

Darkwave, 80's Synth-Pop And Drum & Bass - an Analysis With a Portfolio

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been previously submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jan Trafas', located at the bottom right of the page.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introduction	3
Portfolio Analysis	4
Song One - Inspired by “Blinding Lights” by The Weeknd	4
Drum Beat	4
Instrumentation	5
Song Two - Cover of “Glue” by Bicep	7
Drums	7
Instrumentation	7
Vocal Sample	8
Song Three - Every Shadow Nods	9
Drums	9
Instrumentation	9
Vocal Production and Mixing	11
Reference Match	12
Conclusion	13
Reflection	13
Why Every Shadow Nods Will Be Released But Not The Others	13
The Future - What To Improve	13
Summary	13
References	14
List Of Figures	16

Introduction

This essay is an analysis of a creative process that follows a principle once greatly phrased by Thomas Stearns Eliot:

“Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn.”

(Eliot, T. S., 1920)

Musicians and poets are in some ways very much alike ...

“The Welsh word “cerdd” can be translated as either “verse” or “music”. It covers both meanings, because, as we know from history, when the great bards were performing their poetry it would be accompanied by music. The two were always intertwined and music, poetry, spoken word and performance have been a part of our society for centuries. The festivals called “eisteddfod” combine literature, music and poetry. These cultural competitions were not just for the rich or educated, but were held in pubs and other meeting places and brought everyone together. They are part of an oral tradition entrenched in Welsh society as it is in many other cultures, as diverse as the Somali tradition of oral storytelling or praise poetry in India and Pakistan.”

(Matthews, 2016)

... and thus this research practices the methodology highlighted by the quote from T. S. Eliot in all of its portfolio elements. The second portfolio element, which is a creation based on the song “Glue” by an artist called Bicep stems from the idea that sometimes to learn one must directly copy what the best in their craft do. An example brought from a past we all have as children, when we copy our peers’ work to learn how to do it ourselves. (Paulus, 2019) This method shows how copying does not always mean plagiarism and unoriginality. If the work created via mimicking a greater, more experienced artist is not planned to be published and distributed, there is no harm in creating it, because it can bring closer the before-unattainable results and build a realisation in the creator, that what separates them from their peers, or in this case industry professionals is just practise.

Portfolio Analysis

Song One - Inspired by “Blinding Lights” by *The Weeknd*

The first song, “Don’t Leave Me Tonight” directly imitates The Weeknd’s “Blinding Lights” however all that was copied was the drumbeat, form, tempo and time signature of the song. The rest of what can be heard is an inspiration taken from the original song and applied to the new production.

Drum Beat

The classic eight-note groove, (Berry, Gianni, 2017) that includes a sixteenth-note double kick pattern occurring every two bars sounds like the very relentless, robotic and electronic rhythms used by many artists of the 1980s decade when drum machines were beginning to enter the world of commercially produced music becoming more popular than ever before. (Fact Magazine, 2014) The syncopated claps can easily be recognised and compared with the original however, their rhythm has been altered slightly. This was done purposely to show that what matters is not the exact rhythm the claps play out, but the concept that they create and role they have in the entire production and in the feel of the drum beat itself. They are used instead of a crash on every buildup and comedown between phrases of the song. The strong reverb on them makes it clear that they are to act as the most powerful accents on the drops even though they are not played on the “One” of the choruses. Every four bars the clap pattern changes, which means it occurs twice as often in “Don’t Leave Me Tonight” as in “Blinding Lights”.

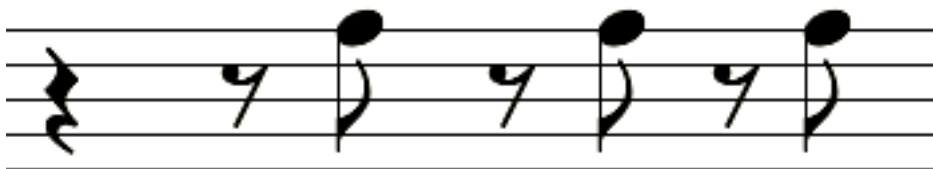


Fig. 1 Clap Pattern A.



Fig. 2 Clap Pattern B.

Instrumentation

The first sound that can be heard on “Don’t Leave Me Tonight” is the reverberated bass synthesiser, made to create the sensation of being played in an enormous space. Straight after it comes a hint of what the hook melody will be, just like in “Blinding Lights” it is concealed with an eq filter. There is a lot of recorded automation on the intro tracks. This was done to make sure and include the live feel and performance part of the song. For example the bass has both an overdrive distortion and a bit crusher plugin on it, of which the mix, drive, downsampling and bit-depth potentiometers are tweaked as the song progresses through the intro approaching the first hook.

In the second half of the first verse, a percussive woodblock sound comes in, marking this part stand out from the previous one and following the rule that in order for something to keep grabbing the listener’s attention constantly, there need to be new parts coming in every eight bars. (Furr, 2015)

In the buildups before the choruses, the bass sound is more open and bright, thanks to a more open filter. This was done to follow the original soundscape of the reference track, where the verses have all the instruments shifted far into the background. The distinct part, that only plays in the choruses, is the arpeggiated pluck synth, following the original “Blinding Lights” arrangement. This one in particular has a stereo delay with different delay times in each of the two channels, followed by the *SilverVerb* reverb to create a lush, full and broad sensation. (Echevarria, 2022)

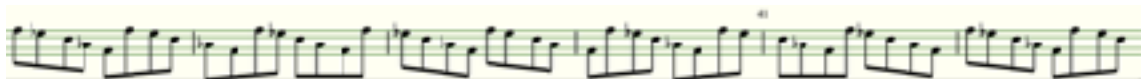


Fig. 3 Arpeggiated Pluck Buildup Part. The melody pattern is a five-over-four melody line, which is used in “Africa” by Toto for example. The entire melody does not fit within a full notational value and so it overlaps over the quarter note. The green staff indicates a melodic instrument inside Logic Pro X.



Fig. 4 Arp Pluck Buildup - Stereo Delay Settings



Fig. 5 Arp Pluck Buildup - SilverVerb Reverb Settings

Song Two - Cover of “Glue” by *Bicep*

The idea for the second song, which is a cover of “Glue” by *Bicep* came as an inspiration to create a drum and bass track which has been my desire for quite some time. The song fulfils many criteria of its genre and goes beyond it adding trance-like rhythmically gated pads and vocals and featuring a tempo typical to songs of the breakbeat, garage genre. (MasterClass, 2021)

Drums

When listening to the reference, one can notice that the low frequencies of the kick drum appear and disappear in an alternating fashion between some of the phrases, mainly when the drums are the only instruments playing. This was followed dully and applied to the cover production. Because the cover uses two different kick drum sound samples, one for the low-end ‘thump’ and one for the ‘boxy mids’, the effect was possible to achieve by removing the sample responsible for delivering the ‘low-end’ and leaving just the ‘mid’ sample which has a low-cut filter applied.

(Owsinski, 2004)

The drums vary slightly from the original, by implementing more hi-hats in place of the original's shakers and sound effects. This created, subjectively, a very desirable effect and that is why the drum beat resembles those of the UK garage genre and not only the drum and bass scene. (MasterClass, 2021)

Instrumentation

The melodic parts of this song come in after sixteen bars of only drums, which allows for the listener's ear to adapt to the groove enough to be able to focus on the instruments once they join the mix. Starting with a vocal pad, beginning on the 'four' before the main part bar, immediately the gate begins to introduce itself by rhythmically muting the otherwise constant and sustained sound of the pad.

The gating effect is achieved by first creating a MIDI instrument track and writing-in midi notes that correspond to the desired rhythm of the gate opening. The track is named “Gate Cue”.



Fig. 6 Notation of the “Gate Cue” track with a sampler instrument on it providing information on when the gate plugin on the vocal pad should open.

The “Gate Cue” track has a send added to it, which routes a copy of the signal to Bus 12 which then is used as the sidechain input of the gate plugin on the vocal pad track. The output of the “Gate Cue” is then removed in order to stop it from producing any sound and adding to the overall level of the mix.



Fig. 7 Settings on the gate plugin applied to the track “Vocal Pad Hi”. In the top-right corner, Bus 12 selected as sidechain input can be seen.

Vocal Sample

The original uses a vocal sample that was sung by Silkie Carlo who had been recorded by Bicep, the DJ duo while “Glue” was being produced. In this cover I have sung my own vocal sample resembling the original with two voices playing at the same time, so as to strengthen the performance delivery and match it with the original singer’s higher octave.

Song Three - Every Shadow Nods

Drums

The drums for this song are an acoustic performance played by Jan Trafas and recorded with an analogue Neve VR Legend console. The deep production with emphasis on a drum machine-like sound comes with inspiration from gated reverbs of Phil Collins's drum parts and Peter Gabriel's work, as well as the traditional Roland TR-808 drum sounds. The challenge that had to be faced in the mixing stage for this record was having to alter the drum sound quite heavily as they came from an acoustic performance. The fact that the drum parts were an actual performance, allowed for some natural fluctuation to be kept in, especially audible on the tom fills, inspiration for which comes from the song "Send Me An Angel" by *Real Life*, especially at the very outro.

One of the most important aspects of the drum production proved to be drastic compression and equalisation altering the sound of the kick drum and the snare by a large amount of dB both in terms of EQ curves and gain reduction.

Instrumentation

Shoegaze-styled guitars open this tune's intro and after sixteen bars the hi-hat joins together with the high-end part of the main bass synth. (DJ Pangburn, 2018) As the song builds until the first main hook, the low-end joins and fills out the frequency spectrum. It sounds as if it was a whole separate instrument joining in but in fact it is just an automation of the low-cut band on an EQ of the 'walking' eighth note bass's low-end version. The song was mixed using a lot of analogue gear, for example a parallel-distorted version of the bass synth was created by sending it to an outboard *SPL GoldMike* and adjusting the input so that the 'peak' light switches on, and then dialling down the output to avoid digital clipping. This track was called "HI_BASS" to differentiate from the main bass track.

"Unless you're producing death metal, it's probably a good idea to balance distorted sounds with clean ones."

(White, 2010)



Fig. 8 Low-end Bass track volume automation printed on a separate track visible as the triangular shape of the waveform.

Another aspect of this song that makes it unique and is going to make a listener want to replay it is the fact that there is a plucked melody that only appears in the final chorus. It leaves a sense of dissatisfaction and does not ever return, because the song simply ends with it playing in the background. Additionally, just like in song one “Don’t Hurt Me Tonight” this same melody appears at the intro of the song and teases the listener to keep playing the song, while having the high-end filtered out, so as not to reveal too much of its tone. The lyrics that sing out “I don’t want you no more, I don’t want you no more” in the choruses also play a role in the ‘replay effect’.

“If you're in a gloomy mood and you've just gone through a breakup, for example, you might listen to something that makes you want to rip your heart out even more, because it reflects your mood and lets you know that someone else at some point was going through something similar to what you're going through.”

(Truong, 2018)

Vocal Production and Mixing

The vocalist is Carrie Linney, she wrote the lyrics and the melody of her own vocal and sang it. She was recorded with an *SE Electronics Z5600* tube microphone and through an *SSL 4000 G+* analogue mixing console at the *SAE Institute* London. The incredible performances were captured and recorded straight into *ProTools*, despite the track having started in *LogicPro*. This decision was supported by the reason that *ProTools* seems to be more precise, fast and clear when it comes to signal flow and general mixing.

Carrie's vocals were first run through the *Waves Vocal Rider* plugin which writes volume automation and helps create a dynamically more consistent performance for a compressor to work on, which makes the effect it has on the vocal sound more natural. In order to create an analogue and warm sound, the track was also wired into a channel on the *Neve VR Legend* and sent through a channel strip equaliser.

The panning effects on the vocals have been printed in the below figure, which shows a a part of the buildup before the final chorus. An accented buildup emphasised by the kick drum playing a straight eight-note pattern was coloured effectively with the vocal panning. It creates a glitched, electronic feel which gives the track a certain eerie character.



Fig. 9 Vocal panning printed tracks before the final chorus.

The distorted vocal ad-libs that can be heard coming in and out of focus during the intro part of the song were achieved by peaking the signal on the input of a *Lexicon 480L* reverb unit and then processing a reverb preset with an equaliser so it would allow the, now harsh, high frequencies to remain in the track. Despite the vocals being generally clean throughout the whole song, which means they have no drastic effects applied and still sound relatively human, this small touch at the beginning of the song causes the emotion of the song to shift into a more unknown, cinematic feel.

Reference Match

The reference tracks included with the F1 Portfolio element are three songs which on its own already shows the different approach taken to create “Every Shadow Nods”. It was aggregated from multiple sources, not copied directly. ‘intelligently imitated’ as per Eliot’s quote, with an addition of many more personal parts, sound choices and mixing decisions. “ESN” does not directly borrow any elements from the three selected reference songs but it still remains sonically cohesive with the soundscape of its references:

Bleib Modern - “If Love Is Just A Word”

Selofan - “Absolutely Absent”

Whispering Sons - “Alone”.

Conclusion

Reflection

Why *Every Shadow Nods* Will Be Released But Not The Others

This track was chosen to be pushed for a digital release using the single release plan created for the F3 presentation assignment. What also made the choice of which song to release easier is the fact that the cover of “Glue” by *Bicep* would require the purchase of a license for the song’s recreation and would not be beneficial for a personal artist’s career. On the other hand, “Don’t Hurt Me Tonight” has too much of a similarity to “Blinding Lights”, while not being similar enough to be a cover, so it lands in an awkward spot ownership-wise and thus will not be planned for release.

The Future - What To Improve

Earlier planning of the project could have resulted in having professional vocalists appear on all the songs, not just for “Every Shadow Nods” and thus having the possibility to work with an overall better-sounding performance every time. This would have helped achieve a more professional-sounding production in both cases.

In the two first songs, that were meant to match the original productions, not enough focus was placed on the sound design and sample selection, especially for the synthesisers.

In the upcoming months the focus for education in the area of mixing and production should definitely be those three: vocal production, sound design and automation with transitions as I have observed them to be the weakest out of all my production skills.

Summary

Overall I feel this project has developed me more by changing the mindset of being completely original no matter the case. It has helped me understand that the difference between me and the professionals I listen to, is possible to be reduced and minimised by me copying their moves in order to learn techniques and apply them to my own musical works.

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List Of Figures

Song One

Fig. 1 Clap Pattern A.

Fig. 2 Clap Pattern B.

Fig. 3 Arpeggiated Pluck Buildup Part.

Fig. 4 Arp Pluck Buildup - Stereo Delay Settings

Fig. 5 Arp Pluck Buildup - SilverVerb Reverb Settings

Song Two

Fig. 6 Notation of the “Gate Cue” track with a sampler instrument on it providing information on when the gate plugin on the vocal pad should open.

Fig. 7 Settings on the gate plugin applied to the track “Vocal Pad Hi”. In the top-right corner, Bus 12 selected as sidechain input can be seen.

Song Three

Fig. 8 Low-end Bass track volume automation printed on a separate track visible as the triangular shape of the waveform.

Fig. 9 Vocal panning printed tracks before the final chorus.