

The defining characteristics of a musical genre as a consumer is something that's seldom thought about. However, as a creator, whether it be production, songwriting, performing or even engineering, it's something we think about daily. As musicians we often create reference tracks in our head when we listen to tracks that inspire us or make us feel a certain emotion. Not in the guise to recreate the exact product, but to use that inspiration as fuel to create something that did not exist before. We make decisions based on techniques we've heard applied in certain genres, whether it be subconsciously or intentionally and use this to fire our creativity.

To prepare for this essay, I have created 3 reference tracks that have been inspired by 3 contemporary commercial music tracks, in three different musical genres/styles. This essay will analyse the three contemporary commercial music tracks and explain in detail how the 3 reference tracks conform to the music genre and the song itself. I will explain in detail the production techniques used and the musical decisions made to create these reference tracks. *Please note, these reference tracks will not consist of any vocals (excluding vox's) and will solely focus on production.*

The first track I will analyse is a song performed by Grammy Award winning American singer and songwriter, Gabriella Wilson, better known professionally as H.E.R. The song is titled Pigment and it was produced by H.E.R. and Qreamy Beats. Both the original track and reference track has a time signature count of 4/4. H.E.R. is typically known as an R&B singer, but straight away you can hear the Jazz influence in the song. Which is not surprising, as R&B was originally known as Rhythm & Blues and was birthed from the fusion of Jazz, Gospel and the Blues, as stated by McGill University (2007). R&B has seen enormous growth over the years. It originally replaced the term "race music" back in the 1940s which was music performed predominately by black people (McGill University 2007). From the 1950s to the late 1980s there were a lot of crossovers between R&B, Jazz, Soul and the Blues. Musicians paid little attention to the distinctions between Jazz and R&B, and frequently recorded both genres. During these times, you would hear a lot of live instrumentation in R&B music, namely, the guitar, bass guitar, saxophone, keyboard and the drums. However, in recent years there has been a cross-pollination between R&B and HipHop, to the point where, in most cases, the only prominent difference between a rap song and R&B song is whether the vocals are being rapped or sung. We are also starting to hear a difference in the production over the years. We hear more synthesizers and programmed drums being used, which demonstrates the crossover of producers being less instrumentalists to more programmers in the genre of R&B today. What makes the song Pigment interesting is that it goes back to the original roots of R&B, from the live instrumentation (Piano and bass) which gives it a very melancholic Jazz feel.

In the process of creating the reference track my main priority was to capture the melancholic feeling it gave me. This was achieved through creating a chord progression on the minor scale, in which I chose E flat minor as that is the same key as the song Pigment (Tunebat 2016). I believe even a difference in the key of the reference track would have affected the feeling captured from the song Pigment. Typically, minor chords evoke a sadder emotion than major chords. This is due to the difference in the third note, the third is what gives major-sounding scales and chords their brighter, cheerier sound, and what gives minor scales and chords their darker, sadder sound (Study Bass 2015). I also removed some of the high end so it could sound darker and removed the low end to create space for the bass and the kick. I also added a touch of small-room reverb on the piano melody to further contribute to the emotion of the song. As stated by the Journal of the Audio Engineering Society, reverb heard in a smaller room were considered calmer and safer than big rooms. My intention of adding this effect was to make the piano melody feel like it was inviting the songwriter into a safe place to pour out their emotion. It was also important for me to ensure that within the melody there was enough space for a singer to layer vocals. My next focus was to create a baseline using an upstanding bass preset to capture the live instrumental feel of the song. These two instruments together set the tone/feel of the song which you can hear in the first 8 bars. It was important for me to ensure the base did not stand out and overtake the melody. I wanted it to be more complimentary, something you could feel and not necessarily hear, but feel like something was missing if it wasn't there. This was achieved through rigorous sound selection and then further mixing the bass by removing the high-end and most of the middle-end and making sure the levels were complimentary to the piano. My next focus was on the drums. It was important to set a tempo that did not remove the

feeling from the melody and bass but instead, create a nice rhythm for a singer to add their own melodies. Setting the BPM at 111 helped achieved this. However, my main priority was ensuring that the kick and the snare were felt, as in modern day R&B having hard hitting drums play a big part in how the listener feels and it also sets the rhythm. I achieved this through side-chaining the kick to the bass so when the kick hit, it did not clash with the bass, as these two instruments are heavy in the low end. For the snare, I pitched it down to add to the melancholic feel and added a touch of reverb to give it more of an impact when it hit. I added percussion in parts to make the drums feel progressive. For the hook, I sampled some live Jazz brushing sounds. I loved how these sounds worked on the song Pigment, it made me feel like I was in a live Jazz show back in the 1970s. I pitched the brushing sounds down a few semi-tones and removed a lot of the high-end. Again, to achieve the melancholic feeling I set myself. For the structure, I included a section with minimal drums as in the song pigment this is done so she can perform her spoken word poetry. To further add to the emotion of the song and to add my own signature to it, I sampled a female vox. I added a telephone EQ so it did not clash with the melody, side-chained and levelled the sample so it would not disturb the vocalists when it came to adding their own vocals. Like the baseline, its more something you feel, but not necessarily hear.

The second track is performed by British rapper, singer and songwriter Michael Ebenazer Kwadjo Omari Owuo Jr. Known professionally as Stormzy. The song is titled Vossi Bop and it was produced by Chris Andoh. Both the original track and reference track has a time signature count of 4/4. Stormzy is one of the UK's leading artists of this generation, he is primarily known as a grime artist, but walks the blurred line between grime and hip-hop effortlessly, which is the same for his song Vossi Bop. Grime is a genre of electronic dance music that emerged in London in the early 2000s. It developed from UK garage and jungle music and also draws influence from dancehall, reggae, and hip-hop (Wikipedia). Some specific features of grime, include a rapid breakbeat of around 130-140bpm, rapping, and an electronic sound in places, which AllMusic calls 'where the legacies of hardcore rap and hardcore techno collide' (Metro 2018). Hip-hop, like grime, is more of a sub-culture and movement than a music genre. It originated in New York City and included elements of rapping, beat boxing, fashion and being street smart. Hip-hop has evolved and it now has a number of sub-genres such as conscious rap, battle rap, trap music and some would even argue grime. However, it still has some distinctive features such as; heavy basslines, a tempo of about 70-100 beats per minute, syncopated drumbeats, samples and lyricism. What makes Vossi Bop interesting is that it draws parallels from the two genres. The BPM is set at 94 (Tunebat 2019) which is typical for a hip-hop beat and has an aggressively hitting drum pattern with a heavy/bouncy baseline which are both big parts of hip-hop and grime music. The melody is a repetitive 4 bar loop; however, the producer has pitched down the melody in parts and reversed it to make the beat more interesting. Which is something that's done heavily in modern day UK hip-hop.

In the process of creating the reference track for Vossi Bop my main focus was creating a beat that hit hard with a lot of bounce. I started off with creating a catchy 4-bar melody using a bell sound. Fortunately, the sound picked was good quality so there weren't any frequencies that I wanted to remove. I only had to remove some low-end frequency when I pitched the melody an octave lower, so it did not clash with the 808s and kick. I also added a touch of reverb just to make it sit in the background better. What I love most about melodic loops in hip-hop/grime music is how versatile they can be. From the main melody I was able to create a melody an octave lower and higher and also reverse the melody in 3 different octaves. This enables you to take the listener on a journey instead of them listening to one 4 bar loop, in one octave, repeatedly. For the 808s, creating a good bounce was imperative for this track to work, it is essentially the backbone of the whole beat. As stated by the Verge (2017), The 808 became a fixture in hip-hop culture, not only as a tool for producers but as a defining sound of the genre. In order to achieve a bounce, I turned the delay, attack, decay, sustain and release all the way down and turned the hold all the way up. This allowed me to have complete control of the 808s and create the bounce necessary for a good quality grime/hip-hop beat. I also added a few 808s glides to further add to the bounce and to make the progression sound more interesting. To make the 808s hit heavy, I added a touch of bass boost, which increased its frequencies in the low-end. For the drum pattern, the priority was ensuring that it hit hard. This means low-frequency kicks and a hard-hitting clap. I side-chained the kick to the 808s so when it hit it did not clash with the 808s. I also included a reversed kick layered with the main kick as this was done in the

song Vossi Bop, this stood out to me because it's something I had not heard on a grime/hip-hop track before. I also developed a 2-step hi-hat pattern with varying velocities to further add to the bounce of the song. The main priority for the drums, was ensuring it made the listeners head knock, through aggressive hitting programmed drums and bounce.

The third track is performed by Nigerian singer, rapper, songwriter and director Osayaba Andrew Ize-Iyamu. Professionally known as Santi. The song is titled Sparky and it was produced by Odunsi (The Engine). Both the original track and reference track has a time signature count of 4/4. Santi is a major player in Nigeria's alternative scene, a music-centric movement that is at once alternative and yet incredibly popular (GQ Magazine 2019). This genre of music can be named as alternative afro-pop. Afro-pop is an umbrella term for contemporary pop music made in West Africa, that initially developed in Nigeria, Ghana and the UK in the 2000s and 2010s (Wikipedia). Afro-pop takes influences from a diverse range of genres, such as British house music, hip-hop, dancehall, soca and R&B. Afro-pop is typically known for its signature electronic (programmed) driving drum beat rhythms. The drum pattern is more than just a complimentary part to the melody, but acts as a major part of the song, often taking a lead role in the song. The BPM is usually set at between 90-110, which creates a nice tempo to develop a drum pattern with a good swing/bounce. Sparky encompasses a lot of what you would expect from a typical afro-pop song. The production is driven by a catchy rhythmic snare pattern with timely placed kicks which makes it easy for the songwriter to develop their own melodies. However, what makes this song stand out to me is that even though it's in a minor key, it still gives me a somewhat happy/cheerful feeling. I believe this is achieved through the sound selection of the chord progression. The sound is very pleasant to the ear and invites the songwriter to laydown smooth/relaxed lyrics within the first 4 bars. As stated by Amplifon (2018) sound is capable of producing some of the strongest emotional reactions in humans. Signifying the importance of sound selection. The bassline on this song is very complimentary to the chords and the singer's melodies. It does not overpower the singer nor the chords, but its presence can still be felt. As genres and subgenres are basically defined by their sound, my initial priority when creating the reference track was sound selection. The beat for the song Sparky is quite minimalistic without a lot of complex melodies or sounds. I picked two ambient pads and layered them on top of each other to make the chords feel full. My intention was to make it feel like the main chord progression was one sound. This was achieved through rendering the two pads into a wav file. I removed most of the low end from the chord progression to leave space for the kick and bassline and removed some high-end so there could be room for the songwriter. I played the chords in D# Minor and set the tempo at 100BPM. I felt it was important to not sway from the tempo and key of the original track as that would immediately take away from the vibe it created (*Please read the last sentence of this paragraph for my lack of reference for the key and BPM for the track Sparky*). My next focus was the drum pattern. As previously mentioned, the driving force of the drum pattern in the song Sparky was the snare pattern. I developed an up-tempo snare pattern with a lot of swing and then layered it with another snare in parts so it could have more of an impact when it hit. With the snare pattern established, I placed a simple kick pattern in the pockets left by the snare, this further contributed to the bounce of the song. I added a few percussion elements to make the drum pattern more cheerful and to add to the bounce of the song. As stated by Wonder of Sound (2015), in early western cultures, percussion was used to stir the spirit and served as morale boosters. The drum pattern established the rhythm for the song and provided a solid foundation for a songwriter to develop their own melodies. My next focus was the bassline. I used a hybrid synth bass/808s, as that is what is predominately heard in a lot of afro-pop songs, including the song Sparky. It was important for me to get the timing of the bass right. Typically, basslines start on the 1 count, however, for the song sparky the bassline doesn't do this. For my reference track, I made the bassline start between the 2-3 count, further contributing to the bounce of the song. As previously mentioned, I did not want the bassline to be overpowering but I wanted its presence felt. This was achieved through cutting out most of the high-end, boosting the low end by a small amount and adding a bit of compression so the levels were consistent for every note. The last thing for this reference track was sprinkling a counter melody in sections of the track. This was done to further contribute to the ambience, feel of the song and to imitate the structure to a degree. I removed all of the low end and some of the middle for this melody as I wanted the high-end textures to stand out when it was playing, and I did not want the frequency to

clash with the main chord progression. I also added a pan effect, so it did not take up space in the mix. Lastly, I added a reverb to make it feel somewhat distant so it did not clash with the chord progression. *(Please note, I was not able to find an accurate description of the BPM or Key of this song. My usual source: "Tunebat.com" provided incorrect information. Therefore, I figured out the key and BPM myself.)*

In conclusion, I believe this essay demonstrates how we as creators, can use songs as a fuel for inspiration to create our own product. In music, I believe nothing is net new. Every sound, melody and idea have a source. I have thoroughly explained how the genres and songs mentioned above inspired my thought process into making these reference tracks. From how it made me feel, the musical theory, production/mixing techniques and other musical decisions made.

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