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An Analysis of Motown, Country Pop/Rock and Pop Rap

In this essay I am going to discuss three genres/genre fusions with particular reference to three corresponding tracks. My chosen genres are Motown (with particular reference to *Get Ready* by The Temptations), country pop/rock (with particular reference to *That Don't Impress Me Much* by Shania Twain), and pop rap (with particular reference to *Good As Hell* by Lizzo). I've created three of my own tracks based on the genre-specific characteristics that can be found in each reference track. I will first offer an overview of the characteristics that define each genre, before looking at some of these characteristics in more depth, with particular reference to how I've gone on to incorporate these characteristics into my own tracks. Amanda Petrusich questions in *The New Yorker* whether new music is becoming such a melting pot of influences that it transcends the need for genres altogether (2021), but genre classification still plays a large role in marketing - it is just as important to tag the correct genre in your track's metadata on a streaming platform as it was for a record shop to place an album on the correct shelf. Additionally, it has emotional significance. Genre is sometimes seen as a 'badge' that 'people use... to express their own self-concepts', particularly amongst adolescents (Gardikiotis and Baltzis, 2011) - a group most likely to be receptive to new artists (YPulse, 2021).

I chose *Get Ready*, a Motown track by The Temptations as my first reference track, hoping to capture the band's sound in the final flush of their collaboration with William 'Smokey' Robinson, their primary producer from 1963 to 1966. Smokey Robinson helped the band achieve their first number one with *My Girl* in 1964. Pre-Robinson The Temptations' sound was less refined and commercially friendly, with songs such as *Check Yourself* and *Paradise* which feature spoken word segments and beat switches that make the music difficult to sing along and dance to. Robinson's successor, Norman Whitfield, changed the band's direction quite dramatically, especially from 1968 onwards with psychedelic tracks such as *Cloud Nine*. The tracks that were produced by Robinson in the mid-60s, on the other hand, are perhaps some of the most instantly identifiable as 'Motown' with their catchy pop-like melodies, gospel backing, simple verse/chorus structures with four bar beat, and instruments such as piano, percussion, strings and brass featuring frequently and prominently. *Get Ready* is quintessentially Motown, and Smokey Robinson's production style can also be heard in the tracks that he wrote and produced for his own band, The Miracles - quick tempos and upbeat vibes against the backdrop of soul inspired vocals and instrumentation.

My second and third tracks - *That Don't Impress Me Much* by Shania Twain and *Good as Hell* by Lizzo - are pop fusion tracks. Choosing 'pop' as a genre poses a challenge - the question 'what defines pop?' cannot be answered as easily as 'what defines Motown?' There aren't just numerous definitions of what pop is, but more than one *approach* to defining it. Is it the characteristics of the music itself that makes it pop, or is it the music's place in the wider cultural context which dictates whether or not it's pop? Despite the complexities, most people will recognise elements of pop when they hear them: a catchy melody, a rhythm that you can dance to - generally four beats to a bar - recognisable instruments - maybe guitar, percussion, piano and keyboard/synths - a simple verse/chorus/verse structure, a length of around three minutes, and

lyrics that rhyme and are on a topic that's relatable to a wide audience - most often love, relationships and heartbreak. These elements can certainly be identified in my second and third reference tracks despite the fusion with other genres.

Shania Twain worked alongside Robert John 'Mutt' Lange, who co-wrote and produced all of her most successful tracks including *That Don't Impress Me Much* and *Man I Feel Like A Woman*. Like many of Twain's tracks, *That Don't Impress Me Much* combines elements of pop, country and rock. We identify country music by its folk harmonies, lyrics that often tell a story, and melancholy melodies that are usually accompanied by strings - perhaps an acoustic guitar, banjo or fiddle. The vocal delivery often contains a distinctive twang evoking accents from the Deep South. Twain's brand of country can be described more specifically as 'Nashville'. The Nashville sound is a subgenre of American country music that rose to prominence during the 1950s and 60s. It sought to replace the 'honky tonk' country music of previous decades with a form of country that was easier on the ear - indeed a sound which was already creeping closer to pop. 'Fiddles and steel guitars' were swapped for 'strings and a basic rhythm section of piano, guitar, bass, and drums' (Cusic, 2017). Country and Nashville techniques can be heard across all of Twain's hits - for example in *That Don't Impress Me Much* you can hear a smooth, catchy yet country-twang inspired guitar and bass backing, which is something I've used in my own track - but it's the blending in of the hard rock and pop that is responsible for her commercial success and legacy. The hard rock element of Twain's music is evident in the electric guitar riffs similar to those used in so many of the tracks that Lange has produced for other artists such as Def Leppard and AC/DC. These bold, arresting chords can be found in *Man I Feel Like A Woman* but the rock guitar riffs heard in *That Don't Impress Me Much* are more comparable to those heard in the music of another of Lange's co-collaborators, Bryan Adams, in songs such as *The Only Thing That Looks Good On Me Is You*, and it was this softer rock sound that I used in my own track. When it comes to country-rock specifically, we can see a traceable history that is decades long (Einarson, 2001), but add in the hard rock electric chords and the poppy beats and lyrics, and we have a new sub-genre that can be seen as beginning with Shania Twain herself (Hall, 2020).

Lizzo's repertoire has been granted several labels, in part because her music genuinely does span all those genres, with the genre shifting depending on the track, but they all certainly have a pop vibe. My third reference track, *Good as Hell*, comfortably fits the genre that Lizzo is most frequently defined as: pop and hip hop/rap. I have used the rap elements from *Good As Hell* in my own track but haven't actively tried to define or emulate a hip hop 'sound'. As Dylan Smith points out in *The Real Difference Between Rap and Hip Hop*, 'rap represents a rhythmic style of vocal recitation that's popular in most of hip hop's top songs. But it's just one component of the broader hip hop cultural movement' (2020). Hip hop and rap are so often used interchangeably, but one is a style and the other is a culture, and while I can seek to replicate Lizzo's vocal style, hip hop isn't something that can be consciously brought into being. Perhaps it is inevitably evoked as a byproduct of including rap in my track, but for the purpose of this essay I'm describing the genre I'm attempting to emulate as 'pop rap' rather than 'pop and hip hop/rap'.

Lizzo's method of vocal delivery is a characteristic of *Good As Hell* that I particularly wanted to replicate. A mixture of singing and rapping is a major feature of the genre. Often this might take the form of a rapped verse and a sung chorus or vice versa, but in *Good As Hell* Lizzo swaps

back and forth between the two continuously throughout the track. The effect of these sudden changes in delivery is the creation of several hooks - moments that take you by surprise, stick in your head and make you want to listen again (a technique very common in the pop genre in particular). So, just as Lizzo opens *Good As Hell* by singing 'I do my hair toss/Check my nails', but then rapping 'baby how you feeling', I begin my track by singing 'I've got this feeling, it's magic' and rapping 'I got voodoo in ma pocket love'. Again, halfway through each of Lizzo's verses she switches abruptly from rapping to singing (I got a bottle of Tequila I been saving for you/Boss up and change your life), and my own verses follow the same structure: the first half of each verse is a rap, and the second half a sung melody, for example: 'no matter what they say, I'm a much better bitch than you'll ever be/So you see there ain't no point in me, tryna be something I'll never be'. I think that 'voodoo in ma pocket' is a line that stands out and could work as a hook, but I think that the transition in my verse from rapping to singing happens a little too smoothly, and doesn't replicate the unexpected, almost jarring quality of Lizzo's transition. This is most likely because in *Good As Hell* there isn't just a transition in vocal delivery but also a change in rhythm, so if I were to make my track again I might experiment more with changes in rhythm.

The aspect of *Get Ready* that I find the most striking is the trumpet riff. It kicks off the track and continues throughout, catchy and then instantly recognisable on repeat listens - a technique The Temptations and Robinson also use in the ever popular *My Girl* - and so my first task was to compose a comparably simple and catchy melody that would become the backbone of my track. I feel this was successful - the same few notes that are prominent in my intro once again become prominent as the chorus builds, and by the time you get to that first chorus the notes already feel familiar. I've been limited to using synthesised brass along with synthesised versions of all the other instruments I've included, however my post-production vision would be for live versions of every instrument to be used, so as to effectively capture the raw, authentic Motown sound. It's ironic that the iconic distortion or 'reverb' in tracks such as *Get Ready* that came about accidentally as a result of rudimentary technology was something I had to strive really hard to recreate with my infinitely more advanced Digital Audio Workstation. I eventually achieved a crackling, vintage sound by taking a single note and using the Alchemy plugin and an oscillator to manipulate that note with a pre-built 'vinyl sound', turning the low cut up and the high cut down, and then creating an AHDSR1 to decay and sustain the note. Something I found far easier was deciding what my Motown track should be about: 'if you write about a dance, about cars or political situations, sooner or later your material sounds passe, dated. But love always has its significance'. This is a quote from Smokey Robinson himself (Lewis, 2022) but it's hard to find a Motown hit that isn't about love. And as Robert Fink points out in his article on Rhythmic Teleology, it's not just gospel inspired singing that Motown tracks sample, but gospel inspired imagery (such as climbing mountains and crossing rivers), which evokes both ecclesiastical euphoria and 'romanticised sexuality' (2011). I may not use religious imagery in my own track but I did write about a highly idealised version of romantic love, with lyrics about a relationship that is so blissful the singer can't be sure that they aren't just dreaming the whole thing.

In contrast to Motown's joyous rhapsodising over new lovers, the lyrics in my second reference track are full of cynicism, using humour and sarcasm to criticise three potential love interests. Twain released *That Don't Impress Me Much* during the third wave feminism of the 90s, which was in part characterised by the act of 'fighting patriarchy with irony' (Brunell), and brought

with it the archetype of the ‘Angry Young Woman’ in pop music. She is ‘uninhibited and smart, bruised and resilient’ (Pareles, 1996). Unlike pop artists of the same era such as Alannis Morissette or Meredith Brooks who fit more comfortably into this category, many songs by Twain such as *Man I Feel Like A Woman* tend to be more lighthearted and celebratory, but Pareles does describe her delivery as ‘relatively pushy for a country singer’, and I tried to capture the *That Don’t Impress Me Much* attitude of Twain with my vocal delivery, and the bruised resilience of the wronged Angry Young Woman with my lyrics (for example ‘You did me wrong/You left me on streets/That will be the last thing you ever do to me’). The lyrics of *That Don’t Impress Me Much* are typical pop lyrics in that they are simple and catchy, but there’s also a hint of country narrative style about them. They might not tell a story, but they do introduce characters and there is a sense of progression as verse moves to chorus using a pattern that Neal (2007) would describe as a ‘modified or shifting chorus’. Each verse introduces a new character with a different defining characteristic: intelligence, good looks, a nice car. Each chorus shifts lyrically just slightly in order to serve as a relevant response to each preceding verse, for example from the verse: ‘you think you’re a **genius**/You drive me up the wall/You’re a regular original **know it all**’ to the first chorus: ‘Okay, so you’re a **rocket scientist**/That don’t impress me much/So you got the **brains** but have you got the touch’. The second verse introduces a second character who’s described as being excessively vain, then the second chorus follows the same lyrical structure as the first chorus but replacing ‘rocket scientist’ with ‘Brad Pitt’ and ‘brains’ with ‘looks’. The final verse/chorus does the same. My lyrics have followed a similar pattern whereby each verse introduces a negative thing that the singer’s ex-partner did to her, and each chorus shifts to act as a relevant response to that verse.

I decided to take a further step toward the country genre in my track’s chorus. Whereas the lyrics of *That Don’t Impress Me Much* evoke modern metropolises and the pop culture of the decade with its references to rocket science, fast cars and Brad Pitt, I decided to pepper my chorus with some images that evoke the timeless landscapes with which country music is most often associated: ‘gold fields/clear skies’, ‘still night/wolf cry’. Whilst my track’s lyrics and overall tone do mimic the reference track by showing defiance and agency, *That Don’t Impress Me Much* maintains a sassy and sarcastic tone throughout, but the lyrics and melody of the imagery-couplets in my chorus introduce a sense of reflectiveness and melancholy that can be found in songs that adhere more strictly to the country genre such as *Alabama Pines* by Jason Isbell and *Drive South* by John Hiatt. I also attempted to inject a subtle country ‘twang’ into my vocal delivery so as to evoke a sense of a country sound, but I was careful not to make it over-the-top so that it became appropriative or a parody. Similarly, in my third track, rather than emulating Lizzo’s American/Detroit accent in her rap vocal, I chose to use an accent that is not quite my own, but is at least a variant of my own English accent - one could be described as a South London accent. As a result I haven’t deviated from the genre of my chosen track but rather shifted the sound from American hip hop to London hip hop.

I’ve found using a Digital Audio Workstation as my primary tool for creating my tracks both advantageous and limiting. Of course it’s beneficial to have access to hundreds of instruments, sound effects, loops and so on, but as mentioned already, there are scenarios where having a live instrument would be infinitely preferable. The only analogue/physical instruments I had at my disposal were my voice and a digital piano. Samantha Bennett (2019)) discusses the rise of a technique in commercial music that sees ‘traditional’ recording techniques and new technologies

such as ‘pre-programmed sounds, digital synthesis and large-scale record construction’ used alongside each other (p. 54). She notes resistance from ‘traditionalists’ who consider the use of digital tech such as DAWs as less worthy than music created by live instruments, but Bennett ultimately frames the simultaneous utilisation of old and new as a fertile method of creating music. In an interview with mixing engineer Dave Pensando, Lizzo’s producer Ricky Reed talks about how he values simplicity over ‘clutter’ in a pop track. He notes that often just the singer’s voice and a few notes is effective and allows the listening to ‘connect’ better. My track opens with just a piano riff and voice, as does *Good As Hell*, so the instruments then layering in and building to a crescendo at the start of the verse has more impact. During the same interview, Reed talks about his dislike of pads but admits he does ‘love’ plugins and pre-sets, thus echoing Bennett’s suggestion that it’s the combination of both techniques that can often produce the best sounds. As with my Motown track, in an ideal scenario, the trumpet solo that I use in my own chorus to mirror Lizzo’s would be recorded using a live instrument. The plugin serves a purpose for the sake of a demo, but one of the most striking features of *Good As Hell* is the combination of synthesised pop and real instruments. My track is more effects-heavy than Lizzo’s - a conscious decision - and if I were to record the final track with live instruments then the contrast between traditional and the new could be all the more effective

I can hear that through mirroring techniques from each of my reference artists I have created tracks that are very similar in essence, but at the same time my own preferences, choices, abilities and limitations have resulted in three tracks that have their own unique sound. Creating my own tracks with such close reference to specific genre characteristics has forced me to reconsider the concept and application of genre. As Petrusich (2021) argues, our perception of genre often has as much to do with what we expect to be hearing based on context as it has to do with what we actually hear in a song. Identifying *That Don’t Impress Me Much* as a fusion of country, pop and rock because we know it’s by Shania Twain and that’s what she does is one thing, but teasing out exactly which aspects of the song belongs to which genre is another matter entirely. I probably gave myself a bigger challenge than necessary by selecting songs that are a fusion of more than one genre, but I think in doing that I’ve had to pay even closer attention to exactly what is characteristic of one genre and isn’t of another than I would have otherwise, and these new areas of knowledge will most likely inform my decisions when making music in the future.

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