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Track One Analysis – Comfortably Numb by Pink Floyd

Comfortably Numb is from the concept album, The Wall. Released in 1979, by progressive rock band Pink Floyd. Progressive rock aimed:

‘to bring new and expanded musical ideas into rock and roll. These included formal structures from European classical music (such as the Suite), virtuosic playing, concept albums with stories and interlinked songs, and new instrumentation, particularly the use of new keyboards and synthesizers.’ (Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, 2023)

A concept album is written so that all songs, ‘... relate to a single idea’. (Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, 2023) Pink Floyd’s, The Wall, epitomises this description; the theme of the album is described on the website, thewallanalysis.com (2016):

‘The Wall traces the life of the fictional protagonist, Pink Floyd, from his boyhood days in post-World-War-II England to his self-imposed isolation as a world-renowned rock star, leading to a climax that is as cathartic as it is destructive.’

Comfortably Numb appears on the third side of the vinyl album, The Wall. It refers to Roger Waters experience of feeling ill as a child but later experiencing similar symptoms as an adult where he was, ‘detached from reality.’ (Song Facts, 2023)

The song is written in 4/4 with a tempo marking of 65 bpm. The structure of Comfortably Numb functions around a verse, pre chorus and chorus pattern. The verses are built on falling Bm, A, G, (passing F#) to Em chords with a melodic line based on the natural minor scale. The pre chorus switches to the relative major tonality (D) and introduces D, A, C and G chords. The use of C natural indicates the introduction of the D Mixolydian mode. The chorus, again based upon major chords, introduces and ends with the line, I have become comfortably numb. Between these two vocal lines sits a melodic guitar solo.

Sonically, the verses of Comfortably Numb are driven by the bass guitar and drum kit, there is a very distinct snare, quite high in the mix. Added to the drum and bass are a selection of swirling synths with added delay. The pre chorus retains the bass and drum kit but introduces orchestral string-based arpeggio ideas. An acoustic guitar can be heard in chorus, low in the mix, before reaching the overdriven guitar solo.

To produce my track, You Don’t Know, it was my intention to take key elements of Comfortably Numb without making an obvious replica of such an iconic rock track. Out of the three tracks I have written/produced, I think this proved to be the most challenging in achieving a good arrangement. While establishing a pallet of sounds for the track, I kept in mind the four basic factors described by Don Sebesky in his book, Contemporary Arranger (location 71, 1994) which are Balance, Economy, Focus and Variety.

I have written in 4/4, with a 75bpm tempo mark, a verse, chorus and break style structure which Paul Whalley (2023) describes in the Tileyard Composing and Arranging resources as ABC. The verses are based on a falling Bm, A, G, F#m chord pattern with the pre chorus initially retaining a minor tonality but eventually shifting to a major; this sets up the chorus pattern, D A Bm G.

I have adopted similar instrumentation to the verses of Comfortably Numb and based the ideas upon a drum kit and bass. The two instruments are supplemented with a range of swelling synths. To add momentum to the synths, I have applied volume swells and shifts in panning from left to right. The

start of the prechorus is also based around a drum and bass ideas with slightly more aggressive sounding synths. To end the prechorus and set up for the chorus, I decided the dynamics of the music needed to drop and felt simple block piano chords were appropriate. The chorus reintroduces the drum kit and bass along with an acoustic guitar, situated fairly low in the mix. The acoustic guitar was recorded using the DI technique:

‘DI is now used because it either makes the instrument sound better (as in the case of electric keyboards) or is just easier and faster.’ (Owsinski, B. pg. 141, 2023)

The acoustic guitar was deliberately panned in the mix to the middle of each side. In the first full chorus, I introduced two crunchy electric guitar tracks; one panned hard left and one hard right. The crunchy electric guitars were EQ’d so that only the higher frequencies were present. This helped them cut through the mix and also remove the muddy lower end. I picked this idea up from Bobby Owsinski (pg. 469, 2023):

‘To make our example work in the mix, one guitar would occupy more of a higher-frequency register, while the other would be in a lower register.’

The crunchy guitar tracks were channelled through a single BUS with a stereo expander. I introduced this in the chorus to make the overall track feel wider.

The introduction of the song uses a string hook line, also occurring after the first and second chorus. As Don Sebesky explains (location 689 – 693, 1994), ‘...strings are more difficult to orchestrate effectively than any other instrumental group’ and it certainly took some time to feel satisfied with their sound in the track. I used East West Hollywood String samples with the recommendation from the book Contemporary Arranger (Sebesky, D. 1994, location 1187 – 1188) which states, ‘Violins - Best results when used in the high register on a simple, single note melodic line.’

As there are three key structural elements to the track: verse, prechorus and chorus. It was quite challenging to stitch each part together without a section sounding out of place. As Paul Whalley (2023) describes in the Tileyard Composing and Arranging resources, a technique to glue parts together is by having a hook line repeat through the song. I opted to use a repeated bass line idea and it can be heard through each part of the track. Although the bass line glues the song together, I wanted to retain a decent level of listener interest for each section and referred to Don Sebesky (2023) in his explanation:

‘...in an arrangement, there is an element which is, temporarily at least, more important than any other; it becomes the center of focus. It may be a vocal or instrumental soloist, a section of the ensemble (saxes, trombones, strings) or the whole ensemble itself. The human ear is capable of integrating a given input and unconsciously assigning varying degrees of importance to several separate aural elements. There are limits to this capability, however. Improper focus can lead to confusion on the part of the listener-losing his interest.’

I adapted the mix to ensure the focus was the vocal line (where performing) and then at appropriate break sections, ensure the melody playing instruments stood out. So, strings at the break and the overdrive guitar at the solo.

I recorded several vocal takes using an AKG 120 condenser mic with the intention it would record a more detailed performance. While recording the vocal lines, I accidentally ran a duplicate vocal line and it added an element of depth to the track. I decided that the doubled lead vocal line sat well in the mix and suited the nature of the track. The vocals were treated with light compression to smooth out

the dynamic range, a de-esser plugin and a harmonic exciter were also used to enhance the vocal sound.

Once I had the core structure and sound pallet in place for You Don't Know, I explored different structural elements and sounds. I wanted to see if I could make the track sound stylistically more progressive rock or in contrast, lean towards more of a pop style arrangement. My concern with leaning towards a progressive rock feel was that:

‘During its long history Prog has generated a certain level of conflict between journalist and critics who describe the style as bloated and self-indulgent...’ (Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, 2023)

I believe that I have struck a secure balance between pop music and progressive rock. However, in contrast there is the potential that I have watered down the elements of progressive rock and lost the impact of the track. The guitar solo in this track requires work to achieve a more melodic feel.

Track Two Analysis – Blinding Lights by The Weeknd

Blinding Lights is an upbeat synth pop track, taken from The Weeknd album, *Afterhours*. The Weeknd, is the artist name adopted by Abel Makkonen Tesfaye, a Canadian singer and songwriter (Marsh, 2021). Max Martin coproduced the track, Martin has written or cowritten over 22 number one hits, with artists including Britney Spears and Taylor Swift.

The focal point of Martin's work is the melody as Savan Kotecha explains in his 2012 TIME interview:

"We work melody first. That's Max Martin's school," Kotecha says. "We'll spend days, sometimes weeks, challenging the melody. The goal is to make it sound like anyone can do this, but it's actually very difficult. In Sweden, you don't do anything until you do it right. I was One Direction's vocal coach on The X Factor, so I know their voices better than almost anyone. We were able to shape melodies around their tones..."

Blinding Lights has been influenced heavily by 80s and 90s music:

"The opening drumbeat is a DeLorean back to Michael Jackson's "Beat It. The amphetamine synth conjures fond memories of leopard-print-era Rod Stewart's "Young Turks" — or maybe that other guy with the avian hairdo, Mike Score from A Flock of Seagulls? And isn't that spooky B-movie organ from Rockwell's "Somebody's Watching Me"? (Billboard, 2020)

However, despite its nod to 1980's music, the track was designed to bring about a new sound. Award winning sound engineer Ghenea explains in his Variety interview (2020), "It was crossing two worlds to make something new that fits today, sonically," I believe that Blinding Lights is a great example of an extremely successful pop song, which on the surface appears relatively simple in its elements but takes incredible skill to write and produce.

The song is based around a four-chord pattern of Fm, Cm, Eb and Bb which is repeated through a melodic synth hook line, verse, prechorus and chorus. The chords are played across two bars which ensures, that despite the track having an upbeat tempo, the song doesn't feel rushed - rather driven. This whole pattern is then repeated with a bridge section and final chorus.

Written in 4/4, the tempo of the track is higher than we would perhaps expect to see in a typical pop song, at 170bpm; compared to the current top two chart songs (Official Charts, 2023), Flowers by Miley Cyrus with tempo marking of 118bpm (Cyrus et al., 2023) and Ed Sheeran's latest release, Eyes Closed runs at 108bpm (Sheeran et al., 2023). A combination of the tempo and kick – snare drum pattern, drive the track forward and are one of the identifying features of the track.

Given the upbeat tempo and sweet vocal tone of Tesfaye's voice, instrumentation in the verse doesn't need to be complex and a synthesized arpeggio idea accompanies with a distorted root bass note, heard every two bars. An additional percussive line, similar sounding to a wooden block, is introduced halfway through the verse in preparation for the prechorus. The chorus adds a vocal choir-based synth layer and a more pronounced bassline.

To write my song, Fire in my Veins, I began by duplicating the core elements of Blinding Lights i.e. the tempo, chords progression, drum pattern and synth sounds. However, it became obvious quite quickly that unless I introduced my own flavour to the track, it would sound very much like I had 'literally just copied Blinding Lights.

I initially wrote a four-chord verse progression using my acoustic guitar of Dm, Bb, C and Am. This pattern worked well but I felt it needed to 'go somewhere else' and added a potential chorus pattern of Bb, C, F and Dm followed by Bb, C, Dm and C. I took this progression and input a synth based MIDI track, inspired by Blinding Lights. While playing the 4/4 progression on my acoustic guitar I had developed a rhythmic strumming pattern which didn't really work when input into the synth part. So, I articulated this through the bass line, this gives the track better momentum. As I already had a chord progression and bassline in place, I utilised XO Drums to find an appropriate MIDI drum track.

In terms of structure, I have based the track loosely on the Blinding Lights idea of a verse, prechorus, chorus, synth break and used a verse, chorus, guitar hook line. The chorus chord pattern in Fire in My Veins successfully leads the track back to the beginning of the verse chord pattern with a sense of punctuation. The punctuation worked really well in introducing the guitar hook line.

To record the electric guitar on this track I used the direct input method through an AXE I/O guitar interface, this would then allow me to edit the audio more easily and alter the amplifier effects. I took this technique from Bobby Owsinski's, *The Recording Engineer's Handbook* (pg. 473, 2023):

Distorted electric guitar is notoriously difficult to edit, since it's difficult to see the attacks and releases of notes and phrases. A great way to make it easier to see the potential edit points is to always record a direct track along with the amplifier mic or amp emulator track.

I recorded the vocals in this track using the same techniques as You Don't Know but have just one vocal line in the verse patterns. To finalise the track, I applied a small level of reverb which helped glue the individual parts together. There are certainly still elements to improve on this track, including the vocal and guitar hook melody line.

Track Three Analysis – Always Remember Us This Way by Lady Gaga

The third song I have chosen to analyse is Always Remember Us This Way, performed by Lady Gaga, in the film A Star is Born. The song was written by Lady Gaga, Natalie Hemby, Hillary Lindsey, and Lori McKenna, and produced by Dave Cobb. I have selected this song as a contrast to the two previous which both include synthesised elements. The original version of Always Remember Us This Way was performed on acoustic instruments as described by Brooke Bajgrowicz on Billboard.com (2018):

“The song is a piano-driven country ballad, which is "pushed along" by Gaga's raw, powerful vocals. Following the first verse being on piano, the guitars and drums kick in from the second verse and Gaga's vocals build up to the final chorus uttering the lines, "

My intention through exploring this track was to try and recreate the acoustic instrument sound using virtual instruments in Logic Pro. I also wanted to take a more economical, perhaps simple, approach to the sonics of a track and omit the obvious use of synthesisers.

I began by setting up a new project in Logic Pro with an adaptive tempo in 4/4. I then imported the original audio track of Always Remember Us This Way into the project, this provided me with a human feeling tempo track (rather than having a set tempo throughout the song). I input the same chord progression as the original track using East West Piano Samples and tried to match the voicings:

Try to be aware of harmonic substitutions and use them whenever you feel the need for a little lift in a musical phrase. (Sebesky, D. location 128, 1994)

The piano felt mechanical, so I added MIDI pedal instructions and used the ‘humanise’ MIDI function on Logic to slightly adjust timing and velocity of the notes.

To create a bass line, I selected the most natural sounding virtual bass instrument in the East West library. I wanted to match the bass timing to the piano part, as this leads the performance – particularly before the drums come in. I set the piano track to create a groove template and then matched the bassline rhythm to it. I tracked the drums using East West drum samples by replicating the original track. To match the timbre of the drums on the original track, I sifted through snare and kick sounds in the sound library.

I recorded a vocal line with my own lyrics, based on the original melody line, of Always Remember Us This Way. To enhance the higher range vocal parts of the track, I doubled them and panned them off centre. I tracked two rhythmically differing acoustic guitar parts designed to fill the spaces on the recording, the acoustic guitars were recorded using direct input method.

To complete this track, I added larger sounding reverb. This was to suggest a performance in a larger venue (similar to the film version).

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