

# Kevin McKenna

## Student Number:1909923

### Foundation

### Element 2

#### **Introduction**

This Essay will discuss insight into three modern pop genres and their defining characteristics. For each genre a track has been selected and analysed for both production techniques and those from its genre.

Next an original track matching the genre, production style and arrangement of the reference tracks has been created. With the aim of capturing the feel and production of the originals whilst also allowing a creative process to flourish.

There is then a discussion on how the techniques and elements from the reference tracks and genres have been applied to the original tracks. Followed by reflections on what worked well for this process and what could be done differently if the exercise was to be repeated.

The three chosen genres are Indie Pop, Grime and Blue-Eyed Soul, represented by three artists within the UK top 40. Lewis Capaldi, Stormzy and Billy Ellish.

One recent potential issue with mainstream pop is that artists are often jumping on the bandwagon of the latest musical trend. As has been mentioned with Taylor Swift's track Reputation... "trying to match what's on the market rather than distinguishing herself from it" (**Appendix 1**). Are current charting artists able to really carve their own musical identity?

## The defining characteristics of Blue-Eyed Soul

“Blue-Eyed soul is a rhythm and blues soul music performed by white artists” (**Appendix 2**). The term was created by a radio DJ in Philadelphia called George Woods in the mid-sixties to categorize the Righteous Brothers. This expanded to include artists like the Beatles, Sonny & Cher, Tom Jones, Van Morrison, Steve Winwood, David Bowie (as the thin white duke), Robert Palmer and Simply Red.

Modern artists include Justin Timberlake and Sam Smith, Rag N Bone Man and Lewis Capaldi.

The style also contains Gospel elements and orchestral support with strong bass and always a very strong emotive lyrical content.

But there is a view that white people are becoming vultures of black culture. (**Appendix 3**). That the music industry transforms the core issues of real soul into an upper middle class (slightly sterile) fashion model. That is both marketable and less intimidating to a wider audience.

The fact that this term was coined in the 60's gives a hint at the racial division that was prevalent at this time (**Appendix 4**).

## **How Hold Me While You Wait conforms to the Blue-Eyed Soul genre**

**(See Hold Me While You Wait in Element 1, Portfolio).**

Firstly, the instrumentation with its orchestral strings (albeit subtle) and strong gospel like elements (**Appendix 4**) help to create an emotive soulful backdrop for the main vocals. The gospel vocals are multi layered and add an almost ecclesiastical element which is well in keeping with the genre.

Secondly Lewis Capaldi's voice channels the rich emotionality and vocal agility of this R & B based style. Where howls growls and shouts invest soulfulness into the singer's delivery (**Appendix 5**).

Thirdly one of the co-writers was Jamie Hartman (**Appendix 6**).

He worked along-side Rag n Bone Man who is another modern artist of note in this genre (**Appendix 7**).

However, it can be argued that the effort to fit this genre is contrived and forced for pure marketing terms. That the vocal emotion is "telegraphed through forced hoarseness and deliberate falsetto cracks. The ugly crying of pop vocals" (**Appendix 8**). And therefore perhaps not original in its form. Also the piano line and seems quite 'ploddy' and dumbed down compared to other richer instrumental works from the genre like Van Morrison - Jackie Wilson Said (**Appendix 9**).

## The production techniques used in Hold Me While You Wait and Blue-Eyed Soul

(See Hold Me While You Wait in Element 1, Portfolio)

Given the link it's worth looking at Soul's original production techniques from the 60's. It really helped to shape the sound.

Musicians were "often in the same room at the same time. With a little box control room with an 8-track tape machine." (**Appendix 10**).

Backing bands were well acquainted and recording was live and based around capturing the drums whilst everything else had mics or a direct input to the tape machine.

This cemented a very live upfront sound.

Some of these techniques are used today to create that authentic sound. Such as a live recording of a complete band in the same room with acoustic screens to provide separation. And using plate reverbs such as the EMT 140, classic compressors like LA2A (on a gentle setting) (**Appendix 11**).

Whilst there is little information regarding the actual studio sessions of Hold Me While You Wait, it features a genuine well miked acoustic piano. With extra resonance being picked up from the sound board. Also an acoustic guitar with damped strumming throughout to cement the rhythm. The vocals are up front with just a bit of reverb to add presence. The rich harmonic multi layered gospel vocals have clearly been overdubbed as they have a very different sonic character to the other instruments. subtle strings and gentle percussion plus bass add to the choruses.

## How these techniques and elements have been incorporated into I Survived You

(See I Survived You and Hold Me While You Wait in Element 1, Portfolio).

The Kurzweil Forte Rich 9 Foot Grand 2GB piano patch was used with added string resonance, along with damping and sustain pedals to create a more authentic sound. (**Appendix A**) This wasn't quantized. Therefore giving a more natural feel. This runs through the track gluing it together in much the same way as the reference track.

No acoustic guitar was available to gel the rhythm so a selection of live drum recordings translated to midi files using a superior drummer was incorporated. Again this helped to create the live feel of the track (**Appendix B**).

A cello and solo violin were added although less subtle than the strings in the reference they similarly added more body to the track at ends of the verses and choruses (**Appendix C**).

Solid held bass notes were added to the choruses to add punch and depth as in the reference track.

Extra layers of vocals helped to create richer harmonics in the chorus.

A similar middle 8 beat drop structure was also created before the final chorus. And a play out chorus section to finish on a held vocal note much as the reference.

The basic arrangement was matched but the lengths of the parts altered to fit the flow and energy of new track. (See I Survived You in Element 1, Portfolio).

## Reflection upon results for I Survived You

I Survived You developed its own integrity as a track with a slightly 'folky' feel. It's interesting how combining most of the same elements in the arrangement led to a different direction.

The tom biased drum sections and fills gave an old school feel and really helped to liven up the track at key points.

The different keys also changed the emotional palette between the two tracks.

Hold Me While You Wait in C major can be defined by a passionate expression of sorrow (**Appendix 12**). One that is almost melancholy in character, While I Survived You, ended up in G sharp natural minor which can bring discontent and uneasiness (**Appendix 12**). As the lyrics are as much a cry of victory at leaving a broken relationship as a lament for the past, perhaps D major with its triumphant victorious feelings (**Appendix 12**) would have made the song more catchy and uplifting.

If the exercise was repeated, then matching the measure and pace of the vocals would be of benefit, especially for the chorus. The extended powerful lyrical build of the Hold Me While You Wait chorus couldn't be matched with the two-line chorus in I Survived You.

This meant putting in more supporting instrumentation with cello, violin and clarinet (for the play out section) to carry the track.

## The defining characteristics of Grime

Stormzy's genre can be described as British Hip Hop, Contemporary R & B and Grime. (**Appendix 13**). But in the case of the analysed track (Big For Your Boots) its most definitely Grime (**Appendix 14**).

Originally created from the merging of styles like Garage, Drum and Bass, Jungle, Hip Hop and Dance Hall, Grime evolved in London in the early 2000's and quickly developed its own unique set of characteristics. Namely a rapid break beat of around 130bpm - 170bpm. Often containing complex 2 step, 4/4 break beats. Sometimes structured around a double time rhythm (**Appendix 15**). Less conventional timings like 5/4 can also be featured. Vocals are upfront aggressive rapping. Along with a range of electronic sounds. "Where the legacies of hardcore rap and hardcore techno collide." (**Appendix 16**).

Lyrics are always hard hitting and raw. While heavy bass can often interject with brutal kick drums. In 2017 the UK record industry acknowledged "Grime as the country's most significant aural rebellion since punk" (**Appendix 17**). Some worry that Grime's very quick rise to commercial success cannot be maintained. Lacking "the ambition and quality to make this revival anything more than a brief explosion" (**Appendix 18**). It certainly seems very current but its future remains to be seen.

## How Big For Your Boots conforms to the Grime Genre

(See Big For Your Boots in Element 1, Portfolio)

One of the co-producers was Sir Spyro. A noted Grime producer who said “I was into collecting garage that was a bit dark...I’ve always loved dark music” (**Appendix 19**).

A dark suspense runs through the whole track. With offbeat gothic choral stabs and a driving bass line that grooves in and out particularly in the chorus.

The vibe has been described as “trunk rattling” (**Appendix 20**). Spyro was also joined with producer Fraser T Smith (Adele, Sam Smith). Giving a slightly smoother more polished feel with an “orchestral cartoonish soundscape” (**Appendix 20**). Fraser’s addition was perhaps instigated as the track was a chart comeback for Stormzy prior to the launch of his album Gang Sign and Prayers (**Appendix 20**).

The strongest element are Stormzy’s aggressive in your face lyrical bombardments. In effect threatening the competition they are never too big for their boots... “I’ve been killing it, new king”(**Appendix 21**).

Some felt this more commercial comeback compared to his previous more underground works to be a bit twee “rapping in a chicken shop about how you’re too old for twitter now” (**Appendix 22**). Either way the track propelled Grime into the up top 40 for 22 weeks (**Appendix 23**).

## The production techniques used in Big For Your Boots and Grime

(See Big For Your Boots in Element 1, Portfolio)

Choral/Orchestral (possibly synth) stabs are staccato short melody lines. Consisting of a single note modulating between two or three note positions over each bar to give "the icy feel of Grime" (**Appendix 24**). The Kick and Snare have a stripped back raw offbeat groove (Normally played by hand from midi pads to keep a human feel (**Appendix 24**). The space in the Kick Snare groove gives the bass and rapper space to fill in and emphasis phrases.

A 16<sup>th</sup> percussive sample groove is layered on top to gel the rhythm together. This is then dropped in and out to provide space for beat stops. Allowing the dark tension between rap and kick to dominate after the 2nd chorus.

There are finer percussive and sample elements that come in to create a "call and response effect" (**Appendix 24**). This helps the shuffle and interest of the groove whilst again keeping plenty of space for vocals.

The whole rhythm is "clipped...without being abrupt...with a snap" (**Appendix 25**).

The bass line is blended in the mix. "Using pulse waves through low pass filters tied to an envelope" (**Appendix 25**). Varying decay times allow different tones to be created.

Vocal hooks are one phrase that has been cut up and retriggered at different points to create different harmonic and rhythmic contexts through the track.

Decay effects are used to emphasis the vocal stabs.

The reverbs are light as "a big part of the Grime sound is its 'straight from the bedroom' chic, which puts the sound right by your ear, rather than in a stadium" (**Appendix 25**).

## How these techniques and elements have been incorporated into Play Dirty

(See Play Dirty in Element 1, Portfolio)

A 5/4 time signature was selected to match the reference track. The Kick was manually played in and the midi replaced with a long decay sample. Played off with a short snappy snare.

A selection of percussive loops were cut up and re warped to help give variety and texture to the groove.

A 16<sup>th</sup> percussive top end was added at similar key points in the arrangement. This helped to glue the track.

A bass groove was added on a low pass filter from Omnishpere. More layers with control line programmed decay were added to develop intensity.

An offbeat version of the bass was recorded live on the Korg Minilogue with modulated with resonance and cut off. This added more drive to the groove.

Short brass and choral notes were offset against each other giving continuation to the mix.

A ragga acapella vocal sample was pitched up 12 tones and the formants changed to help maintain sample smoothness. A light delay was added to these cut as different patterns appeared through the mix.

VocalSynth2 added harmonic undertones to a recorded vocal drop in the chorus and to add emphasis to certain key words through the verse.

A dark reverb with short decay was used on an auxiliary. Mainly for the stabs with a little on the vocals.

## Reflection upon results for Play Dirty

(See Play Dirty and Big For Your Boots in Element 1, Portfolio)

The bass/drum groove that was created for Play Dirty worked well. It carried the same tension, darkness and immediacy as the reference track created its own original vibe (whilst at a slower tempo). Somehow a deeper that groove draws you in (**Appendix D**). This was helped by the extra percussive and bass layers added to help compensate for the slower tempo.

The 16<sup>th</sup> percussive groove was very similar to the reference track so could be matched at key points in the arrangement (**Appendix E**).

If the exercise was to be repeated then a more complete replication of vocal sample grooves would have helped to give more subtly to the hooks in each part (**Appendix F**). With the slower tempo the choral and brass stabs did not have the same impact to drive the track (**Appendix G**). So in future the track would either need to be faster or more short synth/orchestral stabs would need to be introduced in to help drive the track in this area.

## The defining characteristics of Indie Pop

Indie Pop combines guitar pop with a DIY Ethic. (**Appendix 26**).

The scene was created in the post punk era of 1985-1995 and generally associated with being on Independent labels. Compared to Indie rock (with mainstream bands like Nirvana) its more melodic, less abrasive and relatively “angst free”(**Appendix 26**). It’s geared towards the mainstream commercial market with “a melodic, light hearted” sound. Sometimes just using electronics, piano, strings or even eschewing guitar altogether (**Appendix 27**).

An influence of folk and country pervades (**Appendix 28**).

Vocal harmonies tend to be rich and unique in their melodic placement. And the lyrical content and vocal style often tends to be very personal and with some edge (combined with an attitude of honesty and almost imperfection). Synth arpeggios often tend to be used to help glue mixes instead of rhythm guitar (**Appendix 29**).

And although the arrangements are often simple there is a tendency to experiment with form whilst still maintaining a catchy theme. Often with elements of dance or electronica.

With a heritage of bands like The Smiths and Vampire Weekend and current acts like Billie Eilish and Lana Del Ray the genre has a lot going for it.

However, some feel that the genre is racially biased. With nearly all performers being white and that “stereotypical whiteness is in part defined by those (indie) genres” (**Appendix 30**).

## How Everything I wanted conforms to the Indie pop genre

### (Everything I Wanted in Element 1, Portfolio)

Billy Elish and her Brother Finnegas write all their tunes in a small home studio based set up in the bedroom they grew up in their parents' house. Very DIY! **(Appendix 31)**.

There was an agreement to write lyrics they both related to so they could continue the narrative **(Appendix 32)**. This gives a 'relatable' emotive appeal to the lyrical content.

There is a dreamy rhythmic piano in F# major that runs through the whole song. Giving a simplistic almost folky feel. This key often denotes feelings of "Conquering Difficulties, Sighs of Relief" **(Appendix 16)**. Particularly poignant as the track is about their brother and sister relationship and how they support each other **(Appendix 32)**.

The vocals have very rich harmonic overlays in the chorus. Creating a very warm but original presence.

There's an arpeggiated synth that comes in after the 1<sup>st</sup> chorus and continues through the track with a low pass filter to modulate its presence in the mid and tops.

There are also some electronica leanings with the sub kick driving the track and a 4/4 side chain in line with the kick on the piano all the way through.

The original idea of the track came from Billie's depression and ideas about taking her own life. This takes it out of the more shiny side of Indie pop and into something darker. "A very serious step that I was admitting that I was planning on taking" **(Appendix 33)**. Perhaps there is still a residue of this original concept in the finished track.

## How these techniques and elements have been incorporated into Promise

(See Promise in Element 1, Portfolio)

The lyrical content is about a couple that have been reunited with a strong bond of hope and unity after a dark time and have discovered a strong new togetherness. This is in keeping with the darker side of the reference track and its more promoted theme of supporting one another.

The kick side chain was applied to the piano throughout the track (**Appendix H**). The tonality of the piano has been matched to create a similar dreamy laid-back effect. This glues the track together. Valhalla Shimmers Octave up and down effect adds presence and lift along with a Kurzweil pad (**Appendix I**). Solid bass notes were also similarly placed in the chorus.

There is a subtle choral note at F# that comes in through the first verse that was also incorporated (**Appendix I**).

A low pass sub kick pattern was added from a similar point in the track to add more drive (**Appendix J**).

An arpeggiated pattern was programmed from the Arutuia Matrix Brute. This was then recorded from a similar point in the arrangement with the cut off to modulate its presence in the mids and tops (**Appendix K**).

The laid back gentle vocal style was also featured with extra layers to create interesting harmonic textures along with F# in the chorus.

## Reflection upon results for Promise

(See Promise and Everything I Wanted in Element 1, Portfolio).

The intro of Everything I Wanted felt a bit drawn out so a creative decision was made to create a more immediate impact. Coming in with a vocal phrase after the 3<sup>rd</sup> bar followed by a chorus.

Promise has a shorter chorus, although it does have a post chorus section. The verses were shorter and so it meant the interchange between sections was more rapid (6 repeats of the chorus, 3 post choruses and 2 verses), whilst a creative decision was made to keep this flow as it fitted the track. It was a break away from the structure of 2 verse, 2 choruses and a play out to reference that.

Whilst both tracks were in F# minor occasional modulations were made in Promise to C major and A major to uplift the flow due to the slightly slower tempo (118.5 compared to 120) and the increase in part repeats.

The rhythm differs in Promise with a lo fi cut up break beat loop. This was a happy accident during production so again a decision was made to keep this.

Next time a slightly faster tempo would give better pace to the track. Allowing it to gel more with the side chained piano.

## Conclusion

Having looked in depth at the selected genres and production processes involved its obvious there is much more depth going on under the sheeny surface of a catchy hook than first meets the ear!

As tracks continue to get shorter to get complete plays on peoples streaming platforms then compacting the instrumentation and emotive content that makes a hit record into such a short space without making it seem trite has become a real art. “The average length of a chart-topping hit this year (2019) is three minutes and four seconds. That’s 38 whole seconds shorter than the average for a No.1 in full-year 2009. A clear indication of how streaming and the tyranny of the skip rate is changing the actual structure of song writing, as choruses arrive earlier and earlier and anything that might have audiences reaching for that button is brutally excised” **(Appendix 34)**.

Or is history just repeating itself as pop genres and sub genres merge in cycles for each new generation? The evolution story remains to be told for both listener and artist. “Not only does each generation get its own popular music, it also experiences music differently from previous generations” **(Appendix 35)**. The future is moving its feet.

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## Appendix's (Audio examples from created tracks)

A. I survived you. Piano.

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/i-survived-you-piano-appendix-a/s-KYWI6ryhPhH>

B. I survived you. Drums.

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/i-survived-you-drums-appendix-b/s-kFm8v2GQguC>

C. I survived you. Cello / Violin.

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/i-survived-you-cello-violin-appendix-c/s-L65VXXDkGti>

D. Play Dirty. Bass and Drums.

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/play-dirty-bass-drum-appendix-d/s-qhsXZ0IAEQm>

E. Play Dirty. Percussive Loop.

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/play-dirty-percussive-loop-appendix-e/s-RxV9PWUVvWj>

F. Play Dirty. Vocal Sample Loop.

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/play-dirty-vocal-sample-loop-appendix-f/s-3sIP2EA7KE4>

G. Play Dirty. Choral/Brass Stabs.

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/play-dirty-brass-choral-stab-loop-appendix-g/s-fsuxahxuqxu>

H. Promise. Side Chain Piano.

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/promise-side-chained-piano-appendix-h/s-c8sdsKw7yYL>

I. Promise. Shimmer & Kurzweil

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/promise-shimmer-fx-kurzweil-appendix-i/s-qAVHffSu3Yy>

J. Promise. Subtle Choral Note

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/promise-subtle-choral-note-appendix-j/s-g26w8IFdpqz>

K. Promise. Sub Kick.

<https://soundcloud.com/kevinjmckenna/promise-sub-kick-appendix-k/s-KkHATQROgp7>

L. Promise. Arpeggio.

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