the UK.

Production Process

House music centres a lot around the build-up of tension and then release (or drop) (**Iler, 2011**). This was likewise in ‘Piece of Your Heart’, so working at 125bpm, I structured my track in a way that there are 3 or 4 sections where there is a build-up in timbre and especially percussion (Appendix 8).

The first build-up is in the opening verse, where I began production by using Serum (a popular synthesiser for dance and electronic music) to find a spacious synth pad - a symbolic feature in deep house music. Then added layers which began to build the tension, such as the tambourine, offbeat hi-hat, white noise sweep and snare (which increased in dynamics as we got closer to the first chorus). I was aware that after a crescendo such as this, the listener would be expecting to hear a ‘drop’. However, I decided it was too early in the track to give away the most crucial section of the song, so I opted for an ‘anti-drop’, by stripping away everything but the vocals, bass and percussion, similarly to the first chorus in ‘Piece Of Your Heart’. Although this still gave an impression of a drop, it was without overworking the song dynamically too early.

Moreover, there was an even more significant impact as the kick and bass were not introduced until that first chorus.

I was careful when choosing drum sounds as I wanted that specific house feel the Roland TR-909 created in the 80s. I chose the massive, boomy 'four-to-the-floor' kick, "belting" claps and acoustic hi-hats that were reminiscent of the 909 and added an 'Epic Electro' MIDI snare that was contemporary pop-leaning, such as the one in the MEDUZA track (Appendix 9). Again, the first chorus itself was progressively layered with the hi-hats and tambourine coming in on the second 8 bars to build excitement, develop the groove and keep the listener interested.

Just like many classic house records, I wanted to have that driving, groovy, bright rhythm piano (Appendix 10). I only introduced the piano part after the second verse, so as not to overuse it throughout the song. Introducing a new instrument also improved the second chorus drop because it made it different and exciting, and as house music is all about dancing, I cut out the vocals at this point, leaving just the instrumental and groove to carry the track. This allowed for the piano part to temporarily become the main focus, fitting the characteristics of many classic house tracks such as 'Move Your Body' by Marshall Jefferson.

Automation is a big part of dance music (**Matla, no date**), and I used it in a couple of places. For example, I automated the volume and the EQ on the kick in the final build-up section to make it sound more subdued so that there was a more significant impact in the final chorus (Appendix 11). Using 'Latch', I also put a high-pass filter on the piano in that same section and slowly opened it up before the final chorus (Appendix 12). Both of these elements were utilised to, yet again, build excitement and anticipation.

For the vocals, I collaborated with my friend Cat Reynolds who recorded them in his home studio. Ideally, had it not been for restrictions due to COVID19, we would have had a couple of sessions in person and used a top-quality studio and microphone at Tileyard. As a producer, this would have allowed me to direct him and input on the delivery much easier.

I wanted to replicate that very wet and ambient vocal from 'Piece Of Your Heart' that helps house tunes sound so infectious. I used two types of compression to retain the clarity of the vocal but wanted a smooth reverb with a reasonably long decay to make it sound big and spacious. To achieve this, I used a 'Smooth Room' preset in Valhalla Vintage Verb', which had a fast diffuse attack, sparse early echo density, chorus modulation and exponential decay. I also used a little bit of 'Waves Tune Real-Time' auto-tune plug-in to strengthen the vocal and make it a little bit more accurate. Considering the dance and pop nature of the record, adding a touch of auto-tune was essential in making it of commercial and industry-standard quality, as we are all used to listening to perfectly pitched vocals nowadays (**Reynolds, 2018**).

Track 3: 'I Don't Mind' (Future Bass)

"Future bass takes the ecstatic drops of dubstep or trap but provides a warm bounce rather than a lumbering bruteness" describes David Turner of Rolling Stone Magazine. Artists such as Flume, Marshmello and at times Martin Garrix are known to deploy this relatively new (2010s) style of EDM production, which relies on "harsh detuned synths that buzz and purr, half-step beats, filtered chords that are super reverb[ed], mellow, instead of abrasive drops and prominent use of vocals" (**Turner, 2020**). Flume's remix of Disclosure's 'You & Me' is said to have "laid out the genre's blueprint" (**Turner, 2020**), but The Chainsmokers' 'Closer' feat. Halsey, and Martin Garrix and Bebe Rexha's 'In the Name of Love' are also tracks that had significant commercial success and helped propel future bass into the mainstream.

Considering the Flume remix was labelled as the "blueprint" of the genre, I decided to base my analysis on it and use it as my main point of inspiration. Moreover, Flume won a Grammy for Best Dance/Electronic Album in 2016, so his music appealed to me in an artistic and commercial sense.

Production Process

The first thing I noticed about 'You & Me' and the future bass genre in general, is that before we hear a drop, all the instrumentation sits in a lower register. The 'drop' (sometimes the first chorus) is usually accompanied by the expansive synths that "buzz and purr", and that is where some harsher frequencies first hit us. To be in line with this, I chose to start with a guitar which is an instrument that usually sits in the mid frequencies and then a pad that sounded like layered vocals. Utilising Pro-Q 3, I used a high-pass filter on both, to cut even more high frequencies and exacerbate the impact of the harsh synths that are introduced in the chorus. Moreover, I chose that layered vocal pad because vocal-driven tracks in EDM have been doing really well in the past few years. For example, Sirius XM's Vice President of EDM Programming highlighted that "it seems like listeners, our subscribers, and fans are relating more to songs that are more vocal-driven" (**Turner, 2020**).

Usually, future bass songs have a relatively high tempo - between 130 and 150bpm, but I chose to write at 110bpm. This made it a little more R&B and down-tempo, which was a stylistic choice of mine as I feel R&B is my strongest genre as a producer.

I noticed that future bass songs more often than not have punchy, subby kicks so I used a sub-bass plug-in on my kick sample to boost some low frequencies, as well as a touch of overdrive to make them cut through the mix better.

For the bass, I chose a sub-bass preset sound in Serum because I didn't want it to be melodically significant within the track, but rather to complement the beat, pull everything together and fill space smoothly.

Due to the kick and bass both being quite low and subby, I utilised sidechain compression which made the sub bass slightly reduce in volume every time the kick was played - a common EDM production technique (Ableton, 2020). This allowed for the kick to punch through the mix better as it wasn't being concealed by the bass. Furthermore, I used a directional mixer to make the bass and the kick as mono as possible so that they sat directly in the centre and didn't muddy the stereo mix or cause phase problems during widening in the mastering processing.

The synths in the chorus were the main focus of my production because they are usually the centre point of future bass and EDM in general (**The Los Angeles Film School, no date**). I designed the synth on 'Retro Synth' by editing the ADSR of the filter and amp envelope. I made it sound big and spacious by sending it through a reverb bus with Valhalla Vintage Room's 'Large Wooden Room'. To enhance depth and harmonics, I added saturation with FabFilter's 'Saturn 2', and in the last chorus, layered the synth part by transposing it an octave down and playing it together with the original.

I collaborated once again for the vocals for this track, this time with my friend ISB Hazl. I thought he would be a great feature on the song because I wanted my own R&B spin on future bass and his R&B style vocals were perfect for that. I used quite a simple processing chain this time of just EQ, two types of compression (tape and FET), a de-esser and reverb, as I didn't think much needed to be done for his vocals to complement the track. However, in the chorus I utilised stereo delay and 'Saturn 2' again, this time to add distortion and make the chorus punchlines sound dirty and spacious. I lastly got rid of some breaths by using the scissor and fade tools and added a touch of auto-tune, which is commonly used in R&B and trap vocal styles.

Reference List

1. Whitehouse, S., 2019. '*Music covers as vehicles of nostalgia: Exploring fans' recollections and yearning in the UK indie pop music scene.*', University of Leicester School of Business
2. Fitzmaurice, L., 2020. '*After Hours Is The Weeknd's Most Consistent Work To Date.*' EW.com. Available at: <https://ew.com/music/music-reviews/the-weeknd-ew-review-after-hours/>
3. Watt, J., 2017. '*The Death of Pop Music: Are we amid the silent death of a genre?*'
4. Douglas, A., 2020. '*Choosing The Right Compressor Type - Attack Magazine*'. Attack Magazine. Available at: <https://www.attackmagazine.com/technique/tutorials/choosing-the-right-compressor-type/>
5. Vox, 2020. *How A Recording-Studio Mishap Shaped '80S Music*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bxz6jShW-3E>
6. Rietveld, H., 2020. *This is Our House: House Music, Cultural Spaces and Technologies.*, Routledge.
7. Vox, 2019. *The ingredients of a classic house track*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrqlA0PpAv8>
8. Turner, D., 2020. *Future Bass: Get Familiar With EDM's Sound Of 2017*. Rolling Stone. Available at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/future-bass-get-familiar-with-edms-sound-of-2017-118412/>
9. AllMusic (2011) *Noise-Rock Music Genre Overview*, AllMusic, Available at: <https://www.allmusic.com/style/noise-rock-ma0000004455?cmpredirect>
10. SoonVibes (2019) *Key Frequencies to improve your mixing*, SoonVibes, Available at: <https://www.soonvibes.com/en/blog/frequencies-cles-pour-ameliorer-votre-mixage/>
11. Iler, D. (2011) *Formal Devices of trance and house music: Breakdowns, buildups and anthems*, Texas: UMI Dissertation Publishing. Available at: <https://search.proquest.com/openview/5bfa82f69f47d807eb221ccab472345f/1?cbl=18750&diss=y&pq-origsite=gscholar>
12. Matla, S. (no date) '*The Definition Guide to Automation in Electronic Dance Music, EDMprod*', Available at: <https://www.edmprod.com/automation-guide/>
13. Reynolds, S. (2018) '*How Auto-Tune Revolutionised the Sound of Popular Music*', *Pitchfork*, Available at: <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/how-auto-tune-revolutionized-the-sound-of-popular-music/>
14. The Los Angeles Film School (no date) *A Brief History of EDM*, Available at: <https://www.lafilm.edu/blog/brief-history-edm/>
15. Ableton.com. 2020. *Sidechain Compression: Part 1 - Concepts And History*. Available at: <https://www.ableton.com/en/blog/sidechain-compression-part-1/>

Appendix 1 - Guitar Amp



Appendix 2 - Kick EQ



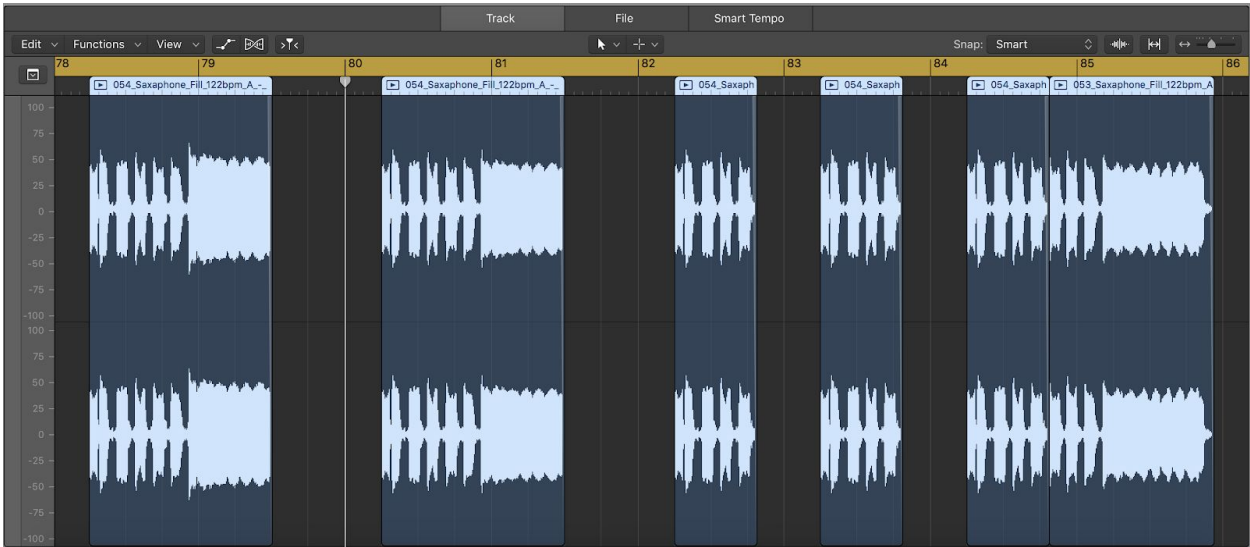
Appendix 3 - Snare Compression



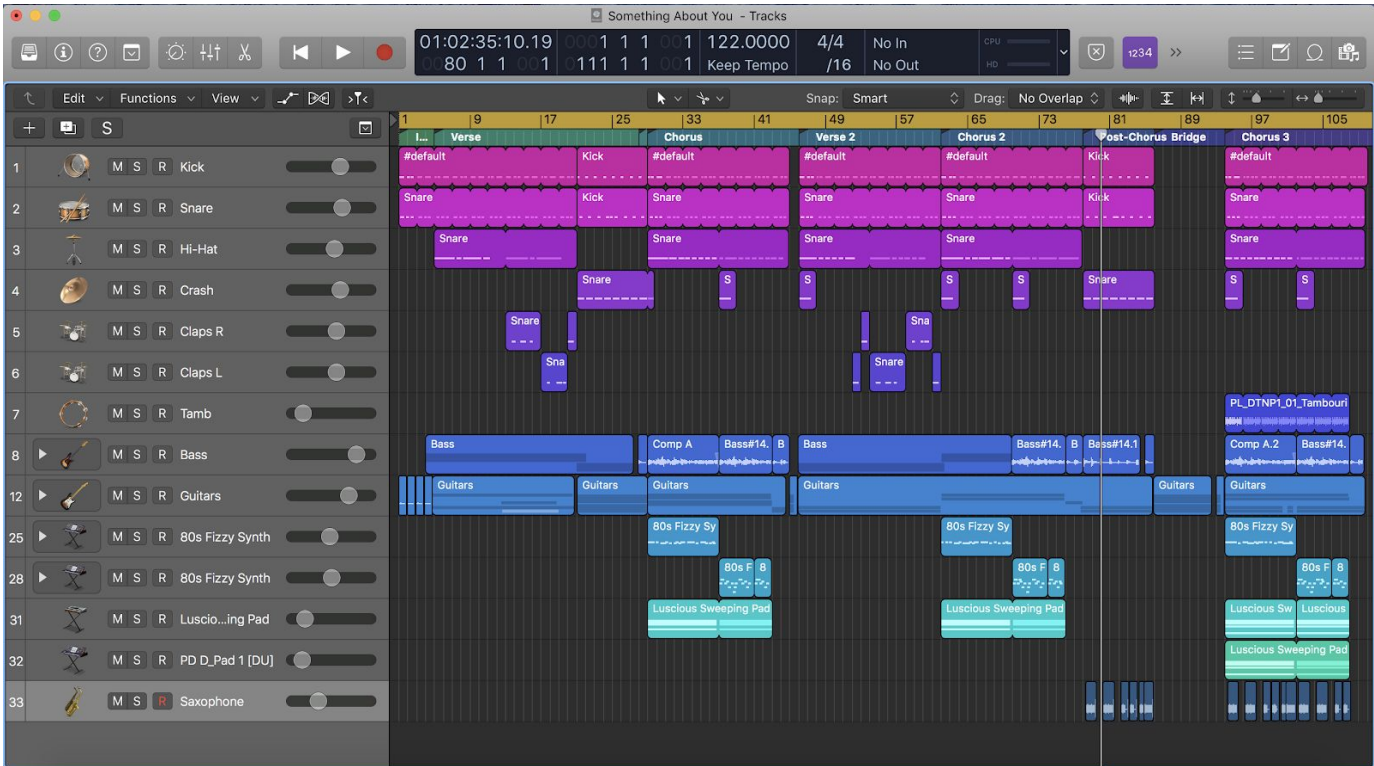
Appendix 4 - Kick Settings in Drum Kit Designer



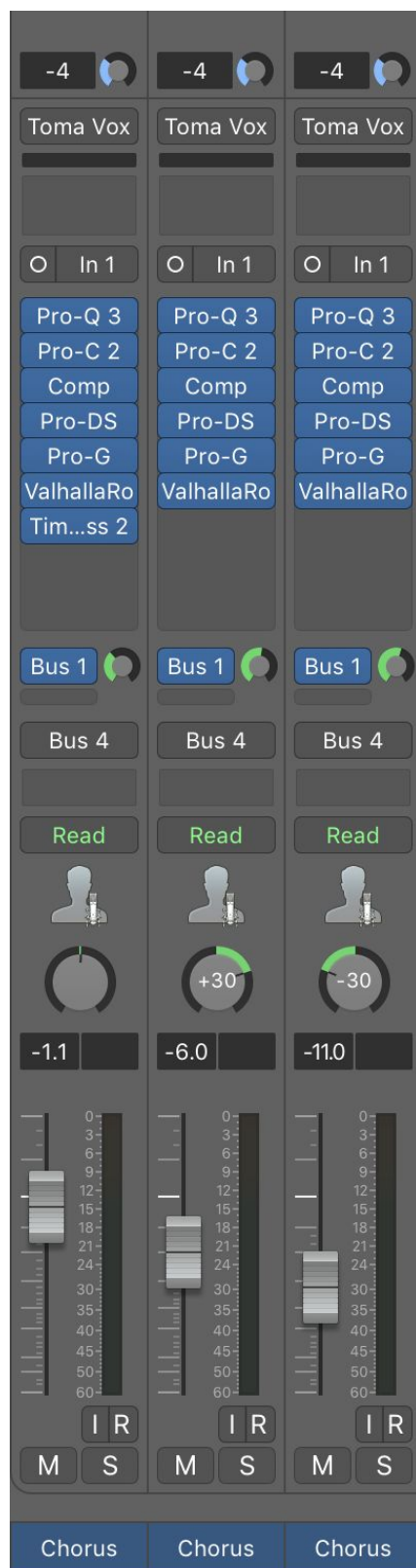
Appendix 5 - Saxophone Solo Audio Edit/Rearrangement



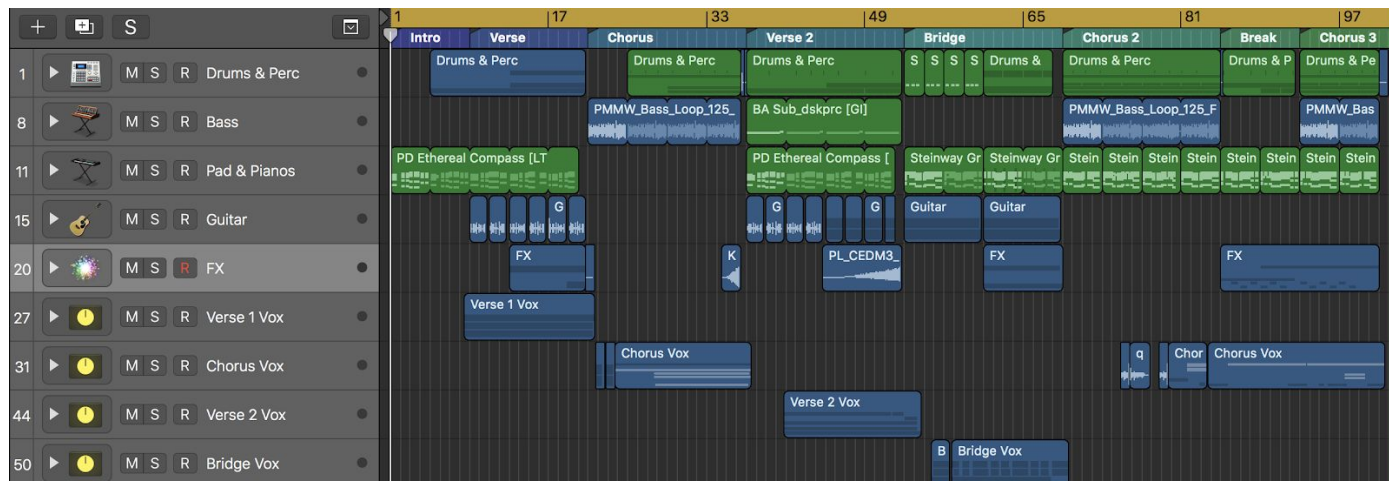
Appendix 6 - ‘Something About You’ Logic Session (Instrumental)



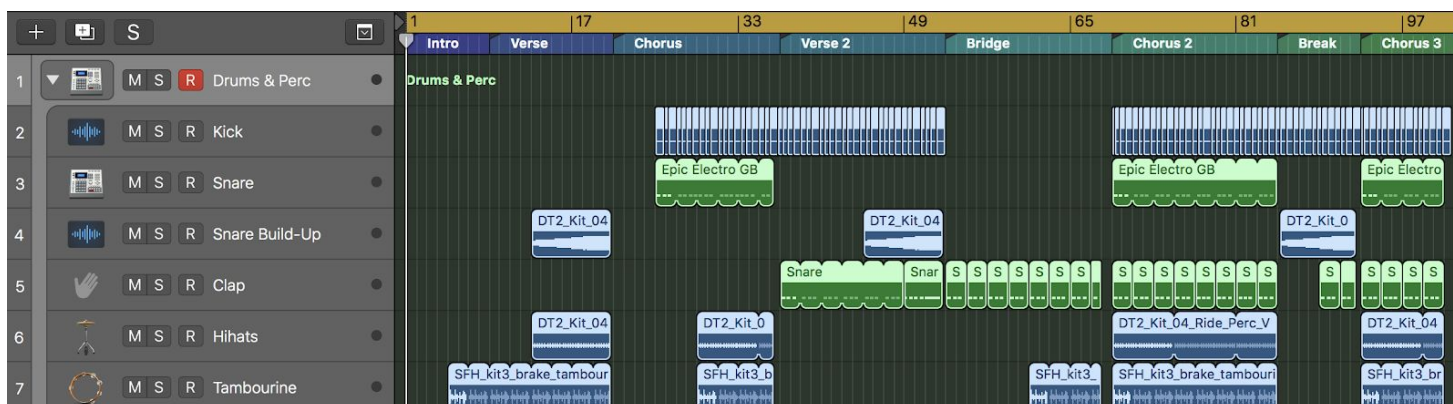
Appendix 7 - Vocal Chain in Chorus



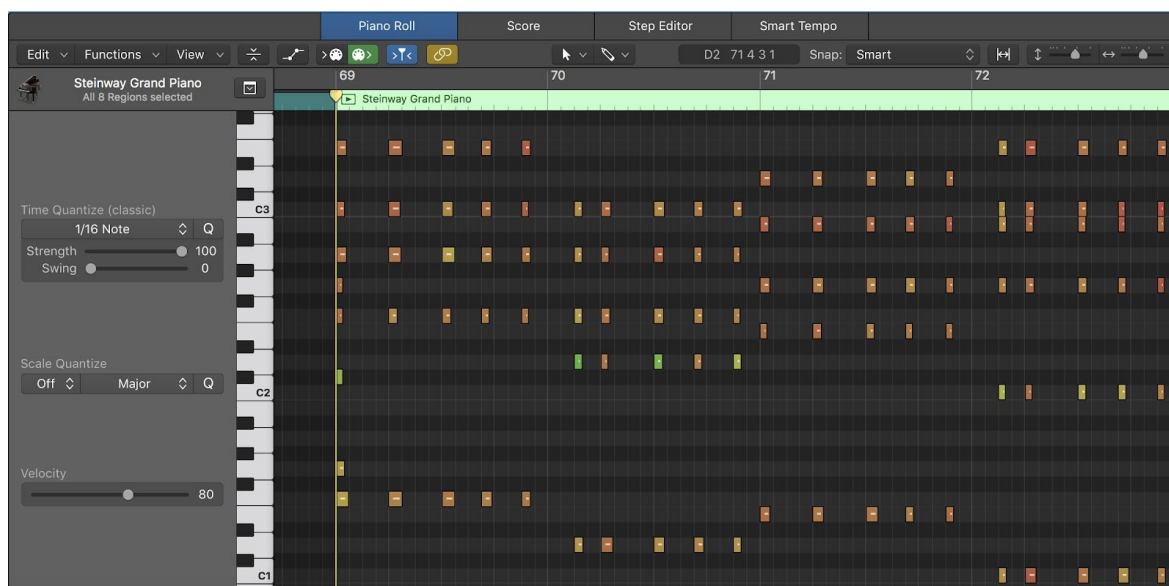
Appendix 8 - 'Fallin' Out of Love' Structure



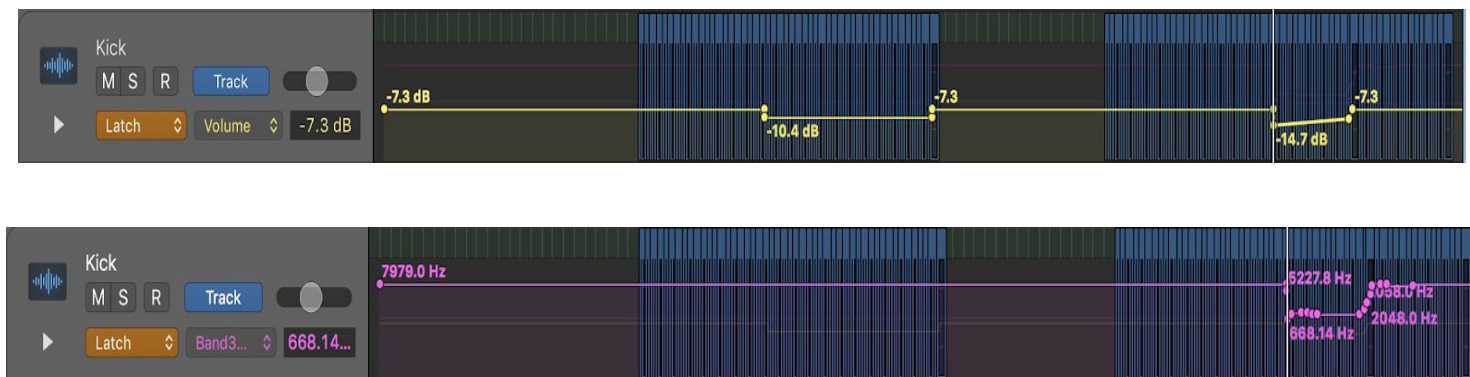
Appendix 9 - Drums & Percussion



Appendix 10 - Piano Roll



Appendix 11 - Kick Volume and EQ Automation



Appendix 12 - Piano EQ Automation

