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Foundation assessment

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Foundation Assessment: Essay

For my music production portfolio, I chose to produce three tracks. The first track “Blue Magic” is a 90s Style Boom Bap Hip Hop song. The second track “Import” is a modern trap song. The third, “Shine My Nine” is a dancehall-pop song, with elements of afro-swing reflective of the burgeoning British urban music scene. Each of these tracks were produced with the intention of being a prime example of their respective genres, with referral to several instances of popular songs in each of the genres, as well as other reliable sources.

Hip Hop song: “Blue Magic”

The 90s signalled a time of commercialisation for hip hop both musically and culturally (Johnson, 2011). Many Hip Hop Artists and producers incorporated elements of Soul, Jazz and RnB, including “cleaner” production and melodic hooks in order to attain crossover commercial success (Johnson, 2011). During this same period, RnB artists began to include short guest verses from rappers and more Hip Hop oriented production, thus blurring the lines between the two genres, and setting the foundations for the current Hip-Hop scene, that sees artists such as Drake and Kanye West, amongst other current artists, alternate between singing and rapping within their music, often times within a single song, without the backlash that would have come with it in earlier times (Johnson, 2011). This period of hip hop also saw the rise of “super producers” such as Timbaland, Pharrell Williams and Dr Dre, who would work with many Hip Hop, RnB and even Pop artists using their signature production styles, making the mainstream commercial music scene, to an extent more homogenous (Watkins, 2005). Examples of melodic choruses, along with other RnB elements can be heard in Tupac Shakur’s “Me against the world”, and Jay Z’s “Can’t Knock the Hustle”, both released in 1995, with the latter showing other hallmarks of mainstream hip hop during the time period. For example, cleaner drums, “drier” vocals, and much more emphasis on

melody and musicality than much of the underground and golden age Hip Hop of the late 80s and early 90s, which often sounded grittier due to its heavier use of samples, and more primitive technology. While “Can’t Knock the Hustle” does sample one other song for its baseline, it and other Hip Hop songs of its time are less reliant on samples than in earlier times due to increasing legal issues, when much of the music in the genre would be ripped from past material, including drum breaks and vocals (Meiselman, 2016). Both aforementioned songs also use a style of swung drum pattern known as “boom bap” that was prevalent throughout the 90s, and is still used in some modern rap songs as a throwback homage to old school Hip Hop, an example of this being “Medellin” by British artists Corleone and Young Adz, a track released in 2018 that was used as one of the prime references for “Blue Magic” alongside the previously mentioned bodies of work (Billboard, 2015). “Medellin” also successfully utilises other elements of popular late 90s Hip Hop music, such as its use of a sung chorus, melodic chords, and a mix emphasizing prominent drums and vocals. More modern elements of the track include the use of autotune to enhance the vocals during the chorus.

“Blue Magic” is a 90s style commercial hip hop track with an RnB chorus, produced and written to be a reflection of old-school Hip Hop songs such as the aforementioned Tupac and Jay Z tracks, with elements added to modernise it, as also seen in “Medellin”. Its tempo is set at 92bpm, well within the typical Hip Hop tempo range of roughly 85-95bpm. One of the defining characteristics of “Blue Magic” is the use of swung “Boom Bap” style drums to carry the rhythm, as also heard in the reference tracks and many other Hip Hop songs. Because of the genre’s strong emphasis on rhythm, it was important that the drums, especially the snares, were placed forward in the mix. The majority of the frequencies the snares hit were in the mid ranges, so EQ was used to increase the gain on both the low mid and high mid ranges to make the snares stand out more, whilst significantly reducing the gain

for low frequencies to stop them from clashing with the other elements such as the bass line, and for high frequencies so that the snares wouldn't become too abrasive, especially since they would be constant throughout the track. The kick is mostly a low frequency sound, so to prevent it from being drowned out by the bass, it was panned slightly to the left, and a transient master was used to increase the attack and make the kick punchier. EQ was also used on both the kick and the bass to reduce mid and high frequencies and get rid of unpleasant sounds muddying the mix, such as a "ringing" sound that came from the virtual bass guitar instrument prior to proper mixing. Whilst "Blue Magic" doesn't sample any particular song, certain elements have been added to give the illusion that the track used a soul or jazz sample as part of the sonic texture, such as a subtle vinyl crackle sound effect looped throughout the track, the inclusion of saxophone notes, as well as mild reverb and distortion used on the keys to give the impression that an actual keyboard is being played, rather than just basic synth keys, thus adding warmth and character to the track. To make the keys stand out in the mix, EQ was used to bring out the higher mid frequencies and they were also panned to give them their own space, preventing them from clashing with other instruments. Vocals are one of the defining characteristics of a Hip Hop track alongside drums, so in "Blue Magic" they are brought to the front of the mix alongside the snares, using compression to negate any sudden changes in dynamics and make the vocal louder overall, A gate and noise reduction was used to remove or reduce background noises. The vocals themselves are quite low frequency, so to stop them from being drowned out by the low and low mid frequency instruments such as the bass and drums, the higher end of the vocals was brought up slightly using EQ to make the vocals sound clearer, and notably, the vocals during the track's intro have their lower end significantly reduced to create a "telephone effect". The vocals during the chorus are enhanced using pitch correction, and slightly more reverb than the verses to make each section of the track more distinct from each other, and to give an

autotune effect similar to the one heard in “Medellin”. Guitar chords and extra vocal adlibs were also included in the chorus for the same reason.

Trap song: “Import”

Trap is one of the more prominent music genres in recent years. Originating in the late 90s and early 2000s as a niche offshoot of southern rap music, it would eventually undergo a rapid increase in popularity from the 2010s and onwards, with producers such as Lex Luger, Southside, Metro Boomin and more recently Ronny J (Lōtic, 2012). Eventually, the genres influence would spread and be seen in multiple other genres, including but not limited to Pop, RnB and Electronic Dance Music; and would achieve huge commercial success, with examples such as the Migos’ “Bad and Boujee” and Cardi B’s Bodak Yellow, among many others, reaching number 1 on music charts in the United States and internationally (McIntyre, 2017) (Trust, 2017).

The most recognisable traits of trap music are its constantly varying double and triple time or similarly patterned hi hat drums, and deep, long decaying 808 kick drums serving as the low end of the track (Friedman, 2017) (Setaro, 2018). Electronic drum machines are often used to program the drums (Setaro, 2018). Other traits may include the cinematic use of keys, woodwind, synths, strings, brass and samples to give the songs an overall dark and ominous tone, which reflects the genre’s often dark or violent subject matter involving drugs, crime and general nihilism (Raymer, 2013). Prime examples of this production style can be heard in popular trap songs such as 21 Savage’s “No Heart” Future’s “Mask Off” and Meek Mill’s “The Difference”, all of which are used as references for “Import”. In particular “Mask Off” uses a soul sample for its distinctive flute motif, whilst “No Heart” and “The difference” use keys and synths respectively. All three of the reference tracks are in a minor key and use the

same type of deep 808s and stuttering hi hats that typical of the genre. While trap songs vary in length and structure, they usually consist of a rapped hook and verses.

The track “Import, was produced with the intention of being a club oriented modern trap song, attempting to include elements from all three of the aforementioned reference tracks. The tempo for “import” is set at 148bpm, not much faster than the average tempo for a trap beat, which is roughly 140bpm. The track uses a looped sample from the intro of “Undenied”, a Trip Hop track by Portishead, akin to the way that “Mask off” sampled its flute riff from a 70s soul song, for its underlying keys, and what sounds like a short three-note guitar riff at the end of the loop. The original sample was quite bass heavy, so EQ was used to significantly reduce the low end of the sample to make room for the 808s, which would provide the low frequencies in a similar fashion to most modern trap songs. The higher frequencies were also increased to make the sample, particularly the three notes at the end of each loop, more audible, as before mixing it difficult to hear after the rest of the elements were introduced. Furthermore, slight reverb was added to the sample in an effort to make it sound wider and more spacious. The most distinctive trait of “Import”, as a trap song, is its drum programming, the varying pattern of hi hats and kick drums, as well as the snares, which while still towards the front of the mix, had to be reduced in volume to avoid overpowering the rest of the track. The long decaying 808s are layered underneath each of the kick drums, providing the bassline. The use of a vocal sample throughout the track provides further percussion. In terms of vocals, the use of reverb is prominent in modern trap music, as can be especially heard in “No Heart” and “Mask Off”. The same technique is applied to the rap vocals in “Import”, but a lesser extent, as the rest of the track itself is relatively “dry”, so using it on the vocals to the same extent as the reference tracks would have made them sound unnatural and superimposed onto the rest of the song. It should also be noted that towards the end of the intro, before the drums, 808s and vocals come in, a tape stop effect is applied to

the sample to silence it momentarily. This is to simulate a “beat drop” similar to those heard in dance music, intended to build hype and energy among crowds before the start of the first hook.

Dancehall Pop song: “Shine My Nine”

Originating in the late 70s and 80s as a faster, more sparse and electronic version of reggae, dancehall music has gained mainstream popularity throughout the 2000s and 2010s, and its influence spread to artists outside the genre, including EDM artist such as Major Lazer, who produced several Dancehall inspired hits from 2015-2017, and RnB and Hip Hop artists such as Drake and Yung Bane, who had dancehall inspired hits such as “One Dance” and “Fine Wine” respectively (Stolzoff, 2002) (Britton, 2016). Dancehall Pop differs from Dancehall, in that it focuses less on toasting and more on melody and repeated choruses, combining the genre’s danceability with pop sensibilities and song structuring. A reduced use of strong language, sexual references and Jamaican Patois made Dancehall Pop accessible to a wider audience (Serwer, 2016). In the United Kingdom, Artists such as J Hus and Kojo Funds combined elements of Dancehall Pop with RnB, Hip Hop and Afrobeats to create a similar sounding genre of music known as Afro Swing (Alemoru, 2018).

One of the characteristics of modern dancehall, dancehall pop and afro swing is its focus on drum machine created rhythms and bass, traits borrowed from the reggae music from which dancehall developed from, along with the inclusion of Pop or RnB like melodies, song structure and chord progression as well as sometimes heavy use of autotune and other forms of pitch correction. This can be heard in tracks such as “Controlla” by Drake, “Fine Wine” by Yung Bane, and “Work” by Rhianna, the reference tracks for “Shine My Nine”. Both “Controlla” and “Fine Wine” both show instances of the use of deep sub bass throughout the tracks. Meanwhile all three show RnB and Pop chord progressions and

structural elements, with the inclusion of repeated hooks to break up the verses, as well as an off-beat clap either every bar or every other bar, a drum pattern that is common in dancehall pop. Autotune is arguably used in all three of the tracks, but in “Fine Wine” it is the most obvious that vocals have been enhanced. All of the aforementioned track also share the sparseness of most dancehall pop songs, with the inclusion of just a hand full of elements; the drum pattern, bassline and either a set of chords in the case of “Controlla” and “Fine Wine” or a repeating melody in the case of “Work”. It could almost be argued that the tracks sound underproduced by the standards of some.

The track “Shine My Nine” was produced to be a Dancehall Pop song with elements of Afro Swing. The song retains the same focus on rhythm as other as the reference tracks and other music within the genre. This was done not only with the song’s off beat drum pattern, but also the arpeggiated staccato synth melody that plays throughout the song. The attack on the synth instrument is set reasonably high, causing it to act as a struck mallet instrument, therefore acting as a percussive as well as a melodic instrument. In this case, the EQ was partly used to shape the sound of the instrument rather than to find its position within the mix. Because the track’s minimalistic and sparse nature, there was more focus on filling out as much space as possible, rather than trying to fit numerous elements into a limited space. The use of distortion on the melody also helped to serve this purpose, not only widening the range of frequencies the sound reached, but also making it sound less two dimensional. The track’s baseline also contributes to its rhythmic elements playing on the first note of each of the arpeggiated chords. These two elements combined made sure that during the chorus and other segments where the kick drum wasn’t included, the song still had a strong sense of rhythm to carry it. Structurally the song has the Pop conventions that classify it as Dancehall Pop; the inclusion of not only repeated choruses but also pre-choruses after each verse, and verses that are sung rather than rapped as with more traditional

dancehall. Pitch correction and reverb as also used on the vocals, not only to fit in with the sparse and spacious nature of the synth melody, but also to match the heavily autotuned vocals of many modern dancehall and afro swing tracks, including the reference tracks. Finally, I should be noted that for the hook segments of “Shine my nine” my low end of the vocals was reduced using EQ in a similar way to the opening vocals in the earlier mentioned Hip Hop track “Blue magic”. This was simply a stylistic choice to make the hooks sound different from the pre-chorus and verses, and prevent the track from sounding like a long continuous verse or freestyle instead than a structured song.

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