

F2 Reflective Essay

Foundation

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When starting the production process, what stood out as a potential hinderance was having professional and ready productions in time for the deadline. Throughout my production development, being effective has always been something I have struggled with. There is an element of being overly critical to one's own work, which essentially only hinders creativity and growth. I wished to use the portfolio to venture into more unfamiliar genres, where I could really challenge my creativity. Furthermore, it was important that each genre allowed for different and distinct productions: granting a greater use of several production approaches and techniques. Initially finding it difficult to identify genre specific tendencies, being confined to a genre did allow for guidelines and certain production expectations that conclusively helped shape the sound of the productions. The reflection consists of 'Dancing With You', which is a Dance-pop inspired track, 'Realise' with influence from Contemporary R&B and 'Breathing Poison' being inspired by Alternative Pop.

Rising to prominence in the late 1980s, dance-pop emerged as a subgenre to Pop music and quickly grew to dominate the music market in the 1980s, and then further evolving into one of the most popular commercial genres today (Sonemic, 2022b). Developing as a more up-tempo and structured derivative of the dance music of the time, Dance-pop is often characterized by its danceable melodies and steady rhythms, which aims to be both suitable for a nightclub dance floor and contemporary hit radio (Abbott, 2021). With Dance-pop there is a greater focus on the production where, in contrast to other pop genres, the vocals and the vocalist are not necessarily the focal point (Pereira, 2021). Further resulting in Dance-pop being a popular genre amongst DJs. Due to the danceable aspect of the genre, easy and catchy melodies are desired; where the vocal is added as short, repetitive top lines (Osborne, 2020). Found in a lot of Calvin Harris productions, especially in his work from the earlier 2010s, is this notion of an upbeat, danceable production lead track with simple top lines.

Harris establishes the song in the genre straight away with a steady, synth progression and clean, simple vocals. This opening is what initially inspired me to produce a track in the Dance-pop genre, where I found inspiration in the more toned-down beginning, further allowing a bigger build-up later in the song. In contrast to Harris, I decided to have the drum foundation present from the beginning. In 'Summer', the song begins with only vocals, synth and bass guitar and then gradually introduces the rest of the foundation throughout the verse and for the build-up, which works great for Harris' production. Nevertheless, I decided that for 'Dancing With You' I wanted the extra weight from the drum kit present from the start. Personally, I found this to

help drive the rhythm, and danceability, of the track forward; where without the extra force of the drums, the song lost some of its momentum. Furthermore, 'Dancing With You' is heavily synth bass based. Initially due to my strong liking of bass heavy productions, the heavy synth production proved to be an eminent way of adding elements suited for a nightclub. By doubling the same melody with both heavy distorted sub basses and higher pitched bass plucking, allowed for an easy, thick, and catchy melody line to be the focal point.

As Dance-pop is an extension of Pop, the standard pop song structured is commonly used by Dance-pop producers and artists. Nevertheless, where a pop song would have a vocal focal point with a strong vocal chorus, Dance-pop has exchanged this with a pre-chorus building up to an upbeat danceable drop that can be with or without vocals. In 'Summer' this chorus, or 'drop', is instrumental and works as a danceable release to the verse. With 'Dancing With You' I initially followed the structure of 'Summer' with a verse leading into a pre-chorus that builds up to a chorus, then repeats until there is a musical break with the bridge before the chorus is introduced again. Nevertheless, Harris included extremely simple lyrics in 'Summer', that are repeated, and only present, in the verses and bridge: which is more of a characteristic of electro house rather than Dance-pop (Martina, 2022). Although, this is not to say that the lyrics found in Dance-pop are not 'simple', as a key element is for them to be catchy. However, there are usually some varieties within the vocal melody and lyrics. The contrast between the verse and the chorus and more playful lyrical melodies found in 'Deep Down' by Alok helped pin down the lyrics for 'Dancing With You'. Especially the relationship between the chorus and the post-chorus, which persuaded me to alter the structure initially inspired by Harris, where I shortened the chorus to add a post-chorus. This allowed for a more chopped up top line which brought some more danceable elements to the song.

Nevertheless, I would argue that with this production I did not manage to entirely achieve the dance-pop vocal sound. In 'Deep Down' the vocals are very clear and punchy adding that extra fun element. For 'Dancing With You' I intended to achieve a similar feel, but did not manage to get the vocals to sound as punchy as I would prefer. Having that additional energy from the vocals would have further placed the song within the Dance-pop genre and lifted the professionalism on the production.

'Realise' was an especially difficult track to produce. Although the instrumentalization is fairly simple, especially compared to 'Dancing With You', there was a notion of the production

lacking identity and affiliation. I struggled to remain predominantly within one genre and found that I got impulses and inspiration from too many angles. I started the production process after being very intrigued by the chord progression of ‘Attention’ by Omah Lay feat. Justin Bieber. I believe what initially threw me off is the songs strong roots in afrobeat and Afropop, where I did not fully manage to grasp and capture that unique sound. There are still traces of this found in ‘Realise’, mainly with the percussion, but not to a substantial amount for the production to be classified as Afropop. The more I worked on the production, the more it resembled the tone of a lot of Justin Biebers recent work, which allowed me to pinpoint the contemporary R&B influences of ‘Attention’.

Contemporary R&B, as the name suggests, is a modern narrative of the Rhythm and Blues styles that originated in the 1940s (Tavakoli, 2022). In contrast to its parent genre where guitar and acoustic instruments were crucial elements, Contemporary R&B is a predominantly keyboard-based genre with electronic¹ influences (MasterClass, 2021). Since the genres origin in the 1940s, R&B has undergone several transformations within the music industry, which might make it difficult to define and navigate. (Henry, 2016). Prophesised by critics to be a ‘dead’ genre at the turn of the 21st century, contemporary R&B managed to reinvent itself from a genre with prominently one distinctive soulful sound, into one with an eagerness to explore vocal techniques and musical fusions (Smith, 2022). Criticised by some to be in a commercial crisis, the genres’ ability to reinvent itself might be exactly what allows Contemporary R&B to thrive and succeed; and further creating a unique and distinctive sound. For instance, in recent years one will find a commonality amongst artists to return to the soulful roots of R&B and combine this with other popular genres such as hip-hop and more commercial pop sounds (Smith, 2022). Resulting in the characteristic sound of the smooth, melismatic vocals borrowed from earlier R&B, mixed with synthesised productions often borrowing rhythms from Hip-Hop.

What settled the production as a contemporary R&B track was essentially the addition of the vocals. Taking inspiration from the vocal production of Normani, predominantly the song ‘Fair’, pushed me to explore more flush and melodic vocal melodies. Normani has a very interesting interchange between longer, stretched out vocal lines, broken up with faster sung words. Contemporary R&B puts great emphasis on movement and intervals between melody

¹ Referring to the use of electronic instruments, not the electronic music genres

lines, where in 'Fair', the inclusion of such interchanging vocals creates those dynamics (tunedly, 2019). I wanted to capture a similar dynamic with 'Realise', by leaving space in-between the vocal in the verses in contrast with a rapid pre-chorus opened for a greater differentiation in emotion, allowing each segment to stand firmly in its own right. Contemporary R&B encourages meaningful vocals and lyrics infused with emotions, often related to romance, rather than the ability for lyrics to rhyme (tunedly, 2019). With 'Realise' I wished to play with the change of going between feeling sad to feeling angry and annoyed by having the sadder lyrics slower and more stretched out, versus the angry and annoyed displayed through a continuous stream of words, almost as if the vocalist is rambling.

Returning to 'Attention' by Omah Lay, which is produced by Avedon and HARV, the latter also being the producer of 'Fair'. Personally, I would not necessarily classify this song as primarily Contemporary R&B, rather Afropop with influences from Contemporary R&B. The songs strong chord soundscape and distinctive percussion are such instrumental elements of Afropop, that are not always found in, or a characteristic of Contemporary R&B (Kariisa, 2018). Taking the chord soundscape from 'Attention', I transformed them into a clearer keyboard chord progression for 'Realise'. Where in 'Attention' the chords work as a pad adding thickness to the production, I was inspired by the more keyboard heavy productions of Contemporary R&B and used the chord progression as a rhythm element instead. The Contemporary R&B influences that are found in 'Attention' can presumably be traced back to the producer's strong ties to Contemporary R&B and previous work with Contemporary R&B artists. Found in several HARV productions, one will find smooth and soulful vocals from Justin Bieber on 'Attention', similarly with the vocals in 'Fair'. With 'Realise' I found myself wanting to recreate that subtle, but long reverb sound. Further adding to the rich vocal production is the use of vocal harmonies, which can be found especially in the chorus, but also more subtly throughout the verses. Found in both 'Attention' and 'Fair', is a great use of autotune as a noticeable element. More of a common element borrowed from Hip-Hop, the use of autotune adds that more modern electronic sound to the production (Runcie, 2021). Personally, this did not resonate with the sound I intended to accomplish with 'Realise', where I wanted some of the 'unperfect' sounds of the voice to shine through to underscore the lyrics and the emotion behind them.

With the production of 'Breathing Poison', I found a lot of inspiration from the Alternative pop genre and its darker productions. Alternative pop was first coined as a term to describe the post-

punk bands of the mid-1980s and 1990s. Simultaneous to the rise of the independent label in the 1980s, which provided more artistic freedom than the bigger labels, the genre offered to represent musicians who did not reach or fall under the characteristics of the mainstream (Brassington, 2015). Despite the original definition, new technology and streaming services means that listeners have more access and ways to listen to smaller labels-, and independents artists, inevitably making them more accessible to the mainstream, and the term ‘alternative pop’ has evolved². Steve Taylor argues in the book “The A to X of Alternative Music” that when looking at alternative genres, it is important to understand what they are an alternative to (Taylor, 2004). The alternative does not represent how something is made, played, or listened to, it is something everchanging in relation to commercial, or mainstream, ideas of what music should sound like (Taylor, 2004).

In the case of Altpop, the genre wishes to remove itself from the expectations of commercial pop music. Commercial pop is an interesting phenomenon, as it is dependent on what is desired by the listeners and considered ‘popular’ for a specific time-period. The music is designed from a consumption point of view, and often reaches a huge audience, but only for a limited amount of time until something else is considered ‘popular’ (Taylor, 2004). By removing the throwaway intentions, Altpop seeks to be honest and reflect the visions and influences of the artist (Brassington, 2015). A common similarity amongst Altpop artists and records, is the darker, and at times sadder expression. Found prominently with Lana Del Rey³, she has for many years dominated the Altpop scene with her melancholy sound (Daly, 2021). Through her albums she established the Altpop sound in modern times and moved the genre further away from its roots by creating a more electronic sound pallet (Sonemic, 2022a). This shift has inspired a further move into the electronic with music released by artists such as Madison Beer, who challenge the clean, upbeat pop sound with darker themed atmospheres.

What first inspired the production for ‘Breathing Poison’, was the staccato synth arpeggio found in Griff’s ‘Black Hole’. What really intrigued me was how unique and different the sound was compared to other chart-hits. The synth almost creates a slight unbalance in the song, where it dissonates with the otherwise cleaner production. Applying this for my own production, I ended up with a ‘bell-pattern’ that plays delayed arpeggios over a synth chord progression. In ‘Black

² From now on I will refer to Alternative Pop as the modern derivative Altpop

³ Although I have not used any Lana Del Ray song as a reference, I felt it was important to mention the impact she has had on the development of Altpop

Hole' the arpeggios are found almost continuously throughout the song, whereas in 'Breathing Poison' the arpeggios are added as a signifying element tied to the lyrics. Going back to the less busy productions of Altpop, having the 'bell-pattern' appear only at certain times amplified its contrasting and unsettling sound. Furthermore, this allowed the bass line to have a more prominent role throughout the song. It was important for me to express a notion of frustration and anger, where the deep and electronic sound of the bass plays a significant part in illustrating this. Utilizing the bass in such a way was inspired by Leroy Clampitt's synth production in the chorus of Madison Beer's 'Blue'. Clampitt creates a relationship between the vocal and the staccato synth bass that darkens the perception of the vocal. Allowing the vocal and the synth to stand alone without impulses from other instruments, creates a contrast and unexpected drop from the verse that further display the defeated tone of the vocals.

Throughout the chorus of 'Blue' the lead vocal is doubled by filtered, digital sounding vocals. Here Clampitt further plays with the relationship between the vocal and the synth, creating a distorted soundscape. For 'Breathing Poison' I wished to create a similar perception. I doubled the lead vocal with a heavily distorted vocal line where I used a Phat FX filter to make it sound like the vocal was being sung through an old phone; further complementing the dissonance with the otherwise cleaner produced lead. I found this relationship to be very intriguing, as it allowed me to really push how far I could distort and manipulate the sound. This kind of exploring with sound was a great part of producing 'Breathing Poison', and one I found myself really enjoying. As I recorded the vocals at home, there were bound to be times when outside noise would make it onto the recording. Dipping into the Altpop world and its desire to be 'different', per se, I wanted to embrace these recording mishaps. Throughout the song there is this humming element cut off with a sharp 'I' sound that came to place when I looped the vocal and the loop cut off right as the vocal was to sing 'I'. Furthermore, in the chorus and second verse, one will find a short sweep that is a transposed and reversed scream, from when someone accidentally walked into the room while I was recording and startled me. By adding these elements, the production really took shape and transformed into something unique and distinctive.

When approaching each of the productions, there was an eagerness to really challenge myself in terms of genres and production styles. Using reference tracks has been a technique I have previously utilised and find very inspirational and useful. Nevertheless, producing within a certain genre with elements commonly found in said genre, was quite a challenge. I found I have a tendency of fluctuating between genres where I struggled to pinpoint the core elements

of the genre withing my productions. Furthermore, producing several tracks for a certain deadline was a new experience that really pushed me to be less critical with my production choices. This industry requires that a producer can deliver a product on time, and through these productions I have gained new insight into how I can achieve this. An immense part of these projects was to instil a confidence in myself and my production choices. As a producer you need to develop the skill to understand when something is good enough; and that is what I have tried to achieve with these productions.

Nevertheless, I should have utilised more of the different resources available through Tileyard: especially the other students. When producing the songs, I got to confined to my own space and voice, where I didn't venture into using more live instruments or different vocalists. For further projects I believe that would be a very beneficial experience and something I should keep challenging.

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