

An Analysis of Power Ballads, Hip-hop and Pop

MA Commercial Music Producer

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Abbreviations page

One Foot in Front of the Other – OFIFOTO

An Analysis of Power Ballads, Hip-hop and Pop Music

1.0 Introduction

Throughout this essay I will be discussing and analysing how I created three tracks under the genres of power ballads, pop, and hip-hop. As I am an artist, songwriter and producer I chose to write and produce the tracks myself. I chose these three genres, as although pop is my comfort zone I felt the other two would stretch my production and writing skills. As a female artist I acknowledge the importance of being able to write and produce. Griff, whose track I use as a reference, states that “females are rarely considered as being a producer, instead the industry is built of men selling female pop artists” (Burgam, 2021). Burgam (2021) states only 3% of music producers were women in the top UK 100 charts.

2.0 Defining Characteristics of Genres

Cambridge Dictionary (2021) defines power ballads as slow love songs sung with a lot of emotion. Pop is defined by it’s strong beat created with electronic equipment, the song itself is easy to listen to and remember. Finally, hip-hop is described as music in which words are spoken rather than sung often around the subject of politics or society. My 3 reference tracks are “Easy On Me” by Adele, “One Foot in front Of The Other” by Griff, and “Ottolenghi” by Loyle Carner.

3.0 Track 1: Power Ballads

3.1 Production Techniques

For my first track I chose to produce a power ballad named “Don’t Blame Me”, inspired by Adele’s track “Easy On Me” produced by Greg Kurstin. Johnson (2021) describes ballads as “songs with love struck melodies”. Johnson (2021) explains defining characters of power ballads are slow in tempo with a musical arrangement that emphasises the songs melody and harmonies. “Easy On Me” conforms to the musical genre of a power ballad. It is a slow love song overflowing with emotion. Tunebat (2021) states it has a tempo of 71 and is in F Major with the time signature of 4.

When producing “Don’t Blame Me” I researched Greg Kurstin’s production techniques (Pensado’s Place, 2016). He speaks of the importance of not getting in the way of the vocals. It is better to filter things down and go with the bare minimum instead of too much. Paul Epworth who produced Adele’s tracks such as “Rolling In The Deep”, states how when it

comes to a power ballad it's more important for the vocalist to feel the song (Mix With the Masters, 2019). Instead of processing and adding a lot of effects to the vocals they are kept very minimal. I kept this in mind when recording and producing Don't Blame Me.

Compiling is a method that will be used in production across all genres. Neil (2015) explains how compiling is a method used by producers, going through multiple takes of the vocal recording to pick out the best ones which are then merged together leading to one smooth take. This is standard practice in the recording industry and one that would be used on a power ballad.

When focussing on vocals, other production techniques used in power ballads are the use of noise gate, de-essing and tuning. Most vocals in popular music will have been tuned. McAllister (2018) explains how vocal tuning is used in most music production to smoothen out any rough takes. Vocal tuning has been around since 1997 and is widely accepted as a common method of production.

3.2 Reflective Analysis

Through acknowledging and analysing these methods of production I used them to assist my production on "Don't Blame Me" to ensure I stayed in line with the genre of power ballads.

When it came to the tempo and arrangement of "Don't Blame Me" I ensured to keep the tempo slow at 115 bpm in the key of F# major with a simple musical arrangement consisting of only piano and vocals, allowing space for the vocals and melodies to shine through. "Easy On Me" starts with a simple piano introduction before the pure vocals cut through with little reverb (Adele, 2021). I used this technique when producing "Don't Blame Me" to ensure it conformed to the genre of power ballads. I used the Logic Pro X Steinway Grand Piano preset for the keys.

Little effects are added to the vocal of "Easy On Me" as Greg Kurstin mentions (Pensado's Place, 2021). I chose to use a small amount of reverb on my main vocal using the Logic Pro X reverb effect Space Designer, Short Ambience' layered with Space Designers Vocal Plate Reverb. I added wetter reverb to the backing vocals to make them feel further away.

I used the standard practice of compiling as Neal (2015) suggests, to ensure I captured the best vocal takes possible. I believe I did this successfully as the vocal sounds like one natural full take which was my intention. In terms of tuning I used the Pitch Correction plug-in in Logic Pro X allowing me to subtly tune the vocals. I found this effect to be subtle enough so the

vocals sounded professional but human instead of heavily auto-tuned. Upon reflection next time I would use the plug-in Melodyne to allow me to fine-tune the vocal more.

An additional musical decision I made was adding harmonies around the main vocal even though “Easy On Me” doesn’t have this. I felt they were necessary to lift the production surrounding “Don’t Blame Me” whilst subtly keeping the listener engaged. McVey (2020) supports this idea explaining how backing vocals can assist in influencing a songs meaning and feel. Alongside harmonies another production technique I used was doubling the vocals in the chorus. McVey (2020) supports the use of this technique stating that doubling any vocal adds depth, making them sound thicker.

I kept the production elements minimal, intentionally keeping in mind Greg Kurstin’s technique of not getting in the way of the vocals. I believe I succeeded in this part of the production as the lyrics and vocals of “Don’t Blame Me” are undeniably the section in the production that stands out.

Finally, I used the technique of quantising some of the keys. Trumm (2020) explains how quantising is making something rhythmically imprecise become precise. It is not always necessary when trying to keep the feel of something. I purposefully did not quantise all of the keys. I wanted to allow room for the emotional human feel power ballads have. Paul Epworth (Mix With the Masters, 2019) supports this idea when speaking about the charm being in the imperfections of production. I kept this in mind when producing “Don’t Blame Me” and believe I successfully executed it. “Don’t Blame Me” also conforms to the power ballad musical genre due to the subject matter of heartbreak.

4.0 Track 2: Hip-hop

4.1 Production Techniques

My second track “Sick in Their Brain” comes under the musical genre of hip-hop inspired by Loyle Carner’s “Ottolenghi” produced by Jordan Rakei. Before starting on my hip-hop production I researched the methodology used. Hip-hop tempo is often around 85-95 bpm (Kody 2021). “Ottolenghi” tempo is 95 bpm, in the key of G major with the time signature of 4 (Songdata, 2021). “Ottolenghi” fits the musical genre of hip-hop. It is more spoken word than singing throughout with the subject focusing more on politics and society.

In terms of the arrangement, Jordan Rakei uses samples, an e-piano, looping the beat and the use of spoken word and singing together. The production in this track involves the use of

sampling real life recordings. This inspired me to experiment with samples in my production on “Sick in Their Brain”.

“Ottolenghi” starts off with one synth pad that pulses throughout the track alongside delicate e-piano melodies accompanying Loyle’s vocal. There is what seems to be a sample of someone typing on their phone at the beginning and a sample of someone talking at the end. The beat comes in at 0.30 and remains throughout the song keeping momentum, apart from one drop down section in the second chorus. Overall the production arrangement is kept minimal with little keys movement to allow the vocals to come through and the lyrics are heard.

The structure of “Ottolenghi” is kept simple with two verses, two choruses and a double chorus at the end as the outro. For the chorus Jordan Rakei sings the hook breaking up Loyle’s rap in the verses. I found this type of arrangement effective as it keeps the listener engaged so I intentionally imitated this technique whilst applying my own style with harmonies. The rap vocals are kept dry, up close and personal giving an intimate feel, contrasting with the sung vocals being more spacious with reverb and layers to them. Jordan Rakei’s vocal hook remains laid back and mellow, fitting with the soothing energy of Loyle Carner’s verses.

I kept Jordan Rakei’s arrangement in mind and made use of the Vintage E-Piano Wurlitzer preset in Logic Pro X. I used another layer of the Wurlitzer to add in a small piano melody hook that I layered with a synth sample from Splice. I made the musical decision of choosing the sound of a Wurlitzer as it sounded vintage and innocent to me.

4.2 Reflective Analysis

Scuillio (2018) states hip-hop lyrics are often very descriptive and introspective. I tried to imitate this when writing and producing my track. At the end of “Ottolenghi” there is a sample of what sounds like a member of the public speaking. Seydel (2016) explains how sampling is very common in hip-hop. I used the technique of vocal sampling throughout my track. I sample a homeless man on the bus in West London talking about how “people on earth are sick in their brain”. His introspective words sounded like he was already speaking to a rhythm. I shaped “Sick in Their Brain’s” narrative around the words of the homeless man, including the production, using parts of the sample from the bus within the production, such as the bell.

Although hip-hop bpm averages around 85-95 bpm (Kody, 2021), I used a bpm of 107 in order to fit the sample of the homeless man talking. On reflection I believe I still managed to keep the laid back hip-hop feel to my track despite the tempo being slightly faster.

In order to create the structure of my track I first picked out the parts of the sample I wanted to use from the man on the bus. I used the Scissor Tool in Logic Pro to cut up the 5-minute recording of the bus journey and pick out the most inspiring parts. I didn't change the speed of his speech as I intended on arranging around his original flow.

I took inspiration from the simplicity of the structure of "Ottolenghi" and followed a similar arrangement with a verse, chorus, verse, chorus, and outro. My intention was to make it sound like it was a duet with the singer and the homeless man together so I intertwined his vocal alongside mine to create a call and response. I kept the spoken word vocal as dry as possible, contrasting with the chorus vocal that I tuned with Pitch Correction and added reverb using Space Designer. Jordan Rakei's vocal on Ottolenghi was not as dry as Loyle Carner's, creating an impactful contrast. Creating my structure like this enabled my track to conform to the genre of hip-hop. "Ottolenghi" consists of subtle harmonies in Jordan Rakei's hook however I made the musical decision to layer my harmonies and adlibs throughout my entire track to add character whilst keeping within the hip-hop genre.

I layered the track with white noise throughout to help the whole track blend in alongside the background noise of the bus sample. I used white noise intentionally to give the production a more calming lullaby feel to it. Pacheco (2020) explains people listen to white noise when they are trying to fall asleep. This concept intertwines and mirrors the lyrics in the chorus focussing around not being able to sleep. This production choice was made with artistic intention and I believe works well in the track.

Hahn (2018) explains the EQ tool is used to manipulate the frequency content of a mix. I manipulated the vocal sample using the Channel EQ Strip in Logic Pro. This enables the vocal to clearly cut through by taking out a lot of the background high-end noise. Alongside this I layered a clearer version of the vocal underneath. I used the plug-in iZotope RX8 to reduce the background noise in the sample. Thornton (2020) explains iZotope RX8 is a noise reduction plug-in used to eliminate noise within audio files such as hums, clicks, hisses and crackles. I layered both sample tracks together as I wanted some of the background noise of the bus to play a role in part of the production whilst being able to hear the speech. I turned up the gain on the bell within the sample, as I wanted it to play a role in the percussion. I also

left the bus destination announcement in at the end with the intention of creating imagery of London. Loyle Carner's tracks feel similar and very British with his accent from South London. This was a musical decision I chose based on the reference track "Ottolenghi" sounding personal with the use of samples, conforming to the musical genre of hip-hop.

5.0 Track 3: Pop

5.1 Production Techniques

I based my third track "Little Bit Lonely" off pop artist Griff's One Foot in Front of the Other (OFIFOTO) written and produced by Griff herself. I was inspired by the fact she produced and wrote the entire track on her own so I decided to take on the challenge.

Bulmer (2021) describes Griff's production as "full of crisp production, clear and emotive vocals." I kept this in mind when producing "Little Bit Lonely" with the intention to make the production as clear and as polished as possible with the help of pitch correction, quantising, EQing, comping and more. Savage (2020) reports pop music is often around 120 bpm. Musictax (2021) states Griff's track is 112 bpm, in the key F# Major.

Both OFIFOTO and "Little Bit Lonely" conform to the musical genre of pop as they have a strong beat and use electronic equipment with catchy hooks and lyrics. Through analysing OFIFOTO as a reference track I could hear Griff uses production techniques such as reverb on the synths, manipulating vocals to turn them into vocal chops, stabbing chords on loop, harmonies and doubling vocals in the chorus. As well as her vocal melodies she adds hooks within the production, such as a synth pad playing another hook throughout the song. In terms of structure OFIFOTO is extremely repetitive, again enhancing the hooks. The structure consists of verse 1, pre-chorus and chorus coming in fast at 0.40. Verse 2 is then almost the exact same as verse 1 and the rest repeats with a double chorus adding to the repetition and hook. Vogue (2021) interviews Adele where she states the more hooks the better, showing this is an effective technique in pop music.

Another production technique used is panning to help add depth to the production. Panning enables the producer to use many layered vocals. The use of panning enables them to sound less crowded by being panned left and right. Seydel (2016) speaks about how lead vocals should always be panned in the centre with the backing vocals and duplicate layers panned either side to allow space within the mix. Griff does this within her vocal production so I ensured I used this production technique.

5.2 Reflective Analysis

Through analysing Griff's structure and pop music in general, I made sure my chorus also came in at 0.40. Huff (2021) speaks about the importance of arrangement in pop music ensuring it grabs and holds the listeners attention. Therefore I put the harmony layers in straight away into the first pre-chorus like in OFIFOTO. I believe both OFIFOTO and "Little Bit Lonely" conform to the musical genre of pop as they both consist of strong beats, the use of electronic equipment filled and catchy melodies making them easy to remember.

Taking into account Griff's production techniques I made sure to make my production arrangement minimal but impactful enough to feel like a pop song. I used 5 main elements; a bass loop, the beat, violas, a Juno synth, and vocals. The track starts with just a vocal chop, a bass loop and finger snaps inspired by how Griff starts OFIFOTO with a synth and finger snaps. In order to build the production in the chorus I added a riser sample from Splice, the bass loop, extra vocal chops and Juno synth chords layered with Logic Pro's Viola preset. I took inspiration from the reverb on Griff's synth and added Space Designer reverb to the violas to make them sound more electronic. I chose to layer the chorus with violas as they are becoming increasingly popular in pop music, used in tracks for Dua Lipa (2020) and Raye (2020). Through using all these elements I believe "Little Bit Lonely" conforms to the musical genre of pop. Johnson and Poyser (2000) talk about how less is more when it comes to good pop arrangements. Most pop songs don't contain a huge number of parts. What is more important is the use of hooks and repetition, which I believe I executed well.

Griff uses what sounds like a vocal chop intertwined throughout her production. Bresnahan (2016) explains vocal chops are sections of vowels that act as a melodic element within the production. This inspired me to use my vocal in more creative ways. I used vocal chops at the start of the track and throughout the chorus to add to the electronic feel. During the break going into the second verse I used the sound of my breath as part of the production and ran it through Logic Pro's 'Tube Vocal' preset to add a different sound in the mix. I believe my vocal arrangement and production conform to the genre of pop through the use of layering, pitch correction, manipulation of Channel EQ, and compression. I used the Logic Pro presets 'Natural Vocal' and 'Telephone Vocal' making the vocal sound polished, aligning with the typical standards of pop production.

Hoffman (2018) explains how auto-tune can be used in a subtle way to simply assist the vocalists' performance as well as being used in a more creative way. Griff uses auto-tune as

an artistic feature fading in and out of the verses whilst layering her vocals in the pre-chorus and chorus with doubles and harmonies to create an anthemic feel. I chose to use the Logic Pro preset of 'Telephone Vocal' for my adlibs to add texture to the backing vocals rather than auto-tune. This was my own additional musical decision as I felt it fit the energy of my track better than the use of auto-tune. Huff (2021) speaks about how extra vocal adlibs at the end can help the chorus feel huge. I believe my adlibs did this. Upon reflection, in the future I would like to experiment more with the use of vocoders in my vocal production.

6.0 Conclusion

Through producing my three tracks and analysing three different genres I discovered although structurally and lyrically all genres were different, there is a common thread of production techniques being used throughout. Through my reflective analysis I believe my three tracks conformed to each musical genre. Moving forward I would like to push myself further musically by producing for others instead of using my own vocal, whilst being more experimental with my production techniques.

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