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Foundation
Element 2

Assignment Track No.1: Untitled – Chris White

Reference Track: Bad Guy – Billy Eilish

Billy Eilish works closely with her brother and producer Finneas O'Connell. In an episode of AWAL's Spaces series on their YouTube channel (2019), there is an interview and tour of their home studio in LA where the album 'When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?' was recorded and produced [1]. It's a small space where ideas can be captured and developed quickly and spontaneously with the duo working closely together. Finneas states that most of the album's vocals were recorded on the bed right by the computer. This is a practice that other producers such as Sylvia Massy swear by for better communication and working fast while creativity is flowing (as mentioned in an interview with Sylvia for Earth Quaker Devices, 2019) [2]. The album was mixed by engineer Rob Kinelski (Ed Sheeran, Thirty Seconds to Mars, Nas). In an interview on Pensado's Place (2019), Rob Kinelski describes his role as supporting the duo by 'not getting in the way' while taking already highly developed productions and ensuring they're presented as best as can be without taking them in a new direction [3].

Bad Guy is minimal pop with the emphasis on rhythm. Even the vocal is more like a riff with a narrow melodic range and staccato phrasing in the verses. The sound is quite dark and dry, with urban sounds for the beat (snaps, hats and punchy kick) and also what sound like dry, natural claps in the chorus. In the intro it sounds like Billy was caught singing\humming along before the verse which was kept in the edit. Moments like this and the song\albums intro reinforces the impression that Billy and Finneas are in control of production decisions from start to finish. Everything is intended or left in after thought, even if it sounds accidental and this is also suggested in the Pensado's Place interview.

The instrumentation features synth bass, beat, a hyped, up front and layered vocal, some resampled vocal for variation and a lead synth for the hook. There is also a mechanical sounding, rhythmic layer at the back of the mix behind the synth hook, seemingly for texture, movement and variety.

Bad Guy (Arrangement):

Intro \ Verse \ Chorus \ Synth Hook \ Verse (variation, starts with minimal beat) \ Chorus \ Double Synth Hook \ Outro (half tempo)

It's a fast paced pop arrangement (135bpm) with a common structure for modern pop (very similar to Blinding Lights by The Weeknd). It has good hooks, considering both the rhythmic vocal hooks and synth hook after each chorus. The bassline is also catchy and harmonically the bass, vocal and synth hook follow and reinforce each other in terms of the phrasing, with any embellishment of the bass generally being while the vocal rests.

For the assignment track the arrangement, tempo and key of G minor, using the natural minor scale, have all been matched. Similar instrumentation has been used, but inspiration was taken from Brazilian Samba Reggae. The beat has been livened up with a rhythm similar to a Samba Reggae surdo line (surdos are pitched bass drums used in a carnival band). A tambourine and clap sound was also blended to create something like a carnival chocalho (a heavy framed hand held percussion instrument). A Berimbau loop found in Reason Studios was also used, which is a Brazilian musical bow, steel strung and played with a stone. It has a wiry sound similar to the one used at the back of the synth hook in Bad Guy.

Similar to the feeling of fun and spontaneity in Billy Eilish's album, the Brazilian vibe in the outro was recorded right by the computer by layering myself singing a vocal phrase from a Brazilian folk song. Samba Reggae beats also take on a different feel when played slow which worked when

matching the half tempo outro of Bad Guy. The tempo was increased slightly from half for this production as it better suited the beat and berimbau loop. In community music of the African Diaspora in the 'new world' and elsewhere, groups of people sing together. Sometimes harmonies are added, but it's more about intent and committing to the celebration, so the layers are sung in different registers and harmonies spontaneously without always being worked out.

My vocal top line is represented with a piano. On reflection, it doesn't quite have the same rhythmic effect as the original and doesn't lock with the bass in the same way. African rhythms often groove due to different parts that interlock rather than them all moving together, but it's a factor I hadn't consciously decided on.

Producer Finneas' treatment of Billie's vocals is a key part in his productions and her sound, so finding a singer to work with would have added greatly to the production. Coronavirus lockdown made it difficult to go back and pick up on this. But this production has energy, is to the point and has a good groove while keeping many aspects of the reference track. Samba reggae and other carnival rhythms are all about dance grooves and have featured in pop tracks like Michael Jackson's "They Don't Really Care About Us" and Paul Simon's "The Obvious Child" as mentioned in the New York Times article by Shannon Sims *They Told the Women in Bahia They Couldn't Drum* (Shannon, S, 2018) [4].

Assignment Track No.2: Time Passes – David Jones

Reference Track: Red.23 – Conner Youngblood

Conner Youngblood writes, performs and produces his own songs and according to the bio on his label Ninja Tune's website, "...it's simply him and an engineer he's known and worked with since he first started releasing music back in high school" [5]. That engineer was Hal Fitzgerald who has worked with a variety of small and unsigned acts from Rap to Country and acoustic artists (reference Hal's Discogs profile [6]). There's not much other work to reference by either Conner or his engineer in the same vein, apart from Conner's debut EP which has a similar feel and production. In a Highclouds Music blog (Marty, A, 2018), Arnaud Marty compares Conner to Bon Iver, another multi instrumentalist singer song-writer mixing organic sounds with electronic production techniques, ambient effects and vocal layers [7].

Similarly, the overall tone of the album Cheyenne is organic with electronic and ambient effects and use of either drum machines or samples with additional vocal layers, mainly by Conner. Again from his bio, Conner comments on his track 'Stockholm':

"I specifically wanted to do a song with 808s and a harp, and see where it goes from there. I ended up using a vocoder too." [5]

Conner Youngblood is often described as Indie while Bon Iver as both Indie Folk and Art Pop. Both do juxtapose sounds from different genres but essentially are a development of the singer songwriter idiom.

The reference track, Red.23 has a very prominent shaker throughout along with a side stick pattern on a snare. A very low, loose bass drum sounds like it's played by hand with a beater (or sampled) and that's stacked with a more conventional kick drum. There's a lot of drone notes (including from brass or synth brass) and ambient reverb giving it a soothing, hypnotic feel. This is emphasised by the vocal which is very close and intimate sounding, almost whispered. An acoustic guitar plays throughout and marks the chord progression which is minimal. The rest is likely synth and sampled pad sounds plus electric guitar, soaked in delays and reverbs and a dream like piano features in the breakdown \ Middle 8 section along with some wordless vocal. After the Middle 8, a drum machine

style beat takes over, but the shaker continues in the background.

Red.23 (Arrangement):

Intro \ Verse \ Chorus \ Verse \ Chorus \ Middle 8 (Breakdown) \ Extended Outro

For the assignment track, my client David Jones brought the lyrics and chord progression which was originally written on acoustic guitar. He is also a singer writer who likes to mix electronic sounds and ambient textures into his music.

Time Passes (Arrangement):

Intro \ Verse \ Bridge \ Verse \ Bridge \ Chorus \ Middle 8 (breakdown) \ Verse \ Bridge \ Chorus \ Outro

Due to the Coronavirus lockdown, I either played or programmed everything bar the vocal, which Dave recorded on his mobile phone and emailed me. I chose an electric piano-like synth sound and played it with a guitar picking pattern to hold the chord progression. The vocal needed heavy auto tuning and some editing, I normally work with my client quite closely when recording, but this wasn't possible due to circumstances and should be considered a guide demo.

The arrangement is different from the reference as it was already implied by the vocals and chords. But I did match up the Middle 8 section from the reference with where an instrumental verse was placed in 'Time Passes' and repeated a verse to fill the space. Outside of this assignment, David will write an additional verse in it's place. There was also an unusual modulation to C major when the mode featured uses a C#. It didn't translate to well to my ear off of the guitar, especially coming back out to the A major. I found using a D major as a passing chord coming out of the modulation, rising by step from C major and forming a IV-I imperfect cadence with the following A major worked better to my ear.

Before choosing Red.23 as a reference, a Tame Impala track was going to be used but it was too different from the client's song and would have needed close work with the client to develop the vocal. Kevin Parker's voice makes the song in 'One More Year'. But I did bring across ideas and effects techniques from that original attempt including use of vocoder in the Middle 8 across a sample of wind. The wind also helped push the effects buses to get the ambience.

The piano and the song after the Middle 8 is more developed than in the reference track.

Discussions with the client over time have highlighted that he likes classic tracks by the Beatles and the Beach Boys with elaborate arrangements, different sections and lots of different instruments. Also 90s psych bands and indie bands with a leaning to rock and roll and blues like Primal Scream and Ocean Colour Scene. The song is in the A Mixolydian mode which also works well with blues. So the key, conversations with the client and the lyric 'makes you blue' gave me the idea of developing it further at the end with blues piano. There was also an alternate Middle 8 piano part written, but it took on too much of a classical tone and seemed out of place to include.

On reflection, I would have increased the tempo slightly and worked with the client more closely on vocals and possibly even revising the lyrics, certainly adding another verse. The production could easily have gone on much longer and probably will. It feels to me like it started going in a more elaborate direction without the means to satisfactorily finish it in that vain and perhaps should have stayed more simplistic and in line with the reference. But the client is very happy as is, if the vocal is re-recorded when possible.

Assignment Track No.3: A44 – The Weasel Kickers

Reference Track: National Shite Day – Half Man Half Biscuit (Referred to as HMHB below)

Folk-ish output aside, HMHB are variously described as Post Punk, Rock or Indie Rock. Most consider them a comedy band and the lyrics, a mixture of caustic social commentary, satire, disdain and resignation, are the focus of their productions with the music a backdrop that sets the mood and energy for the story without getting in its way. This can be seen on Seb Patrick's blog 'Thirty Great Half Man Half Biscuit Lyrics' (2011) [8]

Their music usually consists of driving arrangements with standard guitar punk\rock instrumentation ie - drums, bass, rhythm guitar, lead guitar, lead vocal and backing vocals.

National Shite Day (Arrangement):

Clean gtr intro (verse chords) \ gtr riff (hook) over verse chords \ verse \ pre-chorus \ chorus \ gtr hook \ verse \ pre-chorus \ chorus \ middle 8 \ chorus \ gtr hook outro, fades out

Like a lot of punk and punk rock, the drums are in 4\4 with straight hi hat or ride patterns throughout that drive the song along. (ie – The Sex Pistols – Anarchy in the UK or The Damned – New Rose). There's little variation except to highlight key words and lines or for short bridges. Harmonically, HMHB and punk rock songs are often 3 or 4 chord songs throughout, reducing to one or two chord vamps for bridges. 'National Shite Day' has the chords D, Am, C, and F throughout, only dropping down to an E for the pre-choruses.

HMHB Guitar breaks and solos are often atonal or just out of key\tune. In this case, a gtr hook that's also used at the start and in the outro. In punk, the energy, intent and tone of the music is more important than theory and resonates with the punk ethos of going against the status quo. It also gives a bleak, apathetic sound that matches the lyrics and character of the reference track. The guitar tones here are the same throughout, a cleaner, jangly electric guitar underpinning a more distorted rock guitar tone. The bassline is uncomplicated, functional, outlines the harmony and doesn't wonder too high up its register.

Everything has been recorded and mixed to give a clear sound without heavy use of effects. The vocal is up front with the lyrics clearly audible and for HMHB especially I think this is deliberate as it keeps the focus on the words of the song and the story.

The Weasel Kickers are a midlands based pop-punk \ comedy-rock band who, like HMHB, often impersonate other musical styles to fit the joke or story of the song. The band prefer recording in a live setting to get the right character for the vocal performance with the singers often ad-libbing and performing in character. They provide the lyrics and chords which give a basic structure. Being the band's drummer, we jam through new songs in the practice room and find a style, feel and energy that fits the story and often improvise, adlib or go off on tangents over a period of rehearsals until something sticks.

For A44, we rehearsed and recorded in the same space so that recording was as close to rehearsals as possible. The aim wasn't to get the perfect take of several played the same. The one that had the right energy and feel, for vocals especially, was the take used. With simple arrangements similar to HMHB, they allow us to follow each other if someone gets lost, drops in or out or 'goes off on one' which is useful when ad libbing.

Some acoustic screening was used in the studio along with quality, dynamic vocal mics to reduce spill. Both singers often move a lot as they perform, coming away from the mic, so heavy vocal compression would be needed during the mix. Too much spill in the vocal mics would have led to

room noise being compressed in the mix and overly colouring the rest of the production, even when using gating.

A44 (arrangement):

Clean gtr intro \ verse \ chorus \ verse \ chorus \ gtr solo \ double chorus

Like the reference track, the drums are driving with little let up, 4\4 time with straight 8ths on the ride. The arrangement is simple with the same beats and chords featuring throughout the different parts of the song. There is no special treatment of the guitar tones with both guitarists using the same amp settings throughout, one cleaner jangly tone that starts the song and a more saturated, distorted rock tone for mixed rhythm and lead. Again, this is similar to the reference track. Due to the Coronavirus lockdown, I was unable to get the bass overdubbed. So, one of our guitarists recorded the bass line on the low strings of his guitar at home and emailed it to me. I fed this into Melodyne to analyze the pitch and export a MIDI file which then triggered an electric bass patch on Trillian (a software bass sampler\synth).

The drums were used to trigger samples to clean up the sound of the mix and we did get chance to re-record the rhythm guitar. This helped clean up the sound of the production and give a clearer rhythm section. Some spill from the drum overheads and a next door room mic still gives some live ambience back to the sound, so it doesn't sound too clinical even with the samples. The drum samples themselves were chosen to sound 'live', less defined and even a little worn. This is where the production differs, the band are influenced by HMHB but aren't looking to clone anyone.

On reflection, it would have been good to try re-recording the distorted rhythm guitar parts as well, again to reduce spill but also because the tone was quite saturated without definition and I had to use amp simulation and automation in the mix to give it more of an edge and to keep it present. The verse vocals, the energy and the lead guitar is as intended and fits well with the reference track and a genre that's essentially guitar rock with punk roots. There was some clipping in the chorus vocals and some additional spill as the singers came off the mic further here. Again I would have re-recorded but was unable to in the circumstances. This was a new and smaller studio for the band to record in. In future I would experiment more with room arrangement and bring in more screening to reduce the spill further and the amount of overdubbing needed.

Bibliography

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