

THOMAS READ

Student Number: 1808655

Course Lecturer: Ciarán Robinson

MA Commercial Music Producer - Foundation Assignment

In recent years, commercial music has seen a blurring of lines between genres, to the point that almost any style of music can be considered mainstream pop, as long as it is presented with modern and commercial pop production techniques. Urban music genres such as hip hop, grime, and trap have all moved into the mainstream pop arena thanks to popularity of artists such as Kanye, Drake, Stormzy and others. Peter Robinson says of ‘post-genre’¹ artists: ‘They now straddle, or exist beyond, genres that seemed set in concrete as little as 10 years ago. They represent a cross-pollination that makes it harder than ever to definitively state that you like or dislike one genre or another.’² Bearing this in mind, the three genres I have chosen to analyse are:

- Female pop
- Soul / R&B
- Alternative

I chose one reference song for each of the above in order to analyse the techniques native to each genre respectively, looking at recording techniques, composition, arrangement, chord progressions and melody, for each of them. I then applied similar techniques to my own production of three original songs.

¹ Robinson, Peter. “Pop, Rock, Rap, Whatever: Who Killed the Music Genre?” *The Guardian*, March 17, 2016, sec. Music. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/mar/17/pop-rock-rap-whatever-who-killed-the-music-genre>>.

² *Ibid.*

GENRE 1: FEMALE POP

Overview:

Recent times have seen the rise of the female pop artist. The UK singles chart shows seven female pop artists in the Top 10 for the week of November 23, 2018.³ In the past 5 years, two female artists (Taylor Swift, Adele) have been awarded the IFPI Global Artist of the Year Award, given to the best-selling recording artist of the year.⁴

One of the producers credited with the rise of female pop is Swedish multi-platinum songwriter Max Martin. He has written and produced 22 Billboard #1 singles for artists, 18 of which have been female artists including Taylor Swift, Katy Perry, Britney Spears and Pink. In *The Song Machine: Inside The Hit Factory*, Savan Kotecha outlines Max Martin's approach to songwriting: 'With the Swedish people, what is expected to happen is going to happen... A Swede will not let you down and neither do their songs. If you expect the song to blow here, it will blow here, and if you expect it to be chill there, it's chill there.'⁵

Genre Characteristics:

The production used in female driven pop music revolves heavily around the lead vocal, which takes prime position within the production of the song. Peter Robinson says: 'Most striking is the rise of what we will call 'whisperpop', which hit its apotheosis in Selena Gomez sleeper hits such as *Good for You* and *Bad Liar*, tracks with deceptively understated, intricate vocal performances.'⁶ Often this breathy vocal technique will be found in the verses, before opening the vocal up in the choruses. This creates an emotive

³ "Official Singles Chart Top 100 | Official Charts Company." Accessed December 13, 2018. <<https://www.officialcharts.com/charts/singles-chart/20181123/7501/>>

⁴ "Ed Sheeran Officially Named the Best-Selling Global Recording Artist of 2017." Accessed November 30, 2018. <<https://www.ifpi.org/news/Ed-Sheeran-officially-named-the-best-selling-global-recording-artist-of-2017>>

⁵ Seabrook, John. *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*. Jonathan Cape, 2015.

⁶ Robinson, Peter. "'Whisperpop': Why Stars Are Choosing Breathily Intensity over Vocal Paint-Stripping." *The Guardian*, November 11, 2017, sec. Music. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/nov/11/whisperpop-why-stars-choosing-breathily-intensity-over-vocal-paint-stripping>>

performance in the verses and helps the choruses to feel stronger and louder, creating a contrasting dynamic between the verses and choruses of the song.

Instrumentation centres mainly around piano, synths, and strong electronic drums. Typically songs start with just a piano playing basic chords and the female vocal, often with a filtered minimal drum beat underneath. Heavily reverbed snares or finger snaps are commonly used. In the choruses, the drums open up with a stronger snare brought in alongside hi-hats. Perhaps the most important instrumentation to the genre is the use of side-chained synths. These are almost always found in the chorus, with both mono and polysynths such as the Juno 106 side chained to the bass drum, to create a pulsing effect.

One of the most common production techniques used in pop is the use of vocal samples and chops. These are audio clips of vocals that have been chopped up and then pitched either an octave up or down. There are also plugins such as Exhale and Izotope VocalSynth that create these vocal samples.

Reference Track: Kaitie Forbes - Hotel Room

Key: A

Tempo: 122 bpm

Length: 3:42s

Song Structure:

- Intro (4 bars)
- Verse (8 bars)
- Pre Chorus (4 bars)
- Chorus 16 bars)
- Vocal Interlude (4 bars)
- Verse (8 bars)
- Chorus (16 bars)
- Post Chorus / Instrumental (8 bars)
- Bridge (8 bars)
- Chorus (16 bars)

- Post Chorus / Instrumental (8 bars)
- Outro (8 bars)

Production Analysis of Reference Track:

The intro opens with a vocal melody, chopped and pitched up an octave. There is a synth pad and a filtered kick drum that sits underneath the vocal chops. The verse is sparse with just the synth and kick and lead vocal. During the pre chorus both finger snaps/clicks and backing vocals are introduced. The entry into the chorus is marked by a filtered synth that creates a swelling effect leading into the chorus. The production then expands in the chorus with the introduction of snare and hi hats, along with side-chained synth bass and synth chords. There is a vocal 4-bar interlude after the chorus that uses layered vocals with a vocoder effect.

Ad-libbed vocals are used over the top of the main vocal melody, and they repeat the main chorus vocal hook line during the post chorus sections. The use of sweeps and risers help to create the dynamics of the song, and just before the final chorus the production sweeps up using a riser with all the music cutting out to just the lead vocal, before all of the music hitting back in on the first beat of the chorus. The main melody hook then gets repeated until the end of the song.

Original Song: Beth Keeping - Building Bridges on the Dance Floor

Key: E

Tempo: 105 bpm

Length: 3:33s

Song Structure:

- Intro (1 bar)
- Verse (7 bars)
- Pre Chorus (8 bars)
- Chorus (12 bars)
- Interlude (1 bar)
- Verse (7 bars)

- Pre Chorus (8 bars)
- Chorus (16 bars)
- Bridge (8 bars)
- Chorus (16 bars)
- Post Chorus (8 bars)

Applied Production Techniques:

The song starts out stripped back, with just a piano, lead vocal, and filtered kick drum pattern. The vocal is sung in a ‘whisperpop’ style. To keep it interesting and provide some movement I’ve added a reverse piano. During the pre chorus a wood-block topper is introduced and I’ve applied delay to it to give it some more rhythm. Similar to the reference track, I’ve used a swelling effect leading into the chorus. The production then also opens up in the chorus by bringing in the snare and hi hats, along with side-chained synth bass and synth chords.

I used plenty of cymbal swells, risers, and sweeps to help build into the choruses, and create a dynamic shift between the different sections. These are combined with impact hits on the first beat of the choruses to help the choruses feel big. I also used arpeggiated synth parts in the chorus to create movement with the track.

In the mix I’ve kept the vocals and drums upfront, which is normal for pop. The lead vocal is quite heavily compressed using an 1176 compressor, and auto-tune has been used liberally giving the vocal a smoothing effect that is common in pop.

Additional Musical Decisions:

The artist primarily plays and performs with an acoustic guitar, but wanted the song to fit more in the pop genre rather than the singer-songwriter genre, which is why I have chosen to employ many of the pop genre production techniques outlined above. However, I felt that it was important to include some acoustic guitar sections in the song so that it would still fit in with the existing style of the artist.

GENRE 2: MODERN SOUL / R&B

Overview:

There has been a recent resurgence of the classic soul sound. Artists like Amy Winehouse and Joss Stone brought back the classic soul/jazz vocal, and a host of new artists have fused soul and R&B to create a modern sound. This sound is exemplified by artists such as Mac Ayers, Bruno Major, and Corinne Bailey Rae.

Chris Mugan says, ‘these current practitioners, are open to a wider range of influences than before, with the freedom to take a variety of directions. Their knowledge is gleaned variously from parents' record collections, first musical loves or through online research.’⁷

Genre Characteristics:

The genre has a few notable traits: generally the tempo sits around the 80-100 bpm range, which is slower than the average pop song. Drums are usually quite minimal and will centre on a heavy kick/snare groove. Typically the drum groove is swung giving a more laid back feel. There is a bias towards organic sounding instruments: soul gravitates towards guitars and pianos, and the vintage Rhodes piano sound is hugely popular in R&B.

Production is notably minimal, almost bare in some instances. The vocal and drum beat drive the production, often with songs featuring just a beat, bass line, piano, and rich vocal. The bass guitar might also be given more prominence and space to shine, depending on the feel of the song.

Reference Track: Mac Ayres - Calvin's Joint

Key: Gm

Tempo: 95 bpm

Length: 3:46s

⁷ Mugan, Chris. “The Soul Revival: A Change Is Gonna Come in the Charts.” The Independent, January 20, 2012. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/the-soul-revival-a-change-is-gonna-come-in-the-charts-6291953.html>>

Song Structure:

- Intro (8 bars)
- Verse (18 bars)
- Chorus (16 bars)
- Interlude (8 bars)
- Verse (10 bars)
- Chorus (16 bars)
- Outro / Vamp (12 bars)

Production Analysis of Reference Track:

The intro is a Rhodes piano with a slight tremolo effect, played very sparsely and mainly just marking the main chord progression of Ab - G - Cm. The vocal comes in for the first verse, is quite saturated, and has a fair amount of reverb and delay on it. The drums come in on the second half of the chorus with a swung beat consisting of kick, snare rim taps, and closed hi hats. This is accompanied by a high rhythmic piano part, which pedals the root note Gm through the song. In the chorus the bass guitar comes in, and the drums switch from a rim tap to a full snare sound. The bass and Rhodes piano chords are side-chained to the kick drum to create a subtle rhythmic pumping effect through the song.

The production stays more or less the same through out the next verse and chorus, with some sparse BVs punctuating at intervals throughout. The song ends with an outro section, in which the snare drops back to the rim tap, and the bass line and BVs play a groove that vamps and then fades out.

Original Song: Kaja - A Half Way

Key: Eb

Tempo: 92 bpm

Length: 3:12s

Song Structure:

- Intro (4 bar)

- Verse (8 bars)
- Chorus (16 bars)
- Verse (8 bars)
- Chorus (16 bars)
- Bridge / Vamp (16 bars)
- Outro (4 bars)

Applied Production Techniques:

The song starts with an acoustic guitar cycling a chord progression: Cmaj7 - Am - Fmaj7 - Bb. The verse is just lead vocal and acoustic guitar, with a subtle vocal synth layered underneath created using the Exhale plugin. Kick drum and finger snaps are brought in on the first chorus, and the snaps play an offbeat rhythm at the end of each 4-bar loop. A classic Wurlitzer electric piano plays the main chorus chords alongside the acoustic guitar. The Wurlitzer is side chained to the kick drum, and I also applied the OneKnob Pumper filter plugin to give it a pulsing effect.

The bass line is very simple, marking each note of the verse chord progression. An acoustic piano is also introduced to fill out the instrumentation as the song progresses. In the second chorus a Rhodes piano plays a toppling melody that riffs off the lead vocal, filling in the spaces around it and giving a jazzy/r&b feel to the section.

During the bridge section, the production steps up to its fullest level with the introduction of an acoustic snare, a Hammond organ, a pizzicato string ensemble, and multiple layered BV harmonies. The bass line becomes more intricate playing a stronger line and with passing notes. All of the instrumentation is side-chained to the kick drum in order to allow the kick drum to stand out.

Additional Musical Decisions:

The artist really wanted a Corinne Bailey Rae influence in the song, so we decided to use an acoustic guitar to drive the song. I also used Splice to find some some gospel/R&B style electric piano riffs to punctuate throughout the song. With the mix of the song, I decided not to use too many effects as I wanted it to sound as natural as possible, keeping it in line with the more organic feel found in soul.

GENRE 3: ALTERNATIVE

Overview:

The label of ‘Alternative’ music used to have a much clearer definition of the type of music it represented. The genre was typified by guitar-based rock bands such as Nirvana, R.E.M, and Stone Temple Pilots, who helped to take alternative music into the mainstream during the early and mid 90s. Fast forward twenty years and the Alternative genre is far more ambiguous.⁸ The days of guitar-based rock music dominating the charts have long gone, and instead electronic music has become king.

Former music editor for the Guardian, Michael Hann, writes about rock music being in it’s jazz phase: ‘(Rock) has ceded its place at the centre of the pop-cultural conversation to other forms of music, ones less tied to a sense of history. Ones, dare I say it, more forward looking. For several years, it seemed, I was asked by one desk or another at the Guardian to write a start-of-year story about how this was the year rock would bounce back. But it never did.’⁹

That is not to say that alternative music no longer exists, but rather that the type of music the genre represents has widened to incorporate a much broader range of music and influences. New artists such as Rag ‘n’ Bone Man and Jacob Banks are redefining the alternative label by fusing together elements of different genres, such as blues, R&B, hip hop, soul, and rock. Their music doesn’t fit into any one of those genres alone, but instead pulls influences from all of them. Alternative music used to refer to any type of music that doesn’t immediately fit into the Top 40 chart category, however due to the embrace of other musical influences and modern production techniques, it is not uncommon to find alternative music in the charts.

⁸ Askin, Noah, and Michael Mauskapf. “What Makes Popular Culture Popular?: Product Features and Optimal Differentiation in Music.” *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 5 (October 2017). Pg.16.

⁹ Hann, Michael. “Rock Is the New Jazz and Vinyl’s Misleading Revival: 5 Things I’ve Learned as Guardian Music Editor | Michael Hann.” *The Guardian*, March 31, 2017, sec. Music. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2017/mar/31/five-things-i-learned-as-guardian-music-editor-rock-music-writing-michael-hann>>

Genre Characteristics:

While it can be hard to define the genre due to its very nature, there are some traits and characteristics that can be seen in the genre. The fusion of organic and electronic instruments plays a big part, and commonly real drums and sampled drums will be used alongside each other, as with acoustic piano and electronic synths.

Guitars still play a part in the genre, both acoustic and electric, however they are used in a more subtle way than previously found in alternative rock music. Rather than power chords, guitars are instead used to complement the song rather than to drive it, often playing the main hook line of the song, or providing rhythmic patterns similar to those popularised in 70s funk music by Nile Rogers.

Vocally you will find more of a raw approach rather than the heavily produced vocals you would normally find in chart music. Vocals will tend to be more on the soulful, gritty side, exemplified in artists like Hozier and Tom Walker. However modern vocal effects, such as multi layering and vocal chops are still used giving the songs and vocal performance a current feel.

Reference Track: Jacob Banks - Chainsmoking

Key: F#m

Tempo: 70 bpm

Length: 3:12s

Song Structure:

- Intro (4 bars)
- Chorus A (4 bars)
- Chorus B (4 bars)
- Verse (8 bars)
- Chorus A (4 bars)
- Chorus B (4 bars)
- Verse (8 bars)
- Interlude (4 bars)

- Chorus A (8 bars)
- Chorus B (4 Bars)
- Outro (4 bars)

Production Analysis of Reference Track:

The song does not follow a typical Verse/Chorus/Verse/Chorus/Bridge/Chorus form, but rather employs an unusual structure with the song starting with the chorus and then following a basic ABAB form between the chorus and verses. A simple i - iv - vii - i chord pattern is used throughout the entire song.

The song has a blues rock sound overall, starting with a bluegrass / negro-spiritual vocal chant that sets the tone. Organic instruments are used throughout including stomps and hand claps. A bluesy guitar riff and acoustic piano stabs come in on the chorus and second verse. An important part of the sound is the side-chained synth stabs which help to keep the song sounding current. The synth stabs are doubled with a Hammond organ which again emphasises the fusion between retro and modern sounds.

The production has a lo-fi feel to it with lots of saturation used on the drums, stomps, guitars and vocals to give it an analogue sound. The vocals sit high in mix along with the synth stabs. The vocal chants and BVs are also quite prominent in the overall mix, and feature more as the track goes on - layering over the main guitar riff to thicken it out.

Original Song: JT Gautreau - I Can Barely Breathe

Key: F#m

Tempo: 85 bpm

Length: 3:20s

Song Structure:

- Intro (4 bar)
- Verse (8 bars)
- Chorus (6 bars)
- Interlude (4 bars)

- Verse (8 bars)
- Chorus (6 bars)
- Instrumental (6 bars)
- Bridge (12 bars)
- Chorus (16 bars)

Applied Production Techniques:

The song employs the same bluesy / bluegrass feel as the reference track, starting with a vocal chant that has a Latin influence, complimented by some Latin percussion. I also added some vocal chops using the Exhale plugin. The verse is spare with just stomps and piano, alongside the lead vocal. An acoustic guitar also helps to give the song an organic feel along with the stomps and rim hits and this continues through the first chorus.

Coming out of the chorus, a strong synth bass part helps to give the track that modern feel. I've side-chained the synths so that the resonance and cutoff opens up as each note plays, helping to enhance the side-chain effect. There is also a main hook melody that comes in on both electric guitar and synth. I have distorted both instruments using fuzz and saturation to help them feel warm and lo-fi. Drawing inspiration from the reference track, I've also added a high acoustic piano stabs throughout the choruses and verses that just pedal the F#m root note of the song.

Additional Musical Decisions:

This song was produced for an artist from the Dominican Republic. We included some traditional Latin-American elements into the song using backing vocals that sing a Latin-American style chant. I also recorded some traditional Caribbean instruments such as the Tambora and used them in the bridge. For the overall mix I ran everything through an Empirical Labs Distressor to give it some saturation and compression. The artist also wanted the song to feel contemporary and current and wanted to include some modern production techniques, which is why I chose to include vocal samples from Exhale throughout the song.

References

Allen, Paul. *Artist Management for the Music Business*. Fourth edition. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

Askin, Noah, and Michael Mauskopf. "What Makes Popular Culture Popular?: Product Features and Optimal Differentiation in Music." *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 5 (October 2017).

"Ed Sheeran Officially Named the Best-Selling Global Recording Artist of 2017." Accessed November 30, 2018. <<https://www.ifpi.org/news/Ed-Sheeran-officially-named-the-best-selling-global-recording-artist-of-2017>>.

Hann, Michael. "Rock Is the New Jazz and Vinyl's Misleading Revival: 5 Things I've Learned as Guardian Music Editor | Michael Hann." *The Guardian*, March 31, 2017, sec. Music. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2017/mar/31/five-things-i-learned-as-guardian-music-editor-rock-music-writing-michael-hann>>.

Mugan, Chris. "The Soul Revival: A Change Is Gonna Come in the Charts." *The Independent*, January 20, 2012. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/the-soul-revival-a-change-is-gonna-come-in-the-charts-6291953.html>>.

"Official Singles Chart Top 100 | Official Charts Company." Accessed December 13, 2018. <<https://www.officialcharts.com/charts/singles-chart/20181123/7501/>>.

Robinson, Peter. "Pop, Rock, Rap, Whatever: Who Killed the Music Genre?" *The Guardian*, March 17, 2016, sec. Music. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/mar/17/pop-rock-rap-whatever-who-killed-the-music-genre>>.

———. "'Whisperpop': Why Stars Are Choosing Breathy Intensity over Vocal Paint-Stripping." *The Guardian*, November 11, 2017, sec. Music. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/nov/11/whisperpop-why-stars-choosing-breathy-intensity-over-vocal-paint-stripping>>.

Seabrook, John. *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*. Jonathan Cape, 2015.