

An Insight into the Production Process: Defining Characteristics of Three Analysed Genre's & their Incorporation into Own Work

In this essay, I plan to analyse the concept of genre within my three chosen tracks, exploring its place, or lack of, in the modern musical landscape. I plan to outline the artists own interpretation of genre, whilst reflecting on the critical response to their tracks, my own response and that of the artist. The three tracks I've chosen to analyse are Grimes - *You'll miss me when I'm not around* (Grimes, 2020), Eliza - *Wasn't Looking* (ELIZA, 2017) and The Streets - *Soldiers* (The Streets, 2014). In addition to discussing the defining characteristics of each genre, I'll be exploring how I used this analysis in the creation of my own three tracks; *GYM (Give You More)*, *Control Me* and *Beaches on the Thames*, and reflecting on the success of my application of the analysed tracks & genres.

"An instinctively avant-garde surrender to the "will" of technology, a "fuck art, let's dance" DJ-oriented functionalism, and a smidgen of underclass rage" (Reynolds, S. 1999, p.6). Reynolds touches on the surrender to technology and a 'caution to the wind' approach to electronic music here, back in his 1999 exploration of electronic music, techno and rave culture, *'Generation Ecstasy'*. 20 years later, I was interested in further exploring the relationship artists have with technology, computers and a digital-self in relation to electronic & electropop music in my analysis of Grimes *'You'll Miss Me When I'm Not Around'*. I leant focused on how Grimes' relationship with this may have changed since her rise to fame with the notorious *Visions* album in 2012.

Anupa Mistry discusses Grimes' unique and industry defying emergence out of the *"freewheeling music scene"* 10 years ago, referring to her a *'DIY ingenue'* (Mistry, A. 2020). Two of her first hit tracks, *Oblivion* and *Genesis*, play with galactic layered vocals; mimicking whale sounds or alien vocals. Proudly self-producing as a young female artist, Grimes experimented heavily with the layering of vocals as sound effects to fill the production, with risk-taking levels of reverb, delay and echo. Mistry's reference to a young Claire Boucher (Grimes) as a *'DIY ingenue'*, certainly seems apt here, as a dictionary definition of an ingenue is *"an innocent, inexperienced, unworldly young woman"* (Collins English Dictionary, 2020). Grimes' experimental, child-like ethereal vocals and DIY break through into the music industry may paint this picture, though I would argue that rather than inexperienced, unworldly and playing the role of the young and innocent, Grimes knew

exactly what she was doing in the late 2000's and early 2010's with her DIY computerised electropop. She understood the rules but had no intention of following them.

Grimes has self-described her earlier music as “*post-internet*”. Born in 1988, Grimes “*came from the first generation that had web access as children. Older music fans were “raised with genres of music. But people my age had everything all at once.”* (Snapes, L. 2020). This generation of genre and rule-breaking DIY electronic producers came to life between around 2007 – 2013, as teenagers began shaping their musical libraries from YouTube playlists, featuring electronic artists such as Purity Ring and CocoRosie. Purity Ring’s *Fineshrine* (Purity Ring, 2012) & CocoRosie’s *Werewolf* (lethaldoser26, 2008) are examples of how these artists joined in Grimes’ experimental blend of ethereal childlike vocals with attacking and computerised synth driven loops & clashing layers. All three artists I personally discovered through YouTube playlists and Tumblr as a teenager. These electronic indie “*post-internet*” tracks are seeded in the make-up of this first generation to grow up with an online space, filled with experimentation around genre rules (or lack of them), a strong indie online community, playlist discovery and a keen interest in computer music.

Purity Ring is among the artists Grimes associates with her new genre ‘Fae’; “*The fae are the children living at the end of the world, who make art that reflects what it's like to live knowing the earth may not sustain humanity much longer.*” (Cafolla, A. 2017). This discussion of apocalyptic children comes as Grimes has created a digitalised childlike ‘Nymth’ to represent herself in the press during the *Miss Anthropocene* campaign. I can’t help but associate this character and her discussion of the ‘Fae’ with her use and production of soprano ethereal vocals. After all, Grimes has never been shy of seeding her philosophical views within her music & exploration of genre, “*philosophy radiated through her rushing, incantatory synth-pop, spliced with acid and bubblegum, club boldness and whispered intimacy*” (Snapes, L). Perhaps both Grimes’s suggested “*post-internet*” and “*Fae*” genre’s mix and stem from this computerised perception of self and expression from growing up amongst this 2000’s & early 2010’s generation of indie DIY electronic music.

Grimes now seems to have moved on to a more commercial electro-pop orientated stage in her production and song-writing with *Miss Anthropocene*, with catchier hooks and guitar led arrangements, yet still paying homage to the apocalyptic, ethereal and experiential electronic tones of earlier albums *Oblivion* and *Art Angels*. Grimes calls the sound of *Miss*

Anthropocene “ethereal nu metal”, I attempted to incorporate elements of this into the mixing of *GYM (Give You More)*, as I added high levels of distortion to the already crunching electronic synths and metallic, clashing beats that carried a galactic vibe. One of the defining elements of *You’ll miss me when I’m not around* is its building layered ethereal vocal with high echo and reverb, part of Grimes signature style and perhaps part of the digital Nymph character she has devised for the project. “*She used her vocals to mimic whalesong or aliensong, a futurist reimagining of the transfixing voices of Enya and Mariah Carey, over irresistible melodies*” (Mistry, A, 2020); meshing experimental, clashing soprano harmonies with high reverb and echo were the defining elements of my work in *GYM Give You More*, that for me that encapsulated Grimes’ signature vocal arrangement.

For *GYM (Give You More)*, I wanted to pay homage to the experimental and ethereal tone of Grimes’ earlier work in *Visions and Art Angels*, while capturing the electro-pop and guitar distortion driven arrangement in *You’ll miss me when I’m not around*. Originally, I was going to collaborate with a friend who’s a talented guitar and bass player to record the guitar parts and would have used The Roundhouse in London for recording instruments and vocals. However, due to the barrier of covid-19, a midi keyboard and USB mic were my only resources for my three tracks. Though this may have hindered the track’s similarity with *You’ll miss me when I’m not around*, with less guitar-based production, building raging midi-synths instead and an attacking drum arrangement helped me tap into Grimes’ rule defying production mind-set, where I felt able to take risks and make non-confirmative or conventionally commercial decisions in mixing and composition.

The lyrics & melody of *GYM (Give You More)* stem from a song I wrote a couple of years ago with just an acoustic guitar. I wanted them to tell the story longing and un-requested love. With raw, ethereal vocals and a gently-plucked classical guitar accompaniment they sold this story quite well. Re-visiting the lyrics for this project, I was interested in re-framing them through an attacking electronic lens, with the intention to leave the listener with an ambiguous understanding of the artists moral compass, un-earthing themes of jealousy and a villainous edge to the track. These themes of jealousy and the idea of an anti-hero influenced the production of this track, as they were the driving forces behind the heavily distorted deep synths and aggressive glitching drums. Intertwined with the angelic ethereal vocal edit, to mimic Grimes’s latest electropop conquest; “*the murky, malevolent sound of depression and dashed hopes, laced with sweet melodic hooks*” (Snapes, L 2020).

For my second analysed track, I chose *Wasn't Looking* from the smoky R&B album *A Real Romantic* by Eliza (formerly Eliza Doolittle). What drew me to this record, was an article in *Wonderland Magazine* where Eliza discussed her thoughts on re-defining herself as a new artist following her previous commercial pop success, by not “*really thinking in genres at all*”, saying goodbye to her record label, and dedicating herself to releasing first takes and demos. “*This is nine songs of smoky R’n’B performed in the basement of a Camden bar, of jazzy beats and blurry vocals...its moodiness, diversity and DIY attitude all clear to hear*” (Bell, F. 2018).

The simple, grainy, down-tempo, soul and funk inspired bass line in *Wasn't Looking* drives it forward, and there's a minimalism and simplicity that gives the song it's silky, seductive tone. Listening to Arlo Parks Cola, I was struck by the similarities in the simple bass, drum and vocal arrangement. This minimalist smoky R&B is what I tried to achieve with *Control Me*. Luckily, I wanted the track to have an authentic live demo feel, alluding to Eliza's coined first demo phrase, “*demoitis*” (Bell, F. 2018) and my recording circumstances helped with that, as I set up a make-shift recording studio with hanging pieces of material and mixed out the bird song from outside in the audio recording. I felt this all added to the grit of the smoky R&B vibe of the demo and is also why I used the first take of me singing all the way through as the main audio track in production, as Eliza states, “*I think 'demoitis' is actually a great thing, because the minute you move away from the moment that spark of creation happened, and try to recreate it, you've lost something.*” (Bell, F. 2018).

When tackling the arrangement for *Control Me*, which I had originally gathered live musicians to feature on, then having to figure out a new angle due to the midi and USB limited constraints of self-isolation (and no knowledge of bass guitar), I first headed to YouTube to find inspiration on how I could achieve *Wasn't Looking's* “*funk-filled bassline*” & “*plodding instrumental*” (Oke, T. 2017). I took a look at funk bass YouTube tutorials such as ‘Bully Thakidd’s *Basic Funk Formula pt.1*’ (Thakidd, B. 2018), to find that though these helped me understand the basics of a funk baseline, I still fell short of the technical skills and physical instrument to attempt the seductive, improvised, live funk bass I had planned for. Thus, following a final lucrative search for answers in Mel Bay’s ‘*Complete Funk Bass Book*’, I decided to take stock of Bay’s introductory advice; “*the best advice anyone can give you is to buy recordings and copy what the bass player is doing*” (Hilland, M. 1993, pg. 3) I

carefully listened to the bass line in *Wasn't Looking* and composed a simple bassline I could loop and layer using both synthesized muted & picked bass. This gave me that subtle smoky nod to Eliza's funk and soul, that I was able to add enough distortion, wow and flutter to, alluding to the seductive soul, funk and computer R&B tone I had wanted from the track.

Stemming back to the inspiration of Eliza's and Arlo Parks soul tracks, as well as vocally reflecting 1960's rhythm and blues artists, both use a vintage crackle and lo-fi effects within their production to create a vintage vinyl effect, adding to the smoky underground ambience of the tracks. For this, I went to YouTube where I followed a Waves audio tutorial using analog and abbey road vinyl plug-ins. I purchased these plug-ins to try to replicate the effect, and was pleased with the smoky, lo-fi and rich texture this added to the track.

The original demo (Appendix 1) featured high harmonies filtered throughout. This was an attempt to add texture and layers that I usually would add in an electropop track. Listening back to the demo however, I found that the higher harmonies didn't fit with the minimalism and moodiness of the drums, bass and synth keys, other than when they filter in at the end of the track. The lower harmonies however, gave a soulful depth and enriched the fullness of the track. The lower harmonies during the repetitions of "*I'm taking it back*" at the end of the track created a soothing and sophisticated depth to the outro of the arrangement. This low, rich female soul vocal can also be heard in Arlo Parks distinctive voice in *Cola*. These styles both stemming from more traditional rhythm and blues & soul influences such as Nina Simone's iconic 1965 *I Put A Spell On You* (TheJazzStreet, 2009).

With this in mind, I created Control Me Demo 2 (Appendix 2), where I attempted to produce a more balanced layering of harmonies that gave more focus to the stripped back main melody recording. Demo 2 looked to find a balanced sense of harmony, stripping back some of the overdubs such as for the opening "*I'd like to think these games aren't necessary*" and only adding in harmony after the song has had time to build and where it's needed to add texture. Demo 2 feels more aligned with feel of Eliza's *Wasn't Looking*. Listening back, I'd have recorded more overdubs and mixed the vocals with less platinum reverb to create a thicker, deeper and crunchier texture with a more ambient, raw and live feel, such as the vocals in Eliza's *Wasn't Looking*.

The give-away of what's inside *Computer & Blues*, Skinner's 2011 album as The Streets, lies in the album title. Described as "*a series of disconnected sketches with cheap bedroom beats*" (Breihan, T. 2011) in a review from Pitchfork, Skinner playfully re-imagines the early hip-hop, UK garage & disco-inspired tools he had at his disposal in The Streets debut *A Grand Don't Come For Free*, and ties up his 5 year run of The Streets releases with a computer crafted, "*endearingly awkward and homemade*" (Breihan, T. 2011) reflection on old friends and distant memories. The "*emotive protest anthem Soldiers*" (Thomas, L. 2011) blurs a simple computerised hip hop beat with a hopeful, building synth arrangement and catchy hooks. I looked to replicate a similar arrangement of synthesised pads and string sections whilst using Skinner's signature rapped, or talked style, to create a similar "*slab of industrial soul*" (Thomas, Lou. 2011).

One of my other inspirations for this track, was Kate Tempest's *Firesmoke*, another example of down tempo hip-hop, but with a simpler industrial & metallic beat and looped piano instrumental. I used the 'Classic UK Hip Hop' from the Logic 10 library, with the same timing and basic drum pattern as The Streets *Soldiers* for *Beaches on the Thames*, alluding to Skinner's signature style, but struggled to reach Skinner's speed and punchiness with the rap. The smoothness of the talking in *Beaches on the Thames* and the mixing of those vocals, was influenced more by Kate Tempest's conversational lyrics rather than Mike Skinner's conversational rap. With calming minimal pads in tandem with softer vocal technique, the results were rather dream-like, moving away from the contrast Mike Skinner creates with his cutting use of words and how they move with building string and pad sections. If I re-recorded the track I'd experiment with different voices, less soft like Kate and more conversational like Skinner, with less reverb and smoothing plug-ins on the vocals.

If you listen closely, there's a laptop space bar tap at the end of the track where I finish recording the audio. I went to edit it out when mixing, but when re-listening to the demo I decided to keep it. I felt it added to the '*bedroom beats*' charm of the track, the un-ashamed truth of computer-based production from a bedroom during covid-19, a subtle nod to both the political context of the lyrics and the album it was inspired from, '*Computers and Blues*'. One of the other challenges of recording this during self-isolation, is I didn't have a pop-shield to hand. Though I fashioned a DIY pop-shield out of an old pair of tights and clothes hanger, a few plosives were in the final production. I mixed most of this down with a de-esser and noise-gate, though similarly to the vocals in my Eliza inspired track, the demo standard

sound worked in this case, within the replication of Skinner's "*poppy hooks through neat tricks*" (MacInnes, P. 2011) and a softer, more hopeful use of electronic pads & strings.

My favourite element of *Soldiers*, is the way instruments are distorted and made to glitch, bringing the music forward into the futuristic, computerised language of the album. For example, the distortion of an opening trumpet with a jumping tape effect. As *Beaches on The Thames* is based on pads, classic hip hop drums, synthetic strings and vocals, I decided in addition to adding slight distortion and subtle vinyl crackle to the synths, I'd design a distorted 'robot' higher harmony to feature heavily in the choruses, through using pitch correction, shifters and modulation. I also lowered the resolution on my distortion plug-in for my pads, to create a computerised glitching effect. If I'd had a different recording environment, I would have liked to experiment with the variety in sections within the track, collecting a library of homemade sounds rather than relying on my Logic 10 library and alchemy.

The DIY aspects I imbedded in these tracks, that would usually be regarded as production and mixing hindrances, were able to be used affectively to add charm and texture to the tracks. The concept of Eliza's '*demoitis*' has been a central theme running through these demos. This is not only due to circumstance & limited recording capacities, or access to equipment, but to pay homage to the rawness and DIY prowess of these three artists. The reasoning Eliza gives for disregarding genre in her work, is that, "*the less I think in that way, the better. I just want to make sounds that feel nice in my ears*". I feel as a member of the '*post-internet*' generation of composers and producers, this is the outlook I'd like to take when approaching my work. That said, there's still a place for genre in what I do and its capacity to develop an identity in each production and arrangement. The history of genre will always influence today's music, just as Nina Simone's deep soul vocal has influenced 19-year-old Arlo Parks 55 years on.

Appendices

1. Control Me Demo 1

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1m5PNk3GjYxRaQQkrSE_aL3zu28Sskz4A/view?usp=sharing

2. Control Me Demo 2 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vVSbAvx-P09iehQNUouPq1KFI5XUjA8/view?usp=sharing>

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