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Module Code: Foundation (ADAD7003\_LON)

Module Title: Foundation

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## INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will delve into three contrasting genres of music. From the dark traditionalist corners of 'alternative country', through the genre-mashing world of 'contemporary R&B' right up to the hyper-danceable, hook-laden 'funk pop', we will hopefully have a better understanding of the elements that make up these genres and use this to inform my own decisions in making my own tracks. Let's dive in.

### GENRE 1 – Alternative Country

The term 'alternative country' or 'alt country' sprang up in the 1990s to describe country writers and musicians working outside of the norms of mainstream country music (C. Smith, 2009).

Many artists rebelled against the polished production style of Nashville-dominated commercial country music in favour of a darker, more lo-fi sound, echoing a more rock and roll sensibility (K. Wolff & O. Duane, 2000) with lyrics being both 'bleak' and 'heartfelt' and less likely to use clichés sometimes used by mainstream country musicians. (C. K. Wolfe 2001).

I'll be focusing primarily on the track '*Safe & Sound*' by Taylor Swift feat. The Civil Wars from - '*The Hunger Games: Songs from District 12 and Beyond*'. Produced by T-Bone Burnett, Billboard.com (2012) describes it as a 'moody folk ballad' with Rolling Stone (2012) calling it a 'stark alt-country-ish' single. This track is similar to songs like '*Polly Come Home*' by Robert Plant & Alison Krauss and '*Hold On You*' by Jeff Bridges (also produced by T-Bone Burnett). Listen to '*Alt Country Song Comparisons.wav*' for examples in comparison to my song.

In keeping with the 'country' aspect of the genre, '*Safe and Sound*' uses live acoustic instrumentation primarily. Drums are dark and intense but are performed in a sparse 'alternative' manner. Cymbal swells, booming toms and military snare rolls all contribute to the moody-war torn atmosphere of this song. Lap-steel guitar, a staple of mainstream country music, is performed in a pensive, haunting manner with sparse, reverberated lines panned variously around the soundscape.

Mix-wise, the track sounds very 'organic' with instruments sounding as they do live. Minor guitar 'buzzes' are heard at various points in the song and timing is loose and 'un-quantized' (digitally time-corrected) which serves to capture the performance as honestly as possible.

Vocals are dry with a subtle, almost inaudible slap-back delay countered by a reverberant, ambient soundscape providing a 'blanket' for the stereo field. Vocal harmonies feature heavily throughout and are panned appropriately left and right to give the impression of people singing naturally beside each other as opposed to in front of one another.

The EQ of the track leans towards the darker side without many of the high frequencies generally associated with overly processed pop music. In the words of producer T-Bone Burnett – ‘if the music does get big, it should be big in a darker, intense way, more like a threatening way rather than a Celine Dion way.’ (Rollingstone.com, 2012)

I took a similar approach to my song ‘Anymore’. The main features I tried to emulate from the above track are the vocal harmonies, acoustic guitar and the addition of sparse, moody instrumentation with reverb and delay effects.

Having never recorded an acoustic guitar in stereo before, I felt this was a great opportunity to do so. I initially chose an XY technique (which involves placing two mics on right angles along the x and y axes (Roback, 2004)) but upon researching, I discovered that I would be stuck with a stereo recording with no option to fold back to mono without phase cancellation (Keller, 2019) so I opted for the M/S (mid-side) technique, allowing me to have both mono and stereo options.

I used a Neumann KM 184 small diaphragm condenser in cardioid as the ‘mid’ and an Aston Spirit large condenser in a figure of 8 pattern as the ‘sides’ – see *Fig 2 & 3*. I used a plug-in called ‘MSED’<sup>1</sup> to have wider control of balances - see *Fig 4*.

**Fig 2. Mid/Side Polar Patterns + Mic Placement**  
(Ciaran Robinson – Tileyard Lecture)

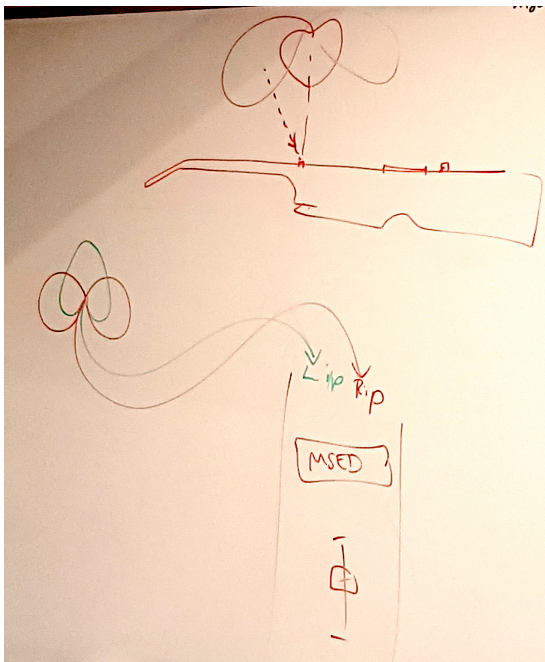


**Fig 3. My Mid/Side Micing Setup**



<sup>1</sup> ‘MSED is a professional audio encoder-decoder AAX, AudioUnit and VST plugin for mid-side processing which is able to encode (split) the incoming stereo signal into two components: mid-side pair, and vice versa: decode mid-side signal pair into stereo signal.’ – (voxengo.com, 2019)

Fig 4 – MSED Plugin for Mid/Side Processing



Frustratingly, upon further reflection, the acoustic guitar take felt too cluttered so was removed. Listen to ‘Intro with + without acc.wav’. This guitar was then replaced with a sparser arrangement to focus the listener more on the delicate vocal harmonies and bring about a more haunting sense of loss and poignancy– similar to the arrangement of ‘Polly Come Home’.

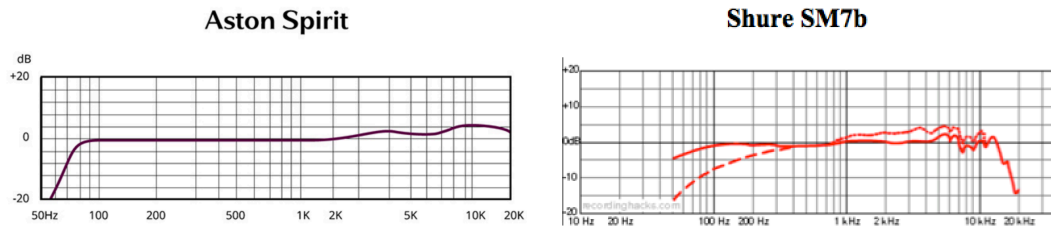
The structure of the song in comparison to ‘Safe And Sound’ can be seen in Fig. 1 below, with both songs following an intro/verse/chorus/post chorus format. Neither song has a standard ‘pre-chorus’. However, this is made up with longer instrumental and vocal harmony post-chorus sections. This would suggest that the genre is more *reflective* rather than *anticipatory*.

Fig 1. ‘Safe and Sound’ vs. ‘Anymore’ Song Structure Comparison



For the vocals, I tested both a Shure SM7b and Aston Spirit microphone and felt the Spirit captured the voice in more ‘3D’ due to its wider frequency response. The Shure has a more limited frequency response with a sharp curved ‘drop-off’ in the upper frequencies as can be seen in the Fig. 5 comparison below.

Fig. 5 - Aston Spirit vs. Shure SM7b Frequency Responses



Vocal harmonies feature heavily and were tracked singly and then ‘doubled’ artificially using ‘MicroShift’ by Sound Toys. Alternatively, these could have been naturally doubled and panned left/right but I preferred the MicroShift in this instance as it sounded more naturally spread and less deliberately ‘doubled’. The song was also initially recorded in Fm but was dropped a semitone to Em, as the original key was too high for the vocalist, especially in the choruses where the melody reaches it’s highest point reaching a high D<sub>6</sub>. The key was tricky to navigate because of the large vocal range needed to sing both the high D<sub>6</sub> note and the low E<sub>3</sub> note.

In keeping with the ‘bleak’ and ‘heartfelt’ lyrical nature of the genre, this song is about the loss of a spouse so I used effects sympathetic to this mood. Most tracks are bussed to a reverb aux with ‘Little Plate by Sountoys’ as well as a ‘blanket/glue’ bus with subtle delay (Soundtoys Echoboy), both of which created a melancholy and reflective feel throughout.

I wanted a particular ambient ‘haunting’ sound to echo the textures widely used in Burnett’s productions so I sampled the beginning of ‘Make A Move’ by Cypress Hill. I cut around the dialogue, applied a low pass filter, pitched it down to fit the key of the song and applied lots of reverb and delay - (*Cypress Sample Before After.wav*)

One issue I encountered during the mixing of this song was instruments taking up the sonic space of the vocal, effectively ‘masking’ it. For this I used a plugin called ‘Waves Center’ which allowed me to remove the ‘centre’ elements of the sound while keeping the ‘sides’. This pushed the instruments wider in the stereo field, allowing space in the centre for the vocals. Going forward, I would definitely consider stereo mic-ing acoustic guitar again for this reason.

## GENRE 2 – Contemporary R&B

The world of contemporary R&B is one of ever-blurred stylistic lines making the task of clearly defining song genres somewhat tricky.

Contemporary R&B can trace origins in records such as ‘Marvin Gaye – What’s Going On’ and ‘Michael Jackson – Off The Wall’ (Ward, 2019) and has elements of rhythm and blues, pop, soul, funk, hip hop and electronic music.

The R&B track I’ll focus on is ‘Lose My Breath’ by Destiny’s Child. The track features an explosive drumline sample, ingeniously sampled from ‘Taps’ by The University of Michigan Drumline by producer Rodney ‘Darkchild’ Jerkins as well as ‘nasty keyboard stabs’ (Reynolds, 2019) and the distinct vocal sound of Beyoncé Knowles, Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams.

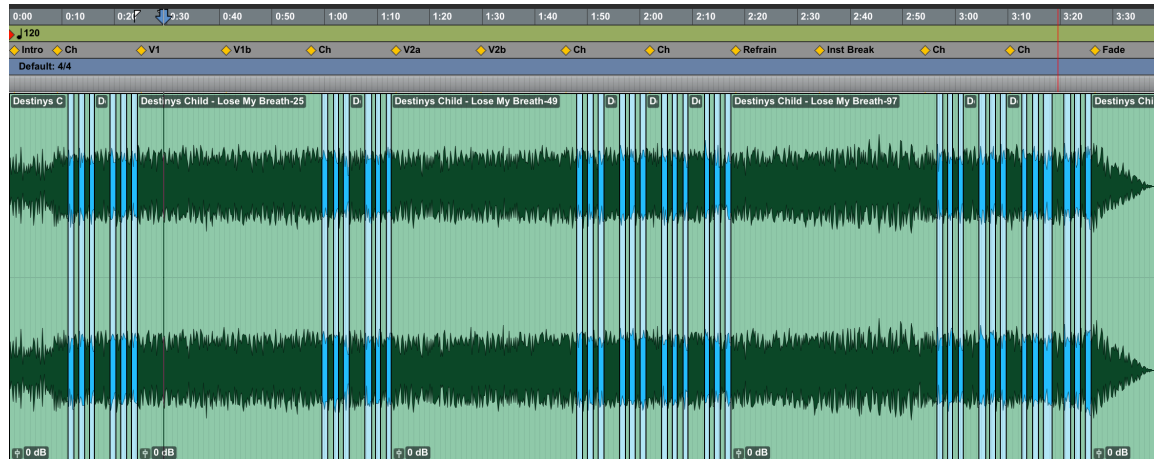
Programmed drums feature heavily in the contemporary R&B genre and this track is no exception with the kick being layered with a suitable fat 808 sample and the snare being provided by a snappy clap sample which served to ‘modernize’ the sound at the time.

This track is BIG on percussion and so is harmonically quite sparse with the only chordal accompaniment being provided by brassy keyboard stabs primarily playing around a 4-note range in simple octaves. This simplicity is countered by the incredibly intricate polyrhythms of the drumline sample as well as extra programmed claps, kicks and hats which fill up almost the entire mix-scape. Further energy is created by lots of vocal ‘panting’ and the lyrical challenge of ‘can you keep up?’ running throughout.

Similarities in this type of rhythmically charged track can be heard in tracks like ‘1 Thing’ by Amerie, ‘Everyone Nose’ by N.E.R.D. and even the far-reaching ‘Firestarter’ by The Prodigy. Song length is in keeping with the usual pop format – typically between 3:20 and 3:59.

As with its musical spouse (pop), this track uses lots of vocal stacks and lyrical hooks. The phrase ‘make me lose my breath’ is repeated 36 times in the track (see Fig. 9), effectively ‘hammering’ the hook into the listeners’ collective brains. The song employs the famous Chic technique of beginning with the chorus (m-magazine.co.uk, 2015) (which is repeated 6 times throughout) and has an instrumental break to allow for a dance sequence for the music video.

Fig 9 – Destiny’s Child – 36 ‘make me lose my breath’ vocal repeats are highlighted. Song structure and BPM also noted.



Mix wise, the vocals are stacked (a process of recording unison ‘doubles’ as well as harmonies) to add extra texture and ‘weight’. This also allows for various panning of vocal ‘dubs’ around the stereo field and also allows for extra options in the context of a ‘female group’ whereby each member performs solo parts (in the verses) as well as group vocals (in the choruses).

For my own track ‘Get Low’, the main influence I took from the above track is the use of percussive polyrhythms as well as the sparse synth stabs (*listen to ‘R&B Comparison.wav’*). However, the main difference in my track is the inclusion of female rapping (synonymous with Hip Hop) in addition to the more R&B/Pop oriented verses and choruses.

For the percussion in this track, I recorded samples of me hitting a bottle in various positions. I then chopped these samples and imported them into a sampler (Native Instruments - Battery 4) where I could freely program the pattern using MIDI (*see fig. 10 below*). I also recorded various poly-rhythmic claps and programmed kick and snare, tambourine and additional timbale from samples.

Fig 10 – Re-triggering sampled bottles using Battery 4



The synth stabs are stacks of various sounds from Native Instruments libraries and are playing within a 3-note range (A, A# and C). This type of chromatic sounding harmony helps to create a sense of urgency and intensity and is also accentuated in the verse melody with the replies *'I don't even know your name'* and *'better get out my way'* using notes A# C and A with the chromatic interval of A and A# accentuating the feeling of unease or intensity.

I also employ a 'vocal chop' technique throughout the song, particularly in the intro where the artist 'Ivy' calls her name as well as mine as producer 'G Kaye'. This is known as 'tagging' and has been used widely in R&B and particularly Hip Hop for audio 'branding' and promotional purposes. In the Destiny's Child track you can hear the producer say 'Darkchild' during the instrumental break at 2:49 for the same purpose. For the vocal chopping, I edited clips in Pro Tools and manipulated them as desired using duplication and the stock audio suite 'Pitch II' plugin as well as 'Little Altar Boy' by Soundtoys to change the formant of the voice. This chopping technique is more widely used in the Hip Hop genre as opposed to R&B. An example of this can be heard in the track 'Monster' by Kanye West feat. Nicki Minaj (*see Vox Chop Comparison.wav*).

There are key points where the track suddenly stops to give complete focus to the rap lyrics – this also helps to keep the repetition of the track interesting. Vocal harmonies also play a big part in fleshing out sections with many leaning on the more dissonant side. Distortion/saturation was also used on many sections of the vocal to give it a more

aggressive sound. Vocals were extensively ‘comped’ (a method of recording multiple takes and assimilating into a final ‘comp’).

A final interesting point to note is the use of lyrical colloquialisms. When we first sat down to write the rap lyrics we had potentially ‘generic’ sounding content which I felt, as producer, was not individual enough for the artist so I suggested that she draw on her Zambian heritage to include unique words and sayings to help bring something unique to the audience. From there sprung lyrics such as ‘*Kalindula*’ and ‘*Fendela Fendezu, si na man da mutema ufendele*’ which are Zambian calls to dance and serve to further solidify the authenticity of the artist which is incredibly important, especially in the genre of Hip Hop where reputation and credibility are everything.

### **GENRE 3 – Funk Pop**

Funk-pop is another product of the genre-bending nature of modern music. Having its origins deep within Funk bands like Parliament Funkadelic and Disco acts like Chic and Sister Sledge, Funk-Pop is a culmination hyper-danceable ‘funky’ rhythms, rich melodic disco-inspired instrumentation and a slick modern-day pop production, laden with more hooks than a butcher’s back room.

Modern-day examples like ‘Attention’ by Charlie Puth and Toothbrush by ‘DNCE’ all carry the ‘funk flag’ by way of their rhythmic grooves. 4-to-the-floor drum patterns give way to syncopated bass-lines, slick synthesizer stabs and lush vocal harmonies, all filling a rich, feel-good sonic tapestry. In my opinion, the earliest ‘funk-pop’ track is ‘Superstition’ by Stevie Wonder. An infectious groove coupled with a captivating song title captured the commercial pop audiences all too well with ‘Superstition’ scoring Stevie his second US No.1 single. The ‘groove’ I’m talking about is what Michael Jackson referred to as ‘the jelly’ (O’Toole, 2015).

But what is it about the ‘Funk-Pop’ genre that continues to delight audiences worldwide? Looking at the instrumentation, you’ll generally find songs to be ‘rhythmic-centric’ with lots of syncopation, generally from a pumping bass synth which dances around the constant drum backbeat. The Weeknd’s ‘Can’t Feel My Face’ is a good example of this. This ‘busy’ bass line is usually countered by washy legato-type synths, serving as a ‘blanket’ for the sound bed (*see Pop Funk Synth Pads.wav*) and which help smoothen out the more angular rhythmical elements.

But aside from all the instrumental elements, it’s the rich vocal arrangements, swirling with lush harmonies and party-like ‘heys’ and ‘whoos’ that really make this genre come alive. Acts like Earth, Wind & Fire and Michael Jackson pushed musical boundaries with their use of vocal layering and harmonizing (listen to audio comparisons with my track – (*Vocal Harmonies.wav*). While this is more of a feature of Disco, the ‘funk’ feel comes from ‘party’ elements – chants, repetitions, sing-along’s, reminiscent to old James Brown records – ‘*get up, get on up*’ where call-and-response was a big feature. A good modern of the ‘party vibe’ vocal hooks is in the track ‘Blurred Lines’ by Robin Thicke and can be

traced back to ‘Go To Give It Up’ by Marvin Gaye (infamously leading to a court case in which the Gaye estate was awarded \$5M in plagiarism damages ([bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk), 2018)) – listen to my (*Vocal Party Hooks.wav*) for comparisons with my track ‘Superhuman’. These create an informal party atmosphere within the track sometimes going as far as simply being ‘party ambience’ as with the Gaye track.

For my track ‘Superhuman’ I tried to encapsulate ‘the jelly’ as best I could with the groove immediately being established by a strict 4-to-the-floor drum pattern and being offset by the ‘funky’ syncopation of the bass and guitars playing identical parts. I used a reverse snare technique (as used in ‘Uptown Funk’ by Mark Ronson) on beat 2 and 4 to create subtle anticipation of these hits (*Reverse Snares.wav*). Borrowing from the more EDM side of the Pop genre, ‘risers’ and ‘falls’ are used to create tension and release during sections. When muting these, the sections feel more ‘flat’ and lifeless so I kept them in.

Glass bottle percussion is also a big feature in this track. My idea for this came from the bottle percussion in ‘Don’t Stop Till You Get Enough’ by Michael Jackson and serves to accentuate the heavy rhythmic elements of the style using sounds that don’t mask or disrupt the drum frequencies (glass bottles have a much higher freq. range than a kick or snare drum as seen in *Fig. 11* below.)

**Fig. 11 – Kick + Snare Frequencies**



**vs. Bottle Percussion.**



I intentionally used no time correction on any of the guitars or bass and focused on getting the ‘funkiest’ and ‘tightest’ takes naturally instead. According to Rick Beato ([youtube.com](http://youtube.com), 2019), what makes a thing ‘funky’ is it’s ability to ‘sway’ subtly in and out of time without being unnaturally quantized to the grid.

Electric bass is played in the verses but the pre-chorus sees the entry of a pumping syncopated synth bass (a culmination of 4 different synth layers) synonymous with the genre.

Vocal harmonies also feature heavily, particularly in the pre-chorus where legato lines aim to achieve a ‘lush’ disco-inspired sound. These were layered heavily with up to 10 tracks of vocals. The trouble I encountered with layering lots of the same voice is that

there isn't enough variation in the timbre of the layers (usually overcome by simply using different singers). I overcame this by using the voice-manipulation plugin 'Little AlterBoy' by Soundtoys, which changes the formant of the voice easily, thus achieving a more unique sound to use within the vocal blend. Vocals were panned around the stereo field to achieve a 'blanket' effect. These were also heavily edited, compressed and tightly aligned using 'Vocalign' to achieve the most uniform sound possible.

Guitars were recorded 'line-in' and re-amped using 'Guitar Rig 5' to allow maximum control. This also allows me to go back and change the tone if I see fit in the future as opposed to mic-ing an actual amp, which cannot be altered after. I double tracked these and panned hard left/right to give a wide stereo spread (and to keep out of the vocal territory). The electric bass was also recorded direct in and heavily compressed with a UA LA-2A at the input stage. This gives the bass the necessary hard attack and consistency, given that it is a key component of the funk genre.

The song is in the key of C#m, the mode of E dorian and follows a i-iii-v-iv progression (C#m E G#m F#) throughout. This chord progression can also be heard in the similarly funky disco track 'Get Lucky' by Daft Punk and uses its simplicity to draw the listener in without using lots of complex chords or harmonies (typically found in jazz).

I wanted to bring in the 'party' element in the chorus of this song with vocals being recorded much more loosely and casually. The 'hey' lyric is recorded in a 'gang vocal' style with 3 different voices instructed to almost 'shout' or 'call' the lyric as opposed to intentionally 'sing' it. Equally, the 'whoa oh oh oh oh' serves as a crowd 'sing-along' hook.

## CONCLUSION

From the rebellious, purist 'alternative country' with its dark and organic counterparts, through the sample-laden, percussion fuelled and rap propelled bars of 'contemporary R&B', right the way up to the slick, danceable Disco-infused joy that is 'Funk Pop', we have seen a tiny corner of the expansive universe we call music. In doing so, I hope we have gained a better understanding of the moving parts of these glorious genres, and through the processes of composing new music with these as our guides, we have been able to walk through the halls of some of the greats who have so brilliantly gifted us the songs that we know and love.

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