

THREE GENRES, THEIR DEFINING QUALITIES AND HOW I USED THEM IN MY SONGS

AN ESSAY ON WRITING TO BREIF FOR CLIENTS.

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17/12/20

1. Introduction
2. Drake; HipHip & RnB
3. Burial; Garage & 2-Step
4. Post Malone; Trap Pop
5. Conclusion
6. References

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1. Introduction

I have chosen to analyse three tracks in three different genres. These three tracks are Chicago Freestyle by Drake featuring Giveon, produced by Sevn Thomas in the style of Shebib 40, I have identified this track to be within the genres of HipHop & RnB. The second track I have chosen to use as a reference is ArchAngel by Burial off of his ground breaking album Arch Angel. I have identified this track as Garage & Two-Step. Lastly, Better Now by Post Malone, produced by Frank Dukes and Louis Bell. I have identified this track to be Trap Pop.

It is clear to me that many genres of contemporary music are indeed a blend of many genres. However in this modern world of genre blending, key techniques and sounds are always prevalent within specific genres. Such as the 808 and autotune in HipHop and Trap, heavily distorted guitars in Metal and the Amen break in Jungle or Drum and Bass.

Through this essay I have displayed my research into the defining characteristics and techniques of these three genres, I will go on to compare those tracks and techniques to my own work that has been created with the original tracks as reference guides. I then intend to deliver a clear explanation on how I implemented those techniques and developed those characteristics in my own work. Finally I reprise my work, identifying where I achieved these characteristics effectively and delivered on brief and in contrast areas where I feel I need to improve and how I would make these improvements in my future works.

Throughout the essay interviews from the producers and forerunners of these genres has been referenced, this gives clear indication to the factual nature of my statements.

2. Drake; HipHop & RnB.

My track, “Man I think too Much”. Reference - Drake, Chicago Freestyle. Reference 2 - Drake, Do Not Disturb.

I identified the key aspects Drake and Shebib 40’s take on modern hiphop, grime & RnB As a marriage of harmonically rich beds and clear punchy vocals. Sparse at times in terms of instrumentation, big clear drums, sometimes intricate and often high energy often contrast the sparse instrumentation of the tracks. The harmonically rich content comes more from the choice of sounds and use of saturation, bit crushing and distortion rather than musically complex harmonies.

I identified that the vocals in these genres are also front and centre, loud and clear, often tuned either subtly and sometimes more extreme as a vocal effect. 808’s and sample play a key role in these genres, often used together to create new and interesting versions of previous songs or classic sounding samples bringing in elements of soul and jazz.

A combination of techniques is used to create this sound rich yet subtle underwater like sound; notably, bit depth reduction followed by low pass filtering of harmonic and melodic material, except main vocals. This adds more texture to the instrumentation of the track (bit crushing & distortion, adding harmonics & noise) and cuts out highs leaving room for the vocals.

(Simmons, 2016)

The use of soul influenced singing styles, or indeed sampled soul vocal tracks is another identifier of the modern RnB, Grime & Hip hop created by the likes of Drake & Shebib. The connotations that are brought forward by the sound of a soul singer take us back to a world where the sound of an 808 was alien. In these modern genres they are blended together, a clear display of how these genres forge old and modern culture and art seamlessly into one.

I incorporated the elements that I identified to be key to modern RnB, Hip Hop & Grime into my song “Man I think Too Much” by using samples of soul keys, 808s, soul influenced vocal tracks, clear upfront vocals and a combination of sparse arrangement and rich harmonic beds. I used similar production techniques such as autotune, compression and saturation on the vocals. I created

a resampled vocal track with many layers, the layers included harmonies and octaves, I then added saturation and distortion, all of these techniques combined created a 'sample vinyl' feel which added to the aesthetic of the track. Then I incorporated Shebib's "underwater" technique on my sample soul keys, I feel this really sets the tone for the track and makes it clear which genre the track sits within.

The reference featured earlier in this essay, number 1, clearly supports the case for using the production techniques I have implemented into my own track. These techniques are a key identifier of the genre as it immediately sets the tone for the track, making space for the story telling of the singer, a major component in most forms of modern rap.

The evidence given supports my points very strongly as Shebib and Drake are forerunners in their sound, they are taste makers and are often found to be setting trends culturally as well as artistically.

These elements have been incorporated and executed well into my track. The references are clear and suit the style and genre appropriately. I could have recorded the vocals in a cleaner environment to create that punchy and clear sound that Drake & Shebib present in their songs so well. I would also use less reverb, as the amount I have used currently detracts from the punchy and clear nature of the recording. I'd also like to improve how the keys sit into the arrangement, to achieve this I will write, perform and record the keys myself or with session players rather than using samples.

3. Burial; Garage & 2-Step.

My Track, Something Thats True. Reference, Archangel, Burial. Reference 2, You Can't Afford Me, The Streets.

I identified the key aspects of underground UK dance music, such as garage & two-step to be deep, emotional & moody sounds, often using contrast to create big highs and lows. Texturally complex syncopated beats and long, thick washes of reverb and delays, creating atmosphere and driving energy. The drum sounds are thick and heavily textured, straying away from traditional drum kit sounds, this is created by layering many different sounds together on top of traditional drum kit sounds. The technique of layering is also used in other sounds used in the tracks, for

example layering vocal octaves or vocal tracks with various effects to create rich textural landscapes that envelope the beats and leads of the tracks. Adding many layers of effects and foley is another key part of this alt-dance genre, a pivotal artist in this genre is Burial, known for adding rain and wind into his tracks.

(Music and Music, 2009)

Another key identifier of this particular genre is creating moments inside of moments, a technique that uses contrast to create tension and release, not necessarily in the traditional harmony progression sense, but in the sense of tone and dynamic, space and feel. For example creating moments of light in amongst darkness, only to bring the listener deeper into the darkness of the soundscapes. Burial talks about this technique in his interview making it clear how metaphorical his soundscapes are, this metaphorical reflection within the sound is indeed a defining characteristic within itself.

Burial often samples vocals to add emotional weight to his productions this also became a defining trait of the genre, not only are these vocals sampled but pitch and formant shifted to add further to the emotion.

(W, 2009)

(Cooke, 2020)

I incorporated the elements that I identified to be key to underground UK dance music, such as garage & two-step into my song “Something That’s True” by creating contrast in my production, adding and taking away elements to change the atmosphere of the track, the string sample I used in my track creates tension, a sad darkness, a metaphor for the words used later in the song in the vocal line. The rolling syncopated beat comes in adding drive and a lightness in juxtaposition to the dark atmosphere set by the string samples. I added layers onto my drum samples by converting my drum loop sample to midi drums in Ableton and layering different drum sounds, creating a rich unique sound. I also added layers of FX, delays and reverbs to create a tense, emotional atmosphere, conveying meaning in the soundscape created.

Resampled & pitched vocals play a key part in my track, similarly to Burial's track they add emotional weight but also fulfil a secondary role. They add contrast, bringing light to the darkness of the track.

The pitched resampled vocals fit well into the track, adding the emotion when needed. The strings and beats contrast well and create a deep and driving atmosphere in an affective manner. I feel like most of the key elements have been executed very well and are appropriate for the reference. Next time I would improve on the atmospheric sound scape enveloping the main sounds of the track, adding more texture with sound recordings of running water, rain, wind and walla.

The references featured earlier in this essay, number 3 and number 4, clearly support the case for using the production techniques I have implemented into my own track. These techniques are key identifiers of the genre as it immediately sets the tone for the track, for example the pitched vocals sets the deeply emotional tone of the track.

The evidence given supports my points very strongly as Burial is a pioneer in his sound, his album Archangel defined a whole new breed of garage and set the pace for years to come. His influence reaching out into dubstep, contemporary pop and beyond.

4. Post Malone; Trap Pop.

My Track, Move My Heart. Reference, Post Malone, Better Now. Reference 2, Mile High, James Blake Ft Metro Boomin.

I identified the key aspects of Trap Pop as upfront auto tuned vocals, the beats are made of big sounding kicks, “Trap hi-hats” and crunchy snares. There is often a traditional musical element used to contrast the modern style of the production and instrumentation. This element is sometimes orchestral strings, rock or indie style guitars or any manner of traditional instrument. Big break downs that remove most elements leaving lots of room for the vocal line are also a key feature, often elements are heavily effected in this section providing a moment of interest and space to breathe, creating a bigger impact when the beat and main sections resume. A subtle but important element is layering, adding layers of reverbs, delays, effects, multiple layers of the same instrument or FX chain pitched up or down creating texture but subtly. Another key element is a solid sub kick, often replacing the baseline and sometime accompanying it, this must roar, have a lot of texture, often achieved by distortion and saturation to cut through the mix.

(Rotondi, 2020)

I incorporated the elements that I identified to be key in Trap Pop by using sample beats which include Trap style hi-hats. I then layered 808's, kick drums, snares and Amen breaks to create a unique, crunchy beat. In the track I utilised VST string sounds to create traditional sounding instrumentation to create contrast in the arrangement and instrumentation of the track. There are moments of high tension, when many elements are removed from the track, some motifs are continued through this section to provide cohesion, however these motifs are an alternative version to what I have used early in the track. I printed out the delay, reverb and FX chains and resampled them, cutting them up and pitch/formant shifting them. I used these technique throughout the track on multiple elements such as the vocals, drums, bass and harmonic instrumentation. This adds many layers to the tracks and creates a sense of depth to seemingly sparse arrangement. I layered many kicks and subs, to create a huge kick sound that drives the bottom end of the track, I then bussed these together and added parallel saturation and distortion. I always distorted them as one, creating a huge kick, that is clear and driving but does not overwhelm the track.

(Rotondi, 2020)

I feel that the execution of the kick and the bass is where I would focus on improving next time. The bass lacks a really solid melody and losses my interest at points through the track, I would like to layer another bass sound with a strong melody to create this interest and add more energy to the low end of the track. I would also improve on my layering, create more melodic motifs, including vocal ad-libs and string trills. I would combine these with some interesting delay, reverb and FX chain automations to create subtle yet complex rises and falls in the background of the track. I am happy with the execution of the vocals, I feel like the tone and FX used are appropriate for the reference, firmly on brief, and executed with individuality. The execution of the traditional musical element although effective and working well with the track, I would like to record this using live instruments and players. This would take the track to a new level, adding to the impact and emotion of the song. This would also give more room for experimenting with layering and blending between these organic elements, digital FX chains & VST instruments.

The reference featured earlier in this essay, number 5 and number 6, clearly support the case for using the production techniques I have implemented into my own track. These techniques are key identifiers of the genre as it immediately sets the tone for the track, for example the roaring 808 and layered FX set the vibe of the track, giving it a simple drive but complex backing.

The evidence given supports my points very strongly as Post Malone is a number one artist setting trends and conforming to the given restraints of the genres that he works within, while at the same time pushing the boundaries of his music.

5. Conclusion

I have made good choices when implementing the key techniques and features of my chosen genres. It has been made clear to me through this body of study that the concept of genre in contemporary electronic based music is slowly fading. More and more now, I believe, briefs are asking for more of an over all tone, character and voice. Often key identifiable characteristics overlap into many other genres. Although the days of clear cut genres such as; Metal, HipHop, RnB, Disco & Rock, are not too far behind us, the techniques used in these genres now make their way into many contemporary hybrids, this cross-over has been happening for a long time, however now with the advent of affordable laptops and DAWs it is easier than ever to take influence directly or indirectly from many places, even outside of the traditional music landscape. Such as, games, film scores and adverts.

Throughout this exercise I have learnt the importance of initial research and constant reflection, I found myself asking myself the question, “is this true to the brief and the message behind the track?”. I found that the importance of these techniques lies not in so much in the how, but the what and why.

I found it very important to understand what the function of the technique is within the track and where it sits in relation to all of the other elements. This gave me a greater understanding of the purpose of each element and what made these specific elements so necessary within my chosen genres. It is now clear to me that working to brief is an exciting and challenging way of working. It is necessary to research well and keep reminding yourself of the brief.

I feel that the three tracks that I have created are true to the brief and in the future I would improve by listening to the reference track at more intervals throughout the creation process of my own track. I've learnt that the tone and colour of a sound or section can change it's role or indeed it genre 'feel' drastically and that it is not only important to listen for which instruments and sounds are being used on your reference track but indeed, how they are being used and for what purpose. This understanding has developed my skills for writing to brief a lot and I now see this kind of work in a different light.

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