

Commercial Music Production: **Foundation Element 2 – Essay**

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Salad Days by Mac DeMarco

The first track I will be dissecting is Salad Days by Mac DeMarco. The New York Times calls DeMarco the 'lovable laid-back prince of indie rock' (Coscarelli, 2017). However, I have some queries with this description.

Firstly, 'prince' seems too charming a description for someone who infamously inserted a drumstick into their anus whilst performing in the nude. An act that Lee Childers would call the epitome of rock and roll, it being 'outrageous' and 'un-allowed' and clearly demonstrates DeMarco's goofiness.

Secondly, I would argue that indie rock is far too broad a categorisation to encompass DeMarco's unique approach to songwriting and doesn't allow the accurate analysis of the specifics of his production style. According to The Tourist Map of Music, DeMarco's contemporaries include Cuco, Still Woozy and Boy Pablo, all artists that similarly make use of chorus laden guitars and analogue synths to achieve a relaxed feel to their work. But DeMarco's compositions are more reminiscent of 'mellow guitar pop in the mould of '60s and '70s songwriters like Harry Nilsson, Neil Young and John Lennon' (Coscarelli, 2017).

Overall, this makes him more of a 'cult leader for a new generation of slackers' in my eyes (Bassett, 2017). And although this does give into the age-old trope that young people are 'a race of effeminate, self-admiring, emaciated fribbles', it does give us some clarification as to how we might classify DeMarco's music (Town & Country, 1771). Between his tongue in cheek lyricism and low fidelity (lo-fi) recording style, Slacker Rock seems apt, as does Jangle Pop if we are basing our labels 'solely on their actual musical characteristics' (Greenberg,

2016); DeMarco's guitar tone is very metallic, often using a solitary single coil pickup (Clarke 2019). In *Pepperoni Playboy*, the 2014 documentary detailing DeMarco's escapades, he explicitly self identifies his style as 'jizz jazz'.

The themes DeMarco presents us are often paradoxical, 'His recordings force together realism and artificiality, sincerity and irony, popularity and esotericism, attraction and repulsion, work and play, and importance and frivolity' (Wainwright 2013). I believe that this is what fundamentally makes 'jizz jazz' so niche and this is never more evident than in his blending of lo-fi and hi-fi methodologies. Initially, DeMarco's music was overwhelmingly lo-fi with his early projects under the name *Makeout Videotape* emphasising this. However, through the years his albums have varied with their lo-fi/hi-fi balance. The most recent releases 'This Old Dog' and 'Here Comes The Cowboy' sounding increasingly hi-fi, likely due to DeMarco's expanding collection of high quality equipment.

The reimagining of a DeMarco style track such as *Salad Days* or *Ode To Viceroy* began with writing a song that could encapsulate the contradictory themes previously presented. I tried to capture a mood between happy and sad with a feel that was laid-back yet also bouncy and energetic. These motivations accidentally culminated in writing a song with a heavily swung feel, using a non-chord tone to create dissonance in an otherwise major sounding verse and using a peculiar I-IV-I-vii progression to rotate between chords that resolve and those that create suspense.

To keep the 'balance, economy, focus and variety' of the arrangement which supports the lyrics and feel of the piece (Sebesky 1994), DeMarco sticks to the reliable indie rock formula of vocals, guitar, bass guitar and drums, except for an increasing usage of analogue synthesisers as his career continues. In *Salad Days* particularly, there are only a handful of timbres present aside from vocals, however the mix still sounds full and interesting. I would

argue that this effect is largely achieved through the layering of guitars wet with reverb and chorus, the small stereo space occupied by the drums and the panning of relevant parts, which altogether build a wider stereo image (d'Ark 2017). That being said, DeMarco doesn't always follow d'Ark's advice to keep the low frequency content central and sometimes pans bass on one side with drums mirrored on the other (a live on stage stereo image), a technique present on songs such as *Brother*, *Passing Out The Pieces*, and to some degree on *Salad Days* (Clarke 2019).

In this regard, I have followed in DeMarco's footsteps by panning heavily modulated and reverberated electro acoustic lead and rhythm guitar parts to opposite sides, whilst I deviated by keeping a dry acoustic guitar as a central texture for the listener to focus on below the vocals. The percussion in nearly all of DeMarco's work is very much in the background and occupies a small space in the mix. Unfortunately, I was not able to replicate the 'fat mic' recording technique that DeMarco used to record his drums due to equipment restraints (ironic due to the simplicity of the method). So instead, I sufficed with programming very soft live drums, using EQ to fatten the snare, the Ableton stock velocity plugin and compression to control the dynamic range, and stereo imaging plugins to reduce the width of the image. There are also several lead guitar parts that employ tape delay (in line with DeMarco's reliance on analogue equipment) in an attempt to replicate the psychedelic ambience and echoing present during the outro of *Ode To Viceroy*, and just like in the *Salad Day* chorus, the lead guitar part is copied on synthesiser that is panned to the opposite side.

In terms of vocals, DeMarco creates both an airy and warm texture, double tracking sparingly and instead using a fast delay and small amounts of reverb to achieve thickness. I have employed this technique on most of the vocal parts, and when a livelier part is necessary, added a more obvious reverb and delay onto backing vocals which I have also auto double tracked. When it comes to compression, usually a huge part of vocal production in pop, he is

seen in NME to own a DBX 165A Compressor but claims ‘he didn’t end up using it at all’ and also a Teletronix LA-2A. I am unaware what compression he ended up using on 2 and Salad Days but opted for the LA-2A in order to get a transparent sound whilst still cutting the peaks. Retrospectively, I should have found a trained singer for the vocals, but since I wrote the song from scratch I felt personally attached and attempted them myself. Thus, the use of Waves Tune was imperative.

DeMarco recorded Salad Days with the use of a Fostex A-8 Tape Machine, relatively high-quality piece of analogue equipment that requires ‘expertise and care’, which maybe DeMarco was lacking as by the end of Salad Days the 8 track tape machine was down to 6 working tracks and DeMarco’s chain-smoking had caused the tape to warp. But these ‘hiccups...were imperative to the character of the album’ (Clarke 2019), DeMarco commenting that ‘The guitars sound so fucked up... It’s amazing’. This wobbly, wavy vibe is inflated also by his use of varispeed, whereby the pitch or speed of a recording can be increased or decreased. To emulate the saturation and varispeed I used a J37 emulator and the varispeed function on Waves ADT.

[Beware by Death Grips](#)

‘Death Grips is a primal force of nature that seems built to subvert’ (Gargano 2013). They are also an eclectic experimental hip-hop trio comprised of Stefan ‘MC Ride’ Burnett (vocals, lyrics), Zach Hill (drums, production) and Andy Morin (keyboards, production). Their music is chaotic, noisy, aggressive and raw (even in seemingly sparse arrangements where several elements of Bobby Owsinski’s arrangement theory aren’t fulfilled), this coupled with their progressively mutating discography made choosing a track to analyse a challenge given that anything I chose would pose significant challenges.

For instance, Death Grips signature abrasive tone comes from the group as a whole: Ride provides violent vocal delivery and enigmatic lyricism, Hill lays down hard hitting drums and is the ‘creative mastermind’ behind the group and Morin engineers a perfect balance between minimalism and madness (Morin 2017). I eventually decided upon Beware from their debut mixtape Ex Military since it was the first song I listened to by them and it immediately had a big impact on me. In many ways I see my love of grunge music in Death Grips, not only do they sample Jane’s Addiction (albeit more alternative rock) in Beware, but industrial hip-hop (the subgenre of experimental hip-hop that fuses industrial music with hip-hop and that Death Grips falls under) is often used synonymously with punk rap. In this case, punk is primarily, but not exclusively, ‘an aesthetic of attitude’ and since hip-hop is ‘pop music’s alchemy’ it seems natural that some geniuses were eventually going to combine what has contemporary widespread appeal with a rebellious ethos (Rick 2017).

At this point another obstacle arises, similarly to Mac DeMarco, no one really sounds like Death Grips, even within the niche of industrial hip-hop they are niche. B L A C K I E comes very close with ‘equal parts fucked-up electronics, distorted guitar pop-cult samples, guitar feedback, video game noise, and angry as hell street flow’ (Hart 2008), yet that being so, doesn’t have the commercial and critical success of Death Grips. To find this we need look no further than hip-hop’s second billionaire Kanye West and his double platinum album Yeezus. Featuring everyone from Daft Punk to Travis Scott, the album draws from a diverse array of genres, including industrial and punk, and went so far as to reach 269th on Rolling Stones 2020 list of the 500 Greatest Albums of All Time.

Throughout the spectrum of industrial hip-hop the tropes that reoccur include a ‘dissonant production style, featuring atonal noise and loud, distorted drums’ (Rate Your Music). The frequent use of sampling from essentially any genre, Ex Military, for example, taking from Link Wray & His Ray Men’s Rumble (1958) as well as, the relatively unheard of, house artist

Amateur At Play's hilariously non-politically correct fake mental health hotline (2008).

Vocals are typically belligerent and obscure lyrics (that in Death Grip's case cover paranoia, mood swings, the decadence of sexual intercourse, the decline of interpersonal autonomy due to the internet and satanic rituals) are sometimes (or nearly always in Ride's case) screamed or shouted (Death Grips Is Online 2019).

When we look specifically at Beware, we see it is put together very meticulously, the song is full of anarchy which is foreshadowed by the intro sample of Charles Manson, the notorious criminal and cult leader and a simple guitar riff from Jane's Addiction. After this, it explodes into Ride shouting 'Beware!', surrounding the listener with a whole host of distinctive timbres including layered vocal risers, guitar feedback, a horn sample and the hugely impactful snare and kick. These ideas form a composition that feels very dynamic.

I have essentially copied the arrangement and structure of this intro, using samples from various sources including a speech by Gandhi, the blockbuster film Inception and sci-fi type samples from splice, to imply a 'Simulation Theory' theme (see bibliography). In my piece, the accompanying sample is Burn The Rain, a very lo-fi demo by the late Kurt Cobain, which with his half mumbled vocals and background screaming starts to establish a dark and dissonant overtone. When the next section starts, I've tried to create a jolting instrumental by fusing similar textures to Beware. The percussion was built from a mix of Nirvana and industrial sounding samples, adding the distinctive Death Grips type reverb to the snare and distorting the kick. In amongst this I layered choir vocals, a video game style riser, bass feedback and avant-garde brass riffs.

For the hook, I looked to Music From Saharan Cellphones, which as the name suggests, contains a jumbled mess of tracks that Death Grips often sample. I initially attempted to use several other samples, but they often clashed with the verse despite dissonance being a key

ingredient in the genre. Eventually, by looking to the distorted riffs in songs such as Twist of Fate/Cobra by Ho99o9, I heavily distorted the bass from the sample and blended it with a cleaner version of the sample, an effect confounded by a distorted synth bass underneath. The second verse adds an arpeggiated riff on the synth bass, a technique used by Death Grips in some of their most well-known songs including Guillotine and Get Got.

Regrettably, several sessions with vocalists fell through and so I had to resort to using samples from rap and heavy metal to land somewhere in between Ride's oral prowess. Luckily, Ho99o9, Ghostmane and B L A C K I E also combine rapping with screamed vocals so this fitted well into the mould of industrial hip-hop.

This being my first attempt at creating Experimental Hip-Hop, it was very difficult to successfully combine each part even after ensuring there was enough space in the mix and factoring in compression and EQ. Moreover, I set my aspirations very high by trying to mix factors from a multitude of Death Grips albums, aside from taking inspiration from other Industrial hip-hop artists.

[Walking On A Dream by Empire of the Sun](#)

Electropop is a very extensive genre as it's two fundamental components, electronic and pop, obviously have a comprehensive presence in contemporary music. As a genre, it rose to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s thanks to British synth-pop artists such as The Human League and Gary Newman, with the breakthrough song 'Don't You Want Me' opening the floodgates (Puterbaugh 1983). Although classic electropop disappeared somewhat in the 1990s, in the last few decades it has made a resurgence with artists like Empire of the Sun, MGMT and Bastille developing and reimagining the genre from an indie perspective. Following the success of electronic indie pop, mainstream music was flooded

with electropop acts including Lady Gaga, Ke\$ha and the Chainsmokers. Even most recently, Billie Eilish has ‘staked her claim as the reigning queen of electropop’ (Womack 2019).

Bar the obvious reliance on synthesisers and generic pop song structure, the defining characteristics of electropop are difficult to pinpoint since they rely less on firm definitions and theory, and more on the mood and navigating cliches. An example of this lies in the comparison between electropop and electronic dance music (EDM). In some sense, they are very similar, as the lyrical themes both revolve around loves lost and found although EDM is likely to have four on the floor, a formulaic riser and a drop. Another significant element to electropop is that it always stays modern and moves with the times, which might seem in contrast to its assembly line production style, but overall it depends on the state of popular music to have a large influence over electropop, which in turn will then aim to have a broad commercial appeal.

Walking On A Dream conforms to these tropes in numerous ways. First and foremost, it is a four-chord song with an extremely catchy melody (and subsequently vibe), which I think is shown in the fact that it is Empire of the Sun’s most popular song by some 150m listeners. Since I composed and produced Don’t Kill My Vibe for a brief to write a happy and upbeat song, it naturally fulfilled the criteria of an electropop song. From the very beginning of the track, we hear the presence of a synth which tends to lie in the background throughout the song as the rhythmic focus of the song is electric guitar. In my piece, the saturated organ acts as the main rhythmic component and repeats simple catchy chords for both the verses and choruses. Alas, the focal point of any contemporary song is the melody, which in my case was written by the vocalist and in my opinion isn’t an effective enough hook.

Luke Steele, the vocalist and co- producer of Empire of the Sun, mentions that he often doubles and/or triples vocal takes numerous times (Synchroarts). This is evident throughout

Walking On A Dream, even though it is more subtle in the verses and obvious in the choruses. Other effects present on the vocals include a distinctive reverb and various layers of compression stereotypical of any modern pop song (Vargo 2018). On the other hand, in order to construct a more psychedelic and hard-hitting sound, MGMT employ a more obvious use of effects such as delay on the main melodic parts and saturation on bass, snare and kick. Much of this effect was achieved by 'assaulting tracks with substandard compressors from the '90s' in a 'master-class of distortion' (Latt 2019). They also obtained a doubling effect on vocals but using spring delay as opposed to auto double track plugins.

My vocal production lies more towards the style of Empire of the Sun, although this isn't obvious because Steele has such a distinctive voice. I have employed auto double tracking and parallel processing throughout, to create tracks that focus on different atmospheric qualities, the main track is very standard, using reverb and heavy amounts of compression to attain an upfront and expressive vocal like that of Walking On A Dream. The second track focuses on an airier, more psychedelic tone with more reverb and a subtle chorus and the third a warmer, thicker colour is built with saturation.

With regards to percussion, often different artists have different signature sounds. For instance, MGMT often uses live drum samples, whereas Lady Gaga fuses heavily compressed live sounds with electronic kits and sometimes Timberland style beat boxing. I would say that the percussion in Walking On A Dream mixes retro and disco sounds. The snare and kick are both quite dry and the hi-hat acts as an ostinato for most of the song. This is quite different to MGMT's Electric Feel where most of the percussion has moderate amounts of reverb.

I tried to blend these two percussion sounds in different parts of the song. In the verses, I found poppy dry drum samples that I fattened with EQ and saturation, specifically adding

sidechain compression to the kick for a driving dancier feel. Then as we go into the chorus, a gated reverb is added on the snare for a fuller sound. My own additions included the use of a tambourine opposed to hit hat, which resulted in giving the track a much more disco feel than was intended and embellished certain parts percussion such as cowbell, plucks and claps.

The final element I tried to capture was the nostalgic emotion that both Walking On A Dream and MGMT songs such as Electric Feel and Kids seem to convey so effortlessly. I think accidentally producing a song with such obvious disco tropes helped in part since songs like September by Earth, Wind & Fire are such timeless classics, but I decided that an extra layer of ambience was needed. Therefore, I added a background sample of a party with people excitedly conversing and laughing, as well as some '80s still risers and one shots. Overall, this constructed a more retro and evocative vibe.

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