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Name: MAREK DEML

Student ID: 1808653

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FOUNDATION 1 ASSESSMENT - ESSAY

This essay is a part of the Foundation 1 assignment and will cover the process of creating all the three tracks submitted as '*Element 1*' of this assignment. The essay will go through the creation of each track, explain the production techniques used to conform to a specific musical genre while comparing the final tracks with specific reference tracks in the given genre.

To further enhance the ability so successfully emulate a specific music genre, the decision was taken to include another supplementary reference track alongside the main reference to contextualise and illustrate the broader sonic possibilities of each genre.

Track 01 - Override - *Alternative Rock*

Defining the genre

Alternative Rock, sometimes also referred to as alt-rock or simply alternative, is a sub-genre of rock music that was created in the late 1970s, gained more popularity through the 1990s and still remains widely popular in the present day. As discussed in Thompson (2000), a few key releases by Patti Smith and Lou Reed in 1975 as well as the formation of Sex Pistols in the same year are widely regarded as the birth of the Alternative Rock genre. As it's the case with many genres, the original meaning was a little bit broader, the word 'alternative' was simply used to define any music different from the mainstream rock music at the time.

'The term's original meaning was broader, referring to a generation of musicians unified by their collective debt to either the musical style or simply the independent, DIY ethos of punk rock' (di Perna, 1995)

As noted in Carew (2012), alternative rock is also very similar to indie rock and while the two genres share quite a few similarities, there is a slight difference. This is also discussed in an article by Fonarow (2012), where he argues that the term 'Alternative Rock' is nowadays regarded as American and used mostly for American bands, while 'Indie Rock' is mostly used for bands from the UK.

As with many musical genres, there isn't a set of rules that would put a song into the 'alt-rock' category and as discussed earlier, because the term originated from simply meaning 'different than the mainstream', there isn't really a set of musical criteria or a specific musical style that makes an alternative rock song. Saying that, there are still some key elements that a person would associate when hearing the term 'Alternative Rock', mainly the presence of drums, guitars and bass in the setting of a live band with a powerful sound. A nice and brief summary is this quote from The New York Times:

'[it is] guitar music first of all, with guitars that blast out power chords, pick out chiming riffs, buzz with fuzztone and squeal in feedback' (Pareles, 1989)

As discussed in the book 'Rock Music Styles', the lyrics in alternative rock songs tend to be focused around the topics of drug use, depression and other social matters, which were influenced by the state of the society both in the UK and America during the mid to late 1980s (Charlton, 2003)

Reference tracks

The songs chosen as reference tracks for this production are the following songs:

QOTSA - *You Think I Ain't Worth A Dollar, But I Feel Like A Millionaire*

The Pretty Reckless - *My Medicine*

While Queens Of The Stone Age might not be thought of as predominantly 'Alternative Rock', for example sometimes also being categorised as 'Stoner-Rock', these specific songs have all the elements required and based on other research, both of these artist are also widely categorised as 'Alt-Rock' (En.wikipedia.org, 2018) and therefore these songs fit completely into the genre in the context of this essay.

While not produced by the same producer, both of these tracks share a very similar production aspects and a certain feel. They are both essentially a recording of a live band and feature a full band consisting of drums, bass, electric guitar, bass and a vocalist. Bases on further research, and as discussed in Gordon (2014) with Jack White, the focus and a main goal when producing his record 'Blunderbuss' was to capture a performance. When comparing White's *Blunderbuss* and QOTSA's '*You Think I Ain't Worth A Dollar, But I Feel Like A Millionaire*', it is apparent that both share a very similar methodology of producing and making a record.

They both sound very 'raw', meaning there's a minimal amount of post-production and digital manipulation used, and they rely heavily on creating and capturing unique sounds straight to tape, hearing these sounds back on playback and therefore being inspired by them. As also discussed in the documentary '*Sound City*', it is mainly the producers job to keep the session flowing effortlessly, making the band feel inspired and motivate them to perform in way that captures the emotion of the song the best. (Sound City, 2013).

'*My Medicine*' by The Pretty Reckless is a slightly more modern take on this production mindset. As discussed in an interview with the band and their producer, while still being focused on capturing the feel and the sounds organically, the producer Kato Khandwala leaves more space for post-production and the overall sound is a bit more 'polished' and

'modern'. As also shown in the same interview, The Pretty Reckless were only a three piece when recording this track, with the guitarist also playing the bass parts as opposed to '*You Think I Ain't Worth A Dollar...*', where a full band was used for the recording (Audouin, 2018).

Looking at the quote from The New York Times from earlier, it is quite apparent both of these track capture the feel and fit in the genre nicely. Although they're not from the 80s or 90s, even the lyrical content is quite fitting with what's described in Charlton (2003), particularly '*My Medicine*' referring to drugs use.

Looking at the songs from a composition and arrangement point of view, '*You Think I Ain't Worth A Dollar...*' feature pretty much only one guitar riff throughout the whole song, slightly varied in some parts to keep the interest of the listener. It doesn't rely on having a traditional chorus, the only change is provided harmonically in the parts that could be considered the 'hook' of the song as heard in (Queen Of The Stone Age, 2002). '*My Medicine*' follows a more conventional song structure with a clear chorus, but again, a similar guitar pattern is present throughout the whole track, slowly building up, raising the tension to keep the listener interested (The Pretty Reckless, 2010). Both songs are in a 4/4 time signature and have a pretty simple beat played on the drums, with only '*You Think I Ain't Worth A Dollar...*' being a little bit more rhythmically interesting from a drummers point of view.

Production

While '*You Think I Ain't Worth A Dollar...*' is the main reference track analysed for this production, '*My Medicine*' was an obvious choice as a supplementary reference track because of the female vocalist and also for it's slightly more modern sound.

The main idea behind the original composition '*Override*' was to combine and use all the different production techniques from both reference tracks and take something from each to create a unique end product.

The track is co-written by myself and the singer - Charlie D. Taking inspiration from the production process mentioned earlier, a session drummer was used for the track and a guide take was recorded with the drummer, myself playing guitar and the singer singing, all recorded live to create a feeling of a live band recording. The original drum take was layered and blended in with drum samples to bring to sound a little bit closer to '*My Medicine*', but the original tracks were all recorded with EQ and compression already, keeping the same recording mentality as mentioned earlier in Gordon (2014).

The guitars were afterwards overdubbed and the bass was also played by myself, mostly mimicking the guitar pattern, similar to what's happening in '*You Think I Ain't Worth A Dollar...*'

The vocal recordings were all done in full takes, 3 takes for the lead vocal, and a couple takes for the backing vocals, again, recorded with eq and compression and slightly overloading the Neve 1073 microphone preamplifier to achieve the slightly distorted vocal tone of the reference tracks, mainly heard in QOTSA's '*You Think I Ain't Worth A Dollar...*' (Queen Of The Stone Age, 2002).

Structurally, the very beginning takes inspiration from the same song with a similar filtered effect. The drum pattern is also quite similar to both reference tracks in the way the toms are used throughout the track. The guitar riff stays very much the same all the time with again, slight changes towards the end of the song. The chorus is traditional, similar to '*My Medicine*' and the idea for the two instrumental interludes is taken from '*You Think I Ain't Worth A Dollar...*'

The song submitted is a rough mix which would ideally be sent to a mixing engineer, but in terms the feel, this mix captures it very well, keeping it simple with basic EQ and compression moves, similar to the reference tracks. It is in a 4/4 time signature with lyrics talking about going through life and dealing with people, which combined with it's arrangement and instrumentation fits in nicely in the 'Alternative Rock' genre.

Track 02 - Painkillers - *Synth Pop*

The reason for picking this as the second genre is to show the contrast in the production workflow between what's essentially a band recording as discussed earlier and something that's on the other end of the spectrum - Synth Pop.

Brief History and definition

As apparent from the name '*Synth Pop*', this genre features the synthesizer as the main instrument. Synth Pop, short for Synthesizer Pop was similarly to alt-rock also born in the late 1970s. (Nicholls, 2008)

As Maddox (2016) and Reynolds (2014) note, synthesizers started to be used by bands from the late 60s and with the invention of the Moog synthesizer in 1964 by Robert Moog, bands like Yes or Pink Floyd utilised the new technology in their music. One of the arguably most influential albums that defined the beginnings of synth-pop was '*Autobahn*' by the German band Kraftwerk, released in 1974. It's no surprise that synthesizers were then heavily featured on albums by many artists through the 1970s, for example Bowie's Berlin releases like '*Heroes*' or '*Low*'. The 80s then brought a new wave of synth-pop led by '*Video Killed The Radio Star*' by The Buggles, conveniently labeled as 'New Wave'.

Synth music was hugely popular throughout the 80s with artists like A-ha, Duran Duran or Michael Jackson. Despite it's popularity declining in the 1990s, mainly because of Grunge bands dominating the music scene, the late 90s and beginning on the 21st century saw a

revival of the genre which later became a huge commercial success with the likes of Lady Gaga, Chvrches or Owl City.

Synth Pop is sometimes also referred to as electro-pop but as discussed in Shipton (1994), electro-pop uses more electronic elements and focuses on harder sounds.

Production and reference tracks

The main reference for this song is the Scottish band Chvrches and their track '*Mother We Share*'. Following the pretty standard pop song structure of *Intro-Verse-Chorus-Verse-Chorus-Middle8-Chorus*, all of the music is provided by synthesizers. Mainly noticeable are the classic sounds of a Moog synthesizer combined with old school sounding drum machines and samplers providing the effects of the vocal chopping, also called a stutter effect. (CHVRCHES, 2013)

The original composition '*Painkillers*' borrows a similar structure, incorporating an additional post-chorus section. The song started as a simple guitar and a vocal recording, but was re-arranged in the synth-pop style. The original recording is also submitted as a part of the 'Element 1' of this assignment. To closely emulate the production process of Chvrches, mainly virtual emulations of hardware synthesizers were used to provide the instrumentation, specifically plugins from Arturia like the Arturia Mini V3 (emulating a Moog Model D synthesizer) and Arturia DX7 (emulating the original Yamaha DX7). The drum production is a combination of drum machine samples (for example samples of the Roland TR808 drum machine) and self recorded manipulated samples. To create some of the stutter effects, samples were loaded to the 'Pocket Operator PO-33 K.O.' sampler and then recorded back into the DAW in real time, emulating the process as seen in videos and live shows, for example in Detour Scotland (2012)

The supplementary reference track was chosen to be '*Hearts Like Ours*' by The Naked And Famous.

Similar to '*Mother We Share*', this song also features the classic synth sounds of the Moog synthesizers, adding a quite prominent electric guitar track which is something that was also borrowed and used in the submitted track '*Painkillers*'. The guitar in '*Painkillers*' comes in on the chorus as opposed to being featured in the verses as in '*Hearts Like Ours*' to avoid just copying the arrangement.

When creating arrangement for '*Painkillers*', some key elements from the reference tracks were emulated.

Both of the reference of these songs feature a similar approach to building the songs, keeping the verses with a pad and bass simply following the root notes, usually playing 8th notes and picking it up for the chorus by adding more drum samples and a different synth part, dropping the dynamics for the middle 8 to build up a big last chorus. They also use quite of a few mixing and production tricks to keep the arrangement interesting. The use of quite a lot of reverb is apparent in both references tracks, as is using a delay on the vocal to make everything sound more 'spacious'. It is also quite interesting to pay attention to the mix and how it compares to the previous genre. The most dominant instrument are the various synthesizers with the vocals being slightly less prominent. The drums also aren't overpowering and while the performance of the singer is still very important, most of these mixes seem to focus more on the sonic qualities of the arrangement itself, as heard in CHVRCHES (2013) and The Naked and Famous (2013)

All of this was taken into account when producing '*Painkillers*' to make the track fit in to the Synth Pop genre. All songs are in 4/4 time signature which is something also reflected in '*Painkillers*'

Track 03 - Victoria Line - *Pop Ballad*

What is a ballad

'Pop ballad is a form of slow love song prevalent in nearly all genres of popular music' (Frith, 1998)

As discussed in Apel (1973), the word 'ballad' comes from the name of medieval French dance song called 'ballares' (translates to - 'songs to dance to'). The ballad as we know it now, in the form of a song, had its beginning in the late 19th century in Tin Pan Alley and the term 'ballad' as a name for a slow love song was established from the 1950s (Buckley, 2003).

Referring back to its French origins, ballads are down-tempo emotional songs with a strong focus on the narrative, usually about love or heartbreak, talking romantic and intimate relationships. Ballads are known to use acoustic instruments such as piano or acoustic guitars as the main piece of the backing track, leaving the spotlight for the vocal. They are also characterised by strong choruses with a clear lyrical message, usually utilising the vocalist's belt range to convey more emotion. (Bronson, 1969)

Reference tracks

Because the submitted track '*Victoria Line*' is a demo of a potential single for a Swiss artist Noah Veraguth, the main reference track is a song '*Metropolitans*' by his band Pegasus. '*Metropolitans*' is essentially a piano - vocal song with a clear narrative, the choruses are augmented by additional production, building and adding layers as the song goes on, building up to the biggest last chorus. While the production keeps growing, the lead vocal stays full sounding, in the front of the mix, and it's always the key element of the song.

The arrangement and instrumentation are not too complicated, starting off with a just a piano and a vocal, the additional production consists of strings and synth layers combined with subtle backing vocal harmony. It is interesting to listen to the use of reverbs and effects, especially on the vocal to separate the choruses from the verses and create a 'bigger' feeling vocal when the chorus comes in. (PEGASUS, 2017)

As '*Victoria Line*' was written as duet between a man and a woman, the other supplementary reference track chosen is '*You Are The Reason (Duet Version)*' by Calum Scott and Leona Lewis. A love song that precisely follows the rules of a ballad, again featuring a piano as the main instrument with a subtle beat behind it, showing exactly the function of 'heartbeat' of a song as heard in Callum Scott (2018) and described in Hatschek and Crawford (2013), representing a slightly more modern sounding take on a ballad.

Production

As was the case with the two previous the genres, the goal when producing '*Victoria Line*' was to try to emulate the main reference track while incorporating some elements from the supplementary reference track to create a song that conforms to the specific genre.

The song was co-written by two Swiss artists: Noah Veraguth and Lisa Oribasi. Starting with just a simple guitar and vocal melody, the decision was taken to steer the track into the pop-ballad genre and incorporate a piano throughout the whole track. Additional production was programmed, having a small synth part in the beginning and making the choruses more dense as the song goes on. The main focus was then to record vocal takes that capture the emotion of singing about having a romantic affair.

The vocal production emulates both reference tracks, keeping both vocals panned in the center for the first half of the song and having a chorus in the belting range of the singers. Backing vocals are only present in second half of the song while the first two verses and the first chorus feature only one vocal track for each singer, emulating the vocal arrangement of '*Metropolitans*' and also following what's also discussed in Hatschek and Crawford (2013).

The use of a simple kick and snare pattern that is present from the middle 8 until the end of a song as well as the programmed orchestral part in the last chorus is borrowed from the instrumental arrangement of '*Metropolitans*' as is the use of effects, mainly reverbs and delays on the vocal, as discussed earlier (PEGASUS, 2017). That combined with the slow tempo in a 4/4 time signature and passionate vocal performances singing about a romantic relationship puts '*Victoria Line*' nicely in the Pop Ballad category.

Conclusion

As discussed in the section for each track, all the three submitted original productions emulate the specific genre and the reference tracks chosen. Reflecting back, as the comparisons tend to be very subjective, it might have been beneficial to conduct a simple survey to find out if the original productions successfully fit into the genre they are meant to be in, which is something to keep in mind for future works.

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