

Name: James Burns

Student Number: 2106300

Module Title: Foundation Module Brief F2

**Analysis of Progressive Electronic, Disco/Synthwave,
Country**

Introduction

With the availability of streaming platforms, consumers have an unbelievable range of genres at their fingertips, Forbes magazine states “The records and CDs that Silent, Boomers, and Xers stockpiled as youths have been replaced by digital libraries. With this has come a shift toward breadth over depth” (Howe, 2019). As a result, the phrase ‘commercial music’ has become broader as the listeners explore further into genres they would never have encountered prior to streaming. During this essay, I will be exploring three genres, contemporary progressive electronic, disco/synth-pop and country pop, analysing recurring conventions within the music, and reflecting on how they informed the production of my three tracks.

Track 1 - Pushing Thru Forever

Oneohtrix Point Never (OPN) is an experimental electronic musician who has worked with artists such as FKA Twigs, The Weeknd, and Tim Hecker, alongside composing for films such as *Uncut Gems* (Safdie and Safdie, 2019) and *Good Time* (Safdie and Safdie, 2017). His discography ranges from being the forefather of the vaporwave genre, to releasing ambient electronic music, and more recently, working with Warp Records to release his latest electronic, pop, plunderphonic album, *Magic Oneohtrix Point Never*. His style and methodology greatly influences my own personal music, therefore I composed the track ‘Pushing Thru Forever’ using OPN’s songs ‘I Don’t Love Me Anymore’ (Lopatin, 2020), and ‘Long Road Home’ (Lopatin, 2020) as blueprints. I took influence from their structure, sound design and production techniques, of which I will go into more detail within this essay.

Music theory / structure

‘Pushing Thru Forever’ follows an ‘intro, verse, verse, middle 8, chorus, outro’ structure, which is similar to ‘I Don’t Love Me Anymore’, aside from one less verse section, as I didn’t feel like there was room on the song. This simple song structure allows the complex production to flourish without having too many changes that could over-complicate the song. ‘I Don’t Love Me Anymore’ has a relatively upbeat BPM of 130, whereas my track is at 120, thus keeping the allegro tempo and resulting in an energetic track. I experimented with moving the track to 130BPM, however this caused issues with the playback of the samples.

Generic Conventions

OPN’s genre is hard to pinpoint, many use the term ‘progressive electronic’ however this is an extremely broad description as it means electronic music that cannot be categorised. The classic sounds heard within a OPN track are heavily manipulated samples, a Juno 60, and a psychedelic influence. Sherburne writes that his style is “thick with sounds that blur the line between the fake and the real... Whether sampled, synthesized, or acoustic, they are rich with implicit physicality, evocative of stretching and striking; processed voices are carved into curved, glistening shapes, uncanny as ice sculptures. It’s a ridiculously opulent palette.” (2020) This informed my choice of the samples, vocal production, and instruments on ‘Pushing Thru Forever’ as I was trying to replicate the OPN sound.

‘I Don’t Love Me Anymore’ features a realistic sounding sample based drum kit, with natural/lightly manipulated high hats, snares, and kicks, causing it to sound more akin to the drums heard in a live rock band, thus influencing my choice of sounds for my percussion. In

both, 'I Don't Love Me Anymore', and 'Pushing Thru Forever', the drum pattern features a lot of emphasis on the kick with it playing almost on every beat. This causes the driving percussion to have more presence in the track and makes the overall song sound faster as opposed to a kick drum being featured exclusively on the first beat of each bar.

Sampling & Resampling

The majority of this track is made from samples of various pieces of my older work, as this is a key technique used by OPN, "I'm always searching for the juiciest moment in a pop track to sample, and then strip away, pull away, deconstruct, and swab in echo and get into a hypnotic state with it." (ShockTheseTrees, 2017, 05:52). I utilised a reverb-drenched plucked sound from my eurorack synthesiser, and loaded it into my Roland SP404 sampler. Following this, I pitch shifted the sample up and down numerous times to introduce artefacts caused by the poor quality of the pitch-shifting capabilities on the SP404. I then cut the sample up into smaller sections and used them to create the sound heard at 0:00 in the track. The destructive editing caused me to be more reserved with experimentation as I didn't want to ruin my progress. Upon reflection, I would have reduced less of the higher frequencies as I believe the sample often gets lost amongst the track's other instruments.

During the process of this song, I explored the works of Pierre Schaeffer and the origins of sampling. Schaeffer focussed on the tonal characteristics of various sounds in order to compose his musique concrète work, "For the 'concrete' musician there is no difference between the cut bell and the piece of train: they are 'sound fragments'" (Brian, 2014, p.16), which influenced the 'strings' that appear throughout the song. Originally, the sound is a cello from Spitfire Audio's

‘Estática’ pack, however I cut the sound up and sent the signal through three amplifier sims to add noise and distortion, followed by an equaliser to carve away and deconstruct the dense sample. I then loaded this final sound into Ableton’s sampler and played back the ‘string’ sounds heard at 0:16. The randomisation of the splicing resulted in interesting new rhythms within the strings that sounded un-quantised and humanised.

Bass

At 2:20 on ‘I Don’t Love Me Anymore’, a fuzzy distorted guitar can be heard following the root notes of the chords and adding a punk/rock element to the song. For ‘Pushing Thru Forever’, I opted to record an electric bass, running it through the Alesis Quadraverb for a short plate reverb alongside some distortion due to clipping on the pre-amp. Following this I ran it through the Alesis 3630 with a high ratio to compress and squash the sound giving consistent volume throughout, and making it sound more energetic. I believe this was effective as it allowed the bass to cut through the mix, and it drives the song in a similar manner to the guitar, whilst emphasising the root notes of the song which would otherwise be lost underneath the various samples.

Vocals

Throughout OPN’s ‘Long Road Home’ there are heavily processed vocals. The song features numerous layers of toplines, each with their formant being altered, shifting the acoustic resonance in the voice causing it to sound higher or deeper without changing the pitch. I employed this technique on Ifan Pritchard’s vocals as heard at 1:20 as it makes the vocals sound artificial, thus complimenting the electronic aspect of the track.

Following this, I chose to pitch shift certain elements using the 'beat' setting, as this setting is reserved for percussion due to it preserving the transients in the audio. When used dramatically on vocals, it results in artefacts and strange stuttering effects as heard at 1:50. The vocals feature heavy compression followed by some saturation from the Soundtoys decapitator, thus distorting the vocals and making them prominent in the mix whilst also adding some unique character to their sound, following this I applied a short 1/8th ping pong delay for stereo width alongside a plate reverb.

Track 2 - I Think In Neon

In recent years, a surge of synthwave and 80's influenced pop music has seen commercial success, 'Dua Lipa and The Weeknd have been drawing on funky basslines, disco grooves, and synth heavy pop nostalgia to land respective spots at the top of the billboard charts' (Genius, 2020, 00:02). For my track 'I Think In Neon', I took direct influence from these artists, exploring the various generic conventions of their music, and applying it to my track in order to produce a song within a similar style.

Theory & Structure

The Weeknd's 'Take My Breath' (Tsfaye, 2021) formed the initial inspiration for the structure of my track, similar to my track, it follows the structure of: intro, verse, pre chorus, chorus, shorter verse, pre chorus, chorus, middle 8, and chorus. The longer 30 second intro, alongside the synthwave influenced middle 8 at 02:20 are characteristics that stood out to me from 'Take My Breath', therefore I incorporated them into my song. Both 'Take My Breath', and 'I Think In Neon' share the same moderately quick tempo of 121 bpm as it is energetic and ideal for dance music such as disco.

In order to add some variation in the verses, I inverted the piano chords "As a result, most rock harmonies are in root position, that is, the root of the chord is in the bass. Inversions are infrequent enough that when they do appear, they generally are integral to the character of the

music” (Stephenson, 2002, p.78). I found the chord inversions useful for lifting the track, and clearly separating the piano chords from the bass-line and guitar.

Genre characteristics

With the 80’s influence on ‘Take My Breath’, we see a return of disco in a commercial and contemporary format. The classic syncopated muted guitars that introduce the song could easily be heard on a track by popular disco guitarist Nile Rodgers. Alongside this, the four-to-the-floor bass drum, whereby a hit is placed on each beat thus driving the tempo of the song, is a classic disco trait, “Four-on-the-floor functions sometimes as an individual stratum; we could even call it the very root of stratification, because it splits up the drum set (and thus the rhythm section) and asserts the possibility that any element can present itself as independent” (Lin, 2008 p.58). The repurposing of these conventions from the 70s and 80s era of disco into a modern pop song evokes a feeling of nostalgia. I identified these generic conventions from ‘Take My Breath’ and applied them to my track, as heard within the guitars at 0:01, and the four-to-the-floor bass drum that runs throughout.

Dua Lipa’s Cool (Lipa, 2020) features a gated snare, a trick that is synonymous with 80s popular music. Originally, the trick was to use a reverb bus on a snare, and to gate the reverb track with the original snare sample, resulting in a powerful and punchy sound. However, due to modern technology, I utilised a sample of a gated snare as it was far easier to use as I do not have to set up a reverb bus, and the additional steps to produce this sound felt unnecessary.

Production Techniques

The synthesisers that feature on this track were created using hardware synthesisers, without quantisation and MIDI. This created a humanised feel to the chords and bassline whilst also showing further influence from the 80s use of the Juno-60, as the Juno-60 didn't include MIDI capabilities, or quantisation. For the choice of synthesiser, both Dua Lipa and The Weeknd utilised the Juno-60 throughout their tracks. "The Juno was really the sound of the 1980s... The Weeknd glides over synth filled beats like on the production of his track, Blinding Lights" (Genius, 2020, 02:48). The Juno-60 is a polyphonic 6-voice synth released by Roland between 1982 and 1984, it became a staple of 80's house, pop, and techno music, and is known for its classic analog sound. The majority of my leads and chords were performed using the Behringer Deepmind 12, a polyphonic hybrid-analog synthesiser that sounds similar to the Juno-60. The bassline that appears during the Middle-8 was created on my eurorack synthesiser, I used a sine wave, with an additional square wave pitched an octave up. This created a deep, rumbling sub-bass with plenty of overtones that allow it to cut through the mix and remain extremely present in the track, as a bassline is a key component of disco and synthwave music. With further consideration, I would have preferred to have used a bass guitar instead of a synthesiser as a bass guitar is more commonly used within this genre of music.

To add a unique element to the track, and to add my own version of referencing an older genre of music to invoke feelings of nostalgia, my approach for mixing was heavily influenced by late 90s Daft Punk, and Stardust's popular song 'Music Sounds Better With You' (Bangalter, Braxe, & Diamond, 1998), I chose these influences in particular as they had were likewise influenced by

disco, however the outcome is different to that of The Weeknd or Dua Lipa . In regards to the mixing and production of ‘Music Sounds Better With You’, I found an interview with the producer who mentioned “Benjamin Diamond recorded the vocals, which were compressed with an Alesis 3630. Plus, we used another 3630 compressor on the master bus of the entire track. And that was it.” (Braxe, 2012). I applied a similar technique using my 3630, running the whole track through the compressor with a high ratio. I increased the loudness of the bass drum, resulting in a pumping sound and side-chain compression. The Alesis 3630 is also known to be a noisy and crunchy hardware compressor, this resulted in additional saturation, thus making the song sound more ‘in your face’.

Vocals

Throughout this track I featured a variety of subtle pitch-shifting effects on the vocals, particularly during the chorus. Using a vocal track that had been pitched an octave down, resulted in a robotic sounding voice, in addition to filling out the upper-middle frequencies of the track, resulting in a denser mix. Alongside this, I automated the delay at the end of particular words (as heard at 0:44), and I added an auto-pan to the adlibs to add movement to the mix as opposed to having them consistently panned in one direction which can become boring after a while. In regards to processing, in order to give the vocals presence within the mix, I added saturation, removed lower unwanted frequencies, and added a fast compressor to smoothen the transients.

Track 3 - Something To You

Country is an extremely broad genre of music, with numerous subgenres each with their own specific conventions. In order to explore the ‘commercial’ aspect of the genre, I closely looked at the Grammy nominated song, ‘Blue Ain’t Your Color’(Urbahn, 2016) by Keith Urban, and the Grammy winning song, ‘Crowded Table’(Carlile, Hemby, Mckenna, 2019) by The Highwomen. Beginning with ‘Blue Ain’t Your Color’, the largest influence on my track is the 3/4 time signature, alongside the track being driven by a simple drum beat with the kick on the first beat of the first bar, and the snare on the first beat of the second bar, the hi-hat is playing 8th notes, resulting in a steady rhythm throughout the track, whilst adding a waltz-like feeling to the overall piece. Throughout the track, a guitar is heard playing staccato 1/8th notes, thus accompanying the hi-hat, this is something that I carried over during certain sections of my piece as I felt it emphasised the rhythm and drove the piece. ‘Crowded Table’ has a BPM of 132, this influenced my choice of 130 BPM as it gave a more relaxed feeling to the piece. Alongside this, in regards to the structure, ‘Crowded Table’ builds up throughout the track leading to a full, and euphoric final chorus, this is something that influenced ‘Something to you’ as it is impactful and leaves the listener wanting more.

Vocals

In regards to recording, the vocalist has a brassy voice with plenty of depth, meaning a large diaphragm condenser such as the Aston Spirit was ideal for capturing the higher frequencies. As

we were recording in a reverberant room, I decided to use the figure of 8 polar pattern and had the vocalist step back in order to reduce proximity effect and capture some of the room sound. The result wasn't quite as I hoped for, as the vocals were too reverberant and ended up being easily lost in the mix. In order to capture a vocal sound more akin to Keith Urban's song, I used Izotope's RX8 to remove the reverb, and applied an LA2A compressor plugin to smoothen the dynamics and add some colouration.

Instrument Choices

In preparation for the project, I researched the 1960's Nashville Sound, and how producers such as Chet Atkins caused Country to change by replacing 'the nasal twang and southern accents of country voices with smoother backup vocals and adding swelling string sections to soften (or replace) steel guitars and raspy fiddles.' (Ching, 2008, p.303). This influenced my choice of instruments, as 'Crowded Table' is more influenced by the Nashville sound with its smooth backup vocals, piano, and string sections as opposed to 'Blue Ain't Your Color's drier vocals, and acoustic guitars.

Production Techniques

'Blue Ain't Your Colour' features some interesting production techniques that are less traditional in country music, 'The whole thing takes off once drummer Matt Chamberlain creates a simple drum loop, which helps add a left-field spin to the song's doo-wop-worthy waltz' (Leahey, 2016). Underneath the track is a drum machine playing a bass drum and a tambourine, adding further definition in the lower frequencies of the kick, and a contrasting reverberant tambourine

in the chorus. My drum kit is a mixture of Spitfire Labs' percussion, played back on a MIDI keyboard for humanisation in the timing and the note velocities, thus making it seem like a person is playing the kit. This is blended with a synthesised Ableton bass drum and a tambourine sample to capture the feeling of 'Blue Ain't Your Color' whilst still keeping my own original sound.

Whilst country music frequently features acoustic or steel guitar, a heavily reverberant electric guitar is becoming a popular trope within country pop. Keith Urban producer Nathan Chapman, (also notable for working with Taylor Swift) , mentions he 'only used real guitar amps for about 40 percent of the work he did on Taylor's records. For the rest, he used the stock amp designer plug-in in Logic Pro 9.' (Pack, 2018). I utilised an amplifier plugin for ease of overdubbing, and customisability in regards to the guitar tone. I regret this decision, as I feel my guitar sounds digital and artificial, and didn't capture the same tonal characteristics of the electric guitars in my reference track, in the future I feel I would have greater success recreating this using a real amplifier.

Music Theory

The guitar and the bass followed the root notes of the piano chords for the majority of the song, however during the final pre-chorus at 3:14, I used approach notes on the bass, 'Approach notes are notes that come from above or below the "original" melody notes' (Damian, 2001, p.35) this added further movement to the bassline and made the build up more impactful for the final chorus. The song is in a key of G Major, similar to 'Blue Ain't Your Colour', this is important in replicating a similar sound in regards to the chords.

Conclusion

With many contemporary songs being an eclectic blend of numerous other genres, it is important to analyse a track closely for particular generic conventions prior to producing within that style, as there will commonly be overlooked aspects that are vital for a genre's particular sound, whether this was analysing the use of samples in progressive electronic music, the vocal processing in country pop, or the percussion used in disco. I believe I have accurately produced three songs that are informed by my chosen influential tracks from each genre, and reflect aspects seen in popular music of today.

Bibliography

Bangalter, T., Braxe, A., Diamond, B. (1998) '*Music Sounds Better with You*'. Stardust, *Music Sounds Better with You* [Music] Paris: Roulé

Braxe, A. (2012) 'Alan Braxe interview and video studio tour'. Interview by Chris Barker, *Music Radar*, 26th October

Brian, K. (2014) *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Carlile, B., Hemby, N. and McKenna, L. (2019) '*Crowded Table*' The Highwomen. *The Highwomen* [Music] New York: Elektra Records

Ching, B (2008), 'Nashville Sound' in Malone, B.C. (ed.) *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 12: Music*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Pp. 302-305.

Damian, J. (2001) *The Guitarists Guide to Composing and Improvising*. Winona: Hal Leonard Corporation.

Genius (2020) *Why The Weeknd & Dua Lipa Sound Like The 80s* | *Genius News*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sl9HMnJX5cY&ab_channel=Genius (Accessed: 30 Nov 2021)

Howe, N. (2019) 'How Music Streaming Won Over Millennials', *Forbes*, 16 January. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/neilhowe/2019/01/16/how-music-streaming-won-over-millennials/> (accessed 14 December 2021)

Leahey, A. (2016) 'See Keith Urban Record 'Ripcord' Ballad 'Blue Ain't Your Color'', *Rolling Stone*, 9 May. Available at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/see-keith-urban-record-ripcord-ballad-blue-a-int-your-color-55281/> (Accessed 15 December 2021)

Lin, T. (2008) 'Disco as Operating System, Part One.' *Criticism*, 50(1) pp.43-83. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23130867>. (Accessed 14 December 2021)

Lipa, D (2020) 'Cool'. Dua Lipa. *Future Nostalgia*. [Music] Los Angeles: Warner Records

Lopatin, D (2020) "*I Don't Love Me Anymore*". Oneohtrix Point Never. *Magic Oneohtrix Point Never*. [Music] London: Warp Records

Lopatin, D (2020) "*Long Road Home*". Oneohtrix Point Never. *Magic Oneohtrix Point Never*. [Music] London: Warp Records

Pack, B, (2018) 'Engineers and Producers Talk Recording A Country-Pop Crossover Hit', *Vintage King*, 21 August. Available at: <https://vintageking.com/blog/2018/08/recording-country-pop/> (accessed 15 December 2021)

Uncut Gems (2019), Directed by Benny Safdie, and Josh Safdie [Feature Film.] USA: A24

Good Time (2017), Directed by Benny Safdie, and Josh Safdie [Feature Film] USA: A24

Sherburne, P. (2020) 'Oneohtrix Point Never: Magic Oneohtrix Point Never' *Pitchfork*, 30

October. Available at:

<https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/oneohtrix-point-never-magic-oneohtrix-point-never/>

(Accessed 12 December 2021)

ShockTheseTrees (2017) *Electric Independence: Daniel Lopatin (Oneohtrix Point Never) -*

Motherboard. Available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0RAmNU5Es8&ab_channel=ShockTheseTrees (Accessed

30 Nov 2021).

Stephenson, K. (2002) *What to listen for in Rock: A Stylistic Narrative*, New Haven: Yale

University Press

Tesfaye, A (2021) '*Take My Breath*'. The Weeknd. *Take My Breath*. [Music] New York City:

Republic Records

Urbahn, K (2016) '*Blue Ain't Your Color*'. Keith Urban. *Ripcord* [Music] Nashville: Capitol

Records Nashville