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MA12 Commercial Music Producer

Foundation

Element 2: Essay

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The Production Process: Defining Characteristics of Three Analysed Genres and How it Informed the Creation of Own Work.

Within this essay I plan to define genre through three specified compositions and analyse both how their artists conformed and ignored the components that define their respective forms. My selected compositions are *69 année erotique* (Gainsbourg, 1968), *Sometimes* (Shields, 1991), and *Body Movin'* (Beastie Boys, 1998). This analysis also informed the creation of three original compositions *In your end, oh!, On Occasion,* and *Pop Lockin'* and in addition I will analyse the success of the application of the knowledge I acquired from defining each genre.

Kieron Tyler of *Mojo Magazine* states that "*Serge Gainsbourg was for David Bowie,... all things to all people*" (Je t'aime the story of French song, 2015 36:20). Both were iconoclasts and drew from a slew of influences in order to inform their own style. This proved an interesting challenge in recreating Gainsbourg as this process is almost in direct contradiction to how he would have created music. He didn't merely "*interprete"* or perform other people's songs; his personality is as important as the genre of French music, *Chanson,* he worked within.

Like his contemporary Jacques Brel, Gainsbourg raised the intellectualism within *Chanson* (Je t'aime the story of French song, 2015 14:08) and modernised it. Until this point *Chanson* was primarily *"...about prostitute,and er prostitute"* (09:28) taking the gritty underbelly of France to paint realistic portraits of the life both provincial and cosmopolitan people were experiencing. What is different in the works of Gainsbourg and his contemporaries is how they used this in order to discuss more philosophical ideas.

An example of this is *Le Gorille* (Brassens, 1952) where the simple story of a gorilla in a cage is used to discuss everything from the death penalty to a critique on the Catholic church. The arrangement is incredibly simple, just a voice and a guitar, but it is the words and what they discuss that engages you as a listener. You learn the importance of the lyric above other elements due to the elegance and attention that is used to construct them. Interestingly Alain Souchon once heard Mick Jagger say "...in England and in America we make rock n roll and in France they better make wine." (Je t'aime the story of French song, 2015 07:17). However I feel this misses the subtlety to someone like Gainsbourg's musical crafting. The French language has a sound that is "...musical to the rest of the world" (Je t'aime the story of French song, 2015 04:49)." So working within this language there is a great advantage compositionally. This is not where I began when composing my own work *In your end, oh!* but I realised that in order to better reflect the spirit of Gainsbourg that this would require the focus of my attention.

Even in his simplest arrangements he would always try to throw something clever in the wordplay. The title alone of *69 année érotique* is incredibly suggestive "... a cheap pun, which is a classic Gainsbourg move." (Tangari, 2010) I have deliberately copied that with my own title. It both sounds like the word innuendo while also being one itself. Although the rest of my lyrics are generally doltish they do evoke a strong sense of what Gainsbourg was implying as his lyrics represented "... the pop equivalent of an Emmanuelle movie."(Spencer, 2005). Perhaps I should have paid even greater attention to this area by being more poetic but I feel I gave gravitas to the lyric through performance.

A suggestive vocal colouring to the song is what makes Gainsbourg's work sound so distinctive and sensual. "Even if your French stops at "bonjour", the music lets you know that this is a record about a dark, obsessional love." (Ewing, T., 2009). This is key as like an actor on the stage it provides context to complex content within the music. He has a close mic technique that I felt is like *ASMR* and helps the listener intuit a sexual intimacy. I paid homage to this by capturing a whispered performance where the assonance of my *esses* brings seduction whereas normally I would have used a pop filter to remove them.

Dueting with a female vocalists was Gainsbourg's speciality (Je t'aime the story of French song, 2015) in this era. Even with it's sparse use in *69 année érotique* Birkin's breathy delivery furthers the sexual implication. My own girlfriend provided the backing for *In your end, Oh!* and considering that Birkin and Gainsbourg were in a relationship themselves I think the inclusion of my own relationship in this recording furthered the painting of romance even though my lyrics are more comical than what Gainsbourg has written specifically in *69 année érotique.* I felt comfortable with this inclusion as the onomatopoeic sounds on another track like *Comic Strip* (1968) indicated that Gainsbourg didn't take his work too seriously.

When it came to the music I understood my limitations and that I am not an Arthur Greenslade, the composer for Gainsbourg's work, who was "... *a musical prodigy from the age of fifteen"* (Eder, n.d.) so I decided to focus on the elements that defined *Yé-yé* or the modern *Chanson* from its predecessors. "Staccato electric guitar, piano rolls, a quasi-psychedelic rock combo,...an omnipresent thick...doom-laden bass…"(Simmons, 2001) are what Gainsbourg ingested from the likes of Mick Jagger's *rock'n'roll* and it's sexual swagger to laden his text in sensuality.

I used the bass as my lead as it is often "... the first sound you hear" (Ewing, 2009) in not only the reference but the majority of the album it is taken from. It's tone has a vibration that pulses through the body in the way an orgasm might and is essential to providing that seedy quality. Played loosely in my composition it evokes a cool vibe that brings to the mind the sexual liberation that was happening during the 60's. I expanded this element with the inclusion of a heavily distorted electric guitar in the outro which although more common to Gainsbourg's later work I feel that the minimal arrangement benefitted from a driving sound at this point to exaggerate the sexuality.

It's quite interesting that Gainsbourg would include "*churchlike organ music*" (Simmons, 2001) within his pieces as it would normally contradict the suggestive tone of his work. It isn't present within *69 année érotique* but for me his specific use of it conforms to *Chanson* by defining his own character which was a provocateur by placing traditionally religious music within a sexual context that I couldn't not include in my own composition.

Gainsbourg was one of the first artists in France to really push for modern production. Keren suggests that she *"... can't put my finger on any french artist that took that risk within soundscapes"* (Je t'aime the story of French song, 2015 43:04) until this point. With that in mind I included some *audio verite* into my mix to add more story to the lyrical content. It might have been better to have created my own subtext rather than copying Gainsbourg's exactly but that may have lost his sensuality which is at the core of his work.

For the second track I used a favourite song of mine *Sometimes* by *My Bloody Valentine*. I've been drawn to this track since I heard a description by John Doran saying " It's like a mermaid falling into a blackhole."(The Joy Of The Guitar Riff, 2014) in regards to the genre of *Shoegaze* as a whole. It was a term coined by Steve Lamaq after seeing a band spend the whole show staring at the floor (Bromhead, 2018). It isn't the performance that makes it distinctive but it's sound.

Texture is the most crucial element to *shoegaze* because if the dream-like quality isn't there it most likely isn't *shoegaze*. This quality is in how"...it's not so much song focused as it is sound focused...layers can only be separated in your mind by...dozens of listens." (theneedledrop, 2013). So, although the standard rock band set-up is present it is how these distinct elements are blended to make them sound as one that differentiates *shoegaze* from that format and similar genres such as black metal where the production is much more crisp.

It is key to focus on this track and in particular band leader Kevin Shields as he is often referred to as the progenitor of the genre as a whole. *Loveless* (Shields and Ó Cíosóig, 1991) is "...the most seminal shoegaze album ever." (theneedledrop, 2013) despite earlier bands such as The Jesus and Mary Chain on a track like *Upside Down* (Reid and Reid, 1984) employing the "...pop arrangement and Phil Spector wall of sound" (Trash Theory, 2020) to such an extreme before them. My Bloody Valentine moved the sound from the hollow and treble to everything sitting in the mid-range creating an effect known as *pink noise* which is essentially "... *white noise with a frequency hump in it."*(McGonigal, 2007 p48, 49).

Although this has pleasing ramifications as a listener, it results in a great difficulty as a composer/producer in discerning what exact keys or tunings are used or even instrumentation. In order to resolve this issue I referred to an online tab (Appendix 1) which not only assisted in separating the fairly basic arrangement of *Sometimes* but also elucidated the structure. It became incredibly apparent that although the tunings and production may be complex, the songwriting is clear and concise like early Beatles or Beach Boys (Trash Theory, 2020) to whom Shields was an obsessive fan. As a result I settled for following *Sometimes's* structure and chord phrasing almost exactly only changing the tuning and texture to differentiate *On Occasion*. However I think this better placed me in the mind of Shields as I was then more able to focus on the creation of extra frequencies.

"It's the act of obscuring that actually makes this LP interesting." (theneedledrop, 2013). This process had already been implemented to great effect on an earlier release *You Made Me Realise* (Shields, 1988) specifically in "*The Holocaust"* (McGonigal, 2007 p11) section of the song where there is only a single chord being thrashed and no discernable melody. However due to the fact that "...at a certain point your brainwave changes to around 7 Hz" (The Joy Of The Guitar Riff, 2014) one could make the argument that there is one. As a consequence of this I decided to focus on production technique and the balance of eqs in the mix rather than songwriting in order to achieve a similarity in my composition.

This in turn motivated me to deliberately try to harness the studio as an instrument. I applied as heavy control on each sound being recorded as I could and although it may not have reached the

levels of placing "...huge blankets around [the amps] and everything we could to sort of dry it up and make it as upfront as possible." (Doyle, 2018) I became incredibly selective about which guitar takes I used and where I would place my microphone to get the sound that would benefit my composition at least in terms of tonality. I would even say that in the future I would dedicate more time to this part of the process than the songwriting.

Through creating my track it became apparent that the process of achieving *Sometimes's* sonics was much more about peeling away layers then adding anything which cemented Shields mantra about there actually being very few guitars on the album as a whole (Fender, 2018). Specifically this is what Shields came to dislike about many of his imitators such as Slowdive on *Souvlaki* (Halstead, 1993) where there are multiple guitars filling in the gaps of your imagination rather than allowing you to intuit sounds from the noise.

With this in mind I decided it was to rely on very minimal effects but use them in saturation. Shields primarily used *"...various types of distortion..."* (The Joy Of The Guitar Riff, 2014) and "*...reverse reverb, as well…*"(McGonigal, 2007 P 50) in conjunction with what became known as a glider style of guitar playing to create a unique sound which was difficult to imitate. I did attempt this on many takes even initially using a *Fender Jaguar* as Shields is "Big fan"(Fender, 2018) but after many unsuccessful attempts and reading about how he would modify guitars to make this process easier (Fender, 2018) I decided to use my own *Telecaster* as I understand it's abilities better and Shields himself has said "Each guitar kind of suits what's happening." As a result I learnt that I should do some further reading of how a guitar actually produces its sound to have a more informed starting point in the future.

Minimal with guitars proved best for it's texture but I found the opposite to be true when it came to the vocals and bass frequencies. A bass part isn't discernible to my ear on *Sometimes* but there is definitely a weight on that end of the spectrum. "*Nothing over 2kHz was being properly represented from the guitar.."*(Doyle, 2018) so as a result I included a double tracked bass to add weight to the low end to accommodate for the loss at the top. This was also true with vocals where I used two voices with multiple takes layered on top of one another. This assisted in a blend towards the "*pink noise"* but I would have preferred to have recorded fuller guitar takes initially to build a track up rather than accommodating for loss.

I created my own vocal synthesisers with the aim to *"...sound like you're not using a sampler."* (McGonigal, 2007 p.61). I would contend that this is the essence of shoegaze as a whole, incredibly technical and processed production but made to feel organic. The use of actual voice grounds the sound in something familiar but it's processing makes people believe there are actual synthesisers or additional guitars.

Hiding this technique informed my mix as I chose mono as opposed to stereo. *Loveless* is largely recorded in mono. (McGonigal, 2007 P39) a decision influenced by Phil Spector's productions which were known as a "*wall of sound"*. With this style of mixing I did find that it really assisted in recreating the sound of *Sometimes* but I would be interested in attempting stereo to modernise the genre and see where stereo separation could be advantageous rather than it seeming like the enemy.

My final composition was also difficult to categorise as the Beastie Boys' sound is one that is always "... shape-shifting." (Dana, 2020). Though this is key in distinguishing them from others in the *Hip-Hop* genre. Initially I was drawn to the group as I knew they *"...started as a punk band who dabbled in hip-hop mostly as a joke"* (Dana, 2020) and having a similar background myself I was keen to see if my own transition into *Hip-Hop* would be easier using their career trajectory as a guide. However, through further listening to albums such *Paul's Boutique* (1989) and *Hello Nasty* (1998) I realised this wouldn't be the case as it became apparent that *Hip-Hop* was more than a "*joke*" to them. Not only do they have a mastery of the key tenants of the genre but they also defined a new language for it.

"...layers of samples…, vocal effects, synths, loops... Songs rarely end with any resemblance to their beginnings,..." (DiCrescenzo, 1998) delivered over a strong beat that *"...is loose and groovy..."* (Perpetua, 2011) and rapped vocals both signify my reference *Body Movin'* within the genre as it shares similarities with contemporaries such Grandmaster Flash and Run DMC but it's the complexity with how these tenants are implemented that separates it.

For their album *Paul's Boutique "...No fewer than 105 different songs were sampled for its 15 tracks…"* (Buskin, 2013) which differs from what would have been standard at the time. Knowing this I wanted to build my composition, *Pop Lockin'* entirely out of samples. Not only did I feel that this would sonically reflect them but having only ever previously written music with live instrumentation I felt that it would make a clearer distinction to forgo these elements entirely. Interestingly, *Hello Nasty* the album from which the reference was taken, was the first to include fourth member Mix Master Mike into the group's line up (Fitzgerald, 2013). Strictly speaking a DJ is not an instrumentalist, but I believe that my composition may have benefitted from live scratching and filtering that can only be best replicated through one. It would have led me away from relying on effects within Logic Pro which currently can't entirely replicate a human touch. Something that I believe to still be key within this genre despite most of the work being done through computerised instrumentation.

According to producer Mario Caldato Jr, production technology such as Logic and Pro-Tools was *"... really flourishing...maximising our potential with the sonics."(*Fly Fidelity, 2020). So in many ways I had an advantage with recreating this particular era of *Hip-Hop.* Nevertheless, technology has advanced even further today and generally I found that I had to include plug-in distortions and build in mistakes in order to achieve the harsh tone that this genre retains. Similarly, The Beastie Boys had been used to creating "Pause Tapes" (Reason Studios, 2010) where you created loops through recording a cassette and I think this DIY aesthetic is still crucial to representing their sound despite technological advancements. Therefore, instead of smoothing out differences in samples with pitch shifting or beat matching, I chose to keep the discordance. I did apply some flextime to ensure everything kept to tempo but that did lose an element of control over the sound of samples and I would want to ensure tighter control on this element in the future.

This led to an interesting conversation with a fellow student about melody versus tonality (Trippas, 2021) specifically in regards to the bass line. Although the sound of *Body Movin* is fairly complex and rich it was argued that many elements are simple and that that could be

represented in my composition. The reference track used a desk test tone for it's bass line rather than an instrument or even a sample. In theory this would have made my track more reflective of its genre, but I opted for the melodic bassline with bass frequencies boosted to find a happy medium which assisted the musicality but emphasised a vigour of tone.

I'm not a strong rapper so I focused more on the percussive and rhythmic qualities rather than lyrics of rap. Where I did include lyrics I kept them playful in order to reflect the sense of humour The Beasties did implement lyrically. This was also assisted in bringing some of the live performance I lost in the sampling." The Beasties felt comfortable using hand-held vocal mics...our secret weapon was a $29 Sony Variety karaoke mic." (Buskin, 2013) so similarly I performed my vocal with a handheld mic. I would have preferred to have included an actual lyric and perhaps someone who has more experience with rap as flow is as important to this genre as delivery was to the *Chanson* of my first track.

Ultimately through this process I came to the conclusion that I had chosen artists that all have incredibly individualistic sounds. They may hold some core components that conform them to their respective genres but they are the innovators within them, pushing their boundaries. This task was to replicate their genre's sound but the irony lies in it perhaps being more appropriate to have to define my own personal sound as an artist in order to better conform to what each artist created.

Appendices

1. Sometimes Chords Tab
   https://tabs.ultimate-guitar.com/tab/my-bloody-valentine/sometimes-chords-1230516

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