

ESSAY

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1. Introduction

This essay will be analysing three contemporary genres and assess their characteristics to aid in the creation of three compositions in three different genres. Namely, Afro Trap, Future House and Acoustic Pop, which are all diverse and contain unique structures, arrangements, instrumentation, production and different priorities in terms of catering to the commercial market.

2. Afrotrap

2.1 Context

To get an overview of the musical origin, this chapter will first establish the context of the genre and the chosen reference tracks.

Afrotrap is a modern genre that was commercially established around 2015 (ARTE, 2016). It is a combination of Afrobeat, a West-African genre that was created in the 1920s emphasising complex percussion and vocal chants (Dela Aglanu, 2015) and Trap, a style of HipHop developed in the southern part of the United States in the late 90s, that is commonly known for its focus on heavy kick drums and 808 bass sounds (Adaso, 2017). Afrotrap had its origins in the suburbs of French cities and was described as "the music of a generation that grew up between the sounds of Africa and the United States" in a documentary by ARTE (2016). One of the key players in its rise into the European mainstream is MHD a French rap artist with Guinean and Senegalese roots (Bureau, 2016). In 2015 he released "Afro Trap Pt.1 (La Moula)" which is one of the first songs that pioneered the genre, reaching millions of views online (MHD, 2018).

His most successful song to date, called “Afro Trap Pt. 7 (La Puissance)”, is a prime example for this genre, reaching close to 50 million streams on Spotify and will serve as the main reference track (Spotify, 2018).

This essay will also be looking at two other tracks in the same style to get a better overview of the genre.

After the success of French Afrotrap, many other artists from nations like Germany, the Netherlands and the UK started creating their own iterations (Raptastisch, 2017). Afrotrap has had major success in the Netherlands, where it was blended with the sounds of their large Electronic Dance Music industry (EDM) and established their own version of Afrotrap that is sometimes referred to as Afrohouse, like the second reference track “Ze Willen Me” by Hardwell. The third reference is “Butterflies” by AJ Tracey and Not3s, two popular UK rappers to have an English reference.

2.2 Arrangement and Structure

All three reference tracks are approximately between two and four minutes long, which falls in the realm of most pop songs, usually about three minutes long (Allain, 2014). The bpm ranges from 100 bpm to 126 bpm, “Afro Trap Pt. 7 (La Puissance)” has the highest bpm, while the other two are much closer to 100 bpm. The length is between two and four minutes, “La Puissance” being the shortest at 2:22min. All reference tracks have a 4/4 time signature.

“La Puissance” is based on a *verse-chorus-verse-chorus* structure, while “Butterflies” includes an extra chorus at the beginning and “Ze Willen Me” an additional verse and chorus.

It also has a pre-chorus that leads up to the chorus, which shows the Dutch EDM influence with the chorus resembling a drop, commonly known of EDM tracks. It is also worth mentioning that none of the tracks contain a bridge or middle 8, which is common in modern Trap music (Mize, 2016).

2.3 Instrumentation and Vocal

The instrumentation is mostly quite simple. “La Puissance”, for example, contains a simple pluck melody that prevails throughout the majority of the song with some simple pads in the background in the chorus, several brass stabs and a simple guitar melody one minute and 27 seconds into the track. The instrumentation and melodies chosen appear to be minimalistic, which can also be heard in “Ze Willen Me” where a simple piano melody carries the verses as well as a trumpet and 808 bass making up the choruses.

The emphasis lies on the percussion and rhythmical patterns that provide the groove of the tracks. All three reference tracks have a simple kick pattern on all four quarter-notes. They also contain a snare, clap or rimshot with African and Latin patterns that make up the main body of the track. The snare pattern in “Butterflies” seems more Latin, resembling common Reggaeton drum patterns with snares falling on 16th-notes 4, 7, 12 and 15 (MusicRadar, 2007), while “La Puissance” sounds more African, audible in the chorus, especially with the melodic percussive elements at the end of each bar.

Other elements included are high-hats often used in triplet patterns, toms, vocal chops and other percussive elements like congas and djembes.

In all songs the main rhythm is repetitive, the aforementioned percussive elements and fills are thus very important to make the tracks more intricate, for example eight seconds into “Ze Willen Me” where the main rimshot does a triplet fill.

The bass patterns are also quite simple however, can vary in some cases. The basses used are usually 808 sounds which have upper harmonics, most noticeable in the second part of the chorus in “Ze Willen Me” showing the influence of Trap, which is infamous for its harmonic basses (Raymer, 2013).

The simplistic approach allows a lot of space for the vocal that is usually rap, which is another key element of Afrotrap as audible in all reference tracks. Rap, a rhythmical form of vocal delivery, suits this genre as the major characteristic is rhythm (Keys, 2004). However, it does not exclusively contain rap, as audible in the chorus of “Butterflies” which is sung by AJ Tracey. The use of ad-libs, another influence from trap music, is also audible in MHD’s track (Britton, 2018).

2.4 Production

As previously mentioned, the drums and percussion are very important to this genre, this is also evident regarding production. In all reference tracks, the drums are loud, sharp and compressed to sound full while still retaining a lot of attack creating a dynamic feel, especially the snares and rimshots. Production techniques used to achieve these types of drums are a combination of compression, distortion, reverb, delay, layering and panning.

Techniques like parallel compression are often used to achieve full sounding drums and will be applied in the composition (Aisher, 2012).

Apart from drums, most of the instruments like the piano or the pluck sounds are kept quite simple with a bit of compression, reverb and delay. In all reference tracks, the mix sounds full while still having enough space and clarity for the percussion and vocal to shine through. The sub bass is also side chained to the kick for extra punchiness and groove. The vocals also sound loud, heavily compressed and are the forefront of the mix.

Overall the tracks are loud but still very dynamic and are suitable for both clubs and the radio. This is due to the fact that the 808 bass includes a lot of harmonics, seemingly making the bass perceivable through the radio, earphones and small speakers that are not able to replicate low frequencies.

2.5 Implementation

The analysis of Afrotrap led to the creation of “Down”, featuring UK rapper LexBlaze, and the references were used as inspiration to create an Afrotrap track. The bpm is 124 bpm, closest to “La Puissance” to achieve a quicker feel, and is also a similar length. The instrumentation is based on the simplistic principle to leave enough space for the drums and the vocals. The track includes a pluck sound playing the chords in the verses, a flute being the main melodic element in the chorus similar to “Ze Willen Me”, a heavy 808 bassline and the aforementioned rhythmic elements, fills and vocal chops.

The vocals were recorded with a Tileyard mic with an X1 condenser microphone by SE and follows the same structure as “Ze Willen Me”, *verse-prechorus-chorus-verse-prechorus-chorus* and has a similar repetition effect of the word “down” in the chorus. Production-wise, parallel compression and the use of the distortion plugin “CamelCrusher” has been very effective in achieving full sounding drums.

3. Future House

3.1 Context

Future House is a sub-genre of Electronic Dance Music (EDM) that was developed around 2010, blending Deep House with UK Garage (MusicRadar, 2016). The term was coined by one of its pioneers called Tchami, who labelled the songs he posted on SoundCloud as “Future House”. Originally intended as a joke, he said “It has never been about the launch of a new genre. I guess people loved it and made it a new genre. That’s the beauty of internet. Future House basically means all tunes that push forward the House genre. Whatever it is. It’s open” (Ubbs, 2014).

Future House had its first mainstream success with “Gecko” by Oliver Heldens, which has over 136 million streams on Spotify since coming out in 2014 (Ghanem, 2017). The genre has been developing ever since and has become dominant in the EDM and Pop scene, creating globally successful acts like Don Diablo, EDX and Oliver Heldens (Spotify, 2018). One of the latest examples is “Fine Day” by Keanu Silva, the HUGEL remix of “The Shape” and “King Kong” by Oliver Heldens, which will serve as reference tracks.

3.2 Arrangement and Structure

The bpm of Future House varies between 120 bpm and 130 bpm however, is most commonly between 124 bpm and 126 bpm, like the reference tracks. Most Future House songs are released in longer extended edits meant for the clubs, and radio edits for the radio and streaming. This essay will focus on the radio edits only as the extended mixes mostly contain the exact same elements as the radio edits just having intros and outros that are stripped down versions of the drop. The length of the reference tracks is approximately three minutes and they all have a 4/4 time signature.

All reference tracks have a structure of *verse-chorus-verse-chorus*, whereas the choruses are mostly instrumental. Also, all references are in a minor key.

3.3 Instrumentation and Vocal

All three reference tracks show some key characteristics regarding vocals. In comparison to Pop songs or even Afrotrap the lyrics seem less fleshed out. “King Kong” doesn’t contain any vocals whereas, “Fine Day” does yet the lines are quite simple and are repeated often. “The Shape” has full verses but also only contains vocal chops in the drop like “Fine Day”. This is probably due the fact that the genre is predominantly made by EDM producers with a focus on clubs, where the use of vocal samples is common practice (Gamp, 2014). It appears that tracks like “The Shape” with vocals closer to a classic Pop song, are intended for radio play and streaming, whereas others like “King Kong” are intended for clubs and festivals.

Most melodic instruments are digital sounds made with VST plugins like Serum, Sylenth 1 and Massive, or samplers like Kontakt and Nexus 2 (Price, 2014). This is generally the case for all sub-genres of Electronic Dance Music. It is also noticeable that all reference tracks have a piano playing the chords at some point during the track, for example, in the second verse of the “The Shape” and “Fine Day”.

The main drum sounds in all three productions are very similar. The kick in the drop falls on all quarter-notes, with a clap on every second quarter-note and high-hats added in the second part of the first drop and immediately in the second drop. The drum sounds used are generally electronic sounds derived from the TR-909 and 808 with breakbeat samples in the breakdown, audible in the breaks (verses) of “Fine Day” and “King Kong”. These breakbeats are a key influence of UK garage and are used heavily. Other rhythmical elements include toms, snare drums in the build-up and various percussive elements for fills. It is also important to mention the heavy-use of white-noise and effects to help the flow and feeling of the track, most notable in the first drop of “King Kong”.

3.4 Production

Future House contains a lot of elements and is more complex in comparison to Afrotrap. All sounds are heavily processed with a lot of multiband compression, EQ, saturation, reverb, delay etc. The tracks sound loud and full but still dynamic, which is important since it is Electronic Dance Music.

Generally, the tracks are mixed to be played on big club systems, therefore, the low-end is really important, making sidechaining and EQ essential to achieve the right balance between the kick and the bass sounds, which are at the forefront of the drops of all reference tracks.

The low-end must be mixed properly to provide a solid foundation for the track, especially in the drop. The use of distorted basses is also common practice, making it suitable for listening and streaming on earphones and small speakers, since the higher harmonics of the basses make them perceivable, even though the low-frequencies of the bass cannot be replicated by small speakers.

Overall, the mixes sound very wide and sharp but also clean. Panning and EQ are useful tools to achieve enough space to incorporate a lot of elements.

3.5 Implementation

Assessing Future House has culminated in a remix, which is going to be released officially through TGR Music Group in 2019. The tempo is 126bpm and the key is C minor, similar to the reference tracks. All the main elements, such as the breakbeat, piano chords and distorted bass, have been incorporated and it has a similar length, close to three minutes.

As previously mentioned, the use of effects and white noise have been essential for the flow and overall feel of the composition. In a tutorial explaining his song “Animals”, Martin Garrix, the world’s current number one DJ, has shared a technique of bouncing out the reverb of certain melodic elements and reversing it to introduce instruments and new sections of the song (Garrix, 2014).

This technique has been really effective in helping the flow of the track, especially in introducing the vocal chops in the drop. Another technique that proved to be effective to create the sound of Future House is ducked reverb and the use of the VST plugin “Trackspacer”. The technique of ducking means that one audio signal is reduced in volume by the presence of another, similar to sidechaining, where the signal of the kick drum is used to reduce the volume of other sounds to create space for the kick drum (Cooper, 2016). It can also be applied to synths and vocals, where the added reverb is being ducked by the original signal of the synth or vocal. In other words, while the original signal is playing, the volume of the reverb is lowered, making it really useful to create punchy leads and vocals while still adding a lot of reverb, which is implemented on the vocal chops in the drop. Regarding the low-end, Trackspacer has been really useful for sidechaining as it analyses the exact frequencies of the kick drum and carves them out of the bass’ frequency spectrum to create a very smooth form of sidechaining.

4. Acoustic Pop

4.1 Context

Acoustic music has been around since the invention of instruments; however, Acoustic Pop has been a major online trend of the past decade. Several successful artists like Justin Bieber, Ed Sheeran, Shawn Mendes and many more have started their career by making acoustic covers of pop songs and uploaded them to services like YouTube (Gittleman, 2017).

Acoustic covers have prevailed, with most Pop artists starting to release their own acoustic version of their singles, e.g. “New Rules - Acoustic” by Dua Lipa, “The Other (Stripped)” by Lauv and “These Days - Acoustic” by Rudimental, which will serve as reference tracks.

4.2 Arrangement and Structure

The tempo of the reference tracks varies between 89 bpm and 116 bpm, “New Rules” having the highest tempo, and they are all between three and four minutes long. Generally, the tempo of Pop songs can vary quite a lot in regards to bpm however, according to NME the average tempo of a Pop song in the Billboard charts 2017 was 118.5bpm (2017). The average length of a Pop song was 3:45 (Hypefresh, 2017). All reference tracks have a 4/4 time signature.

“New Rules” and “The Other” have similar *verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus* structures however, “New Rules” includes a *pre-chorus* in front of every *chorus*. “These Days” has a *verse-chorus-verse-chorus-verse-chorus* structure and also includes an intro and outro speech.

4.3 Instrumentation and Vocal

As the name of the genre suggests, the instrumentation is mostly acoustic, relying on either a piano or a guitar as the main instrument of the song. “The Other” and “New Rules” are kept quite simple, including just an acoustic guitar, playing the chords and variations, the vocal, and rare additional elements like the crash in the last chorus of the “The Other” or the snap sound in the second and third chorus of Dua Lipa’s song.

In comparison, “These Days” contains more added elements apart from the main piano and vocal, including drum sounds all over the track and thus sounds more complex than the other references.

Summarising, the main focus of this genre seems to be the vocal.

4.4 Production

Acoustic Pop is a massive contrast to the previously assessed genres because it includes fewer elements, leaving much more space in the mix. As previously mentioned, the vocals are the key component and are at the forefront of the mix, like most Pop songs. The lead vocals are compressed and include little reverb in the case of “New Rules” and “The Other” however, in “These Days” reverb and delay are used more heavily. The production makes the balance between the lead vocal and harmonies stand out, which are an important feature of all reference tracks.

Regarding the instruments, the production is also kept rather simple, with “These Days” sounding more complex and fuller due to the inclusion of more elements and also use of more compression, reverb and delay.

4.5 Implementation

The analysis of Acoustic Pop led to the creation of “What You Call This”.

As previously mentioned, the vocal is the key component of this genre therefore, a lot of time was invested into the harmonies, both in terms of tonality and production.

In the session, three different singers were recorded to give the harmonies more range, since all voices are slightly different. The guitar and singers were recorded with the Aston Origin Microphone.

This technique was applied in “These Days”, which includes multiple singers. The final track includes nine different recorded harmonies to make full use of all the available space in the mix. Panning and EQ were essential to create the right balance between the different layers. The guitar was purposely kept simple and repetitive to emphasise the intricacies of the vocal. The guitar was purposely recorded with one mic to avoid phase issues. Different microphone positions were used to find the best sounding position.

The song is built on a *verse-prechorus-chorus-verse-prechorus-chorus* structure and has a slightly lower runtime than the reference tracks. There were different versions including drums, however, the flow of the track is better without any drums. It leaves enough space for all the harmonies of the vocal.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has successfully analysed three different contemporary commercial genres that led to the creation of three unique compositions that are suitable for their respective commercial market. All genres have different characteristics and emphasis however, the production techniques are mostly the same, mainly including compression, EQ, distortion, reverb, delay etc.

The difference lies in the amount these production techniques are used, and the number of elements incorporated. Future House generally contains more elements than the other two genres and therefore requires more advanced production techniques, like ducked reverb to achieve the best possible mix, whereas Afrotrap leaves much more space while still sounding quite full. The production of Acoustic Pop revealed how important small details and variations can make and shows the sometimes less can be more.

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