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Element 2 - Essay

Music as an art form has accompanied humankind for thousands of years and has been developing as society evolved. New inventions in one field of technology also lead to change in the way music was created, played, performed and listened to. From the printing press, to the first computers; the way music was created always modified and transformed. Consequently a variety of genres emerged whenever a change occurred in developments of sound creation. From the hundreds of genres and subgenres that exist, I have decided to pick three that have risen in popularity in the last decades. Namely drum and bass, disco and hip hop music, which I will analyze in the following text. This analysis will look at the characteristics of each genre and compare them to my own original compositions on the basis of music theory and production techniques.

Drum and Bass

Drum and bass often also referred to as ‘dnb’ is an electronic music genre that first emerged in the 1990s in England (Gilman 2002). It is usually seen as an underground genre, however, with the popularity of certain tracks such as “Waiting All Night” by Rudimental or the rise of the Australian drum and bass band Pendulum, the genre flourished and reached hundreds of millions of listeners worldwide. With this growing popularity the genre developed, and eventually started to use vocals and lyrical themes that were pop driven, more extensively. The songs that I have chosen to analyze and the original track that I have created follow this more popular approach to the genre. Here vocals play a more central role, which does not mean that the characteristic breakbeats and deep basses that define the genre are not used. On the contrary, it is a mixture of popular music themes and signature drum and bass sounds. The two main references were “Runnin’ (Lose It All)” by Naughty Boy featuring singers Beyoncé and Arrow Benjamin, and “Work It Out” by Netsky featuring Digital Farm Animals.

Although Naughty Boy’s song is not in the classical 160 to 180 beats per minute range that drum and bass usually operates in, it is full of characteristic elements of the genre. From the typical

breakbeat to the deep bass that enters in the chorus, it is a perfect example of how well drum and bass works with extremely popular themes of music. Netsky's "Work It Out" and my song "Falling Deeper" on the other hand, have the respective beats per minute of 172 and 170, which is the usual tempo of the genre. All three songs have a 4/4 time signature and have close to the same song length: 3:18 ("Work It Out"), 3:23 ("Falling Deeper"), 3:33 ("Runnin' (Lost It All)"). Arrangement wise the songs of the genre, as well as the songs used in this analysis, usually start with an intro and from there move into a verse, a pre chorus and a chorus, following a quite straightforward structure (Fig.1a.). However, in the case of drum and bass, the pre choruses are often referred to as buildups by producers from the community. As the word already unveils, this section of the song builds up towards the energetic chorus or drop, which is the main section of each drum and bass song. The drop is often also part of the song that takes up most of the time in each track, this is especially evident in "Work It Out" where approximately half of the song is simply the chorus.

The main element of each of the songs in the genre is the signature breakbeat rhythm (Broyer 2011). In all three songs this breakbeat comes in when the drop starts, underlining again that the chorus is the central part of the song. In "Runnin' (Lose It All)", Naughty Boy is using a drum loop sample layered with single drum samples, which is typical for the genre, as most of the first drum and bass songs used sampled drum loops from other tracks which were speeded up to 160 to 180 beats per minute. On the other hand, in "Work It Out" and the original track that I created, "Falling Deeper", the drums are programmed rather than sampled, which is a technique that is more often used ever since technology allowed it. The kick in 'dnb' plays on the one and slightly before the three, whereas the snare falls on the two and four in a 4/4 time signature (Fig.3.). At a tempo of 170 bpm, this rather simple drum pattern creates the iconic groove that rave heads have been dancing to for decades. The only disadvantage to having a signature drum pattern is that it is not accepted to move away from it in the chorus. A lot of songs in the genre follow and vary between different drum patterns throughout the song but it is essential that the drop is following its iconic movement.

The main instruments in the reference songs are a piano, a guitar and a deep bass that joins in the chorus. The piano in all songs plays throughout the whole song and rarely changes its chord progression. In “Runnin’ (Lose It All)”, which was written in F sharp major, the only variation happens at the end of each chorus and outro; basically whenever “if I lose myself I lose it all” is sung. In this case the progression switches from the main chords Em G D A to Bm F#m D G. The song “Work It Out”, which was written in B minor, barely has a change in the chord progression, it follows A Bm D G in the verses and switches to A Bm F#m G in the pre choruses and choruses. My song “Falling Deeper”, which was written in A minor, follows the same chord structure throughout the whole song following Bb C G6 G. All of the songs are accompanied by a guitar that enters in the pre chorus or the second verse, usually playing licks in the background or fast rhythmic patterns that give a sense of urgency.

In the drop a ‘dnb’ track starts to shine; here the producer can explore the wildest ideas and either make or break a song. In the reference tracks that I picked the chorus is energetic and filled with a lot of instruments, drums, FX elements and vocals. Here all the elements of the track come together and offer a huge and energetic sound palette. All three songs blossom into a euphoric climax after an intense buildup of snare rolls. In the chorus the lead vocal is playing together with backing vocals that sing or hum certain melodies. This vocal is placed in the back of the mix by adding a lot of reverb (RC-48) on them and thereby giving the impression that it is embracing the lead vocal that is placed in the centre of the mix. In order to not lose the energy of the drums and let them drown in the mix, the snare and hi hats usually only have a small room on them, basically leaving them dry. To make the drop come in as impactful as possible the usage of FX risers and white noise are essential. Especially in Netsky’s “Work It Out”, this feature of creating tension is used quite extensively. Before each transition, from verse into pre chorus and into the chorus, a type of riser resembling the sound of a lazer being turned on is added.

Different to a lot of more underground drum and bass songs, the ones that eventually reached popularity used vocals as one of its lead elements, which is also the case in the reference tracks that I picked. Consequently not only the production had to be extensively analyzed but also the

writing of lyrics was essential. After listening back to a lot of drum and bass songs that were accompanied by vocals it became clear that most use euphoric and motivational topics for their texts. This is evident in the reference tracks provided where both of the songs talk about overcoming certain issues in their life. Therefore writing something in a similar topic was important in making the original track “Falling Deeper” as authentic as possible. The track talks about not thinking about issues from the past but looking forward and working out problems.

Disco

Most modern genres start emerging first in the underground scene, this was no different for disco music. Its first appearance in the world of music was in the 1960s where it was unveiled by deejays in night clubs. It was not long after that, that disco found its way into the charts and captivated the music scene in the 70s and 80s (Garofalo 2014). Driven by syncopated basslines, and four-to-the-floor drum patterns, the genre experienced a revival in recent years. With songs such as “Can’t Feel My Face” by The Weeknd and “Don’t Start Now” by Dua Lipa that underline the immense danceability of this genre, revealing again why it is a preeminent to dance music in general, I had to give it a go myself and went on to produce the song “Hardworker” (Garofalo 2014).

The Weeknd’s “Can’t Feel My Face” as well as my song are in the classical beats per minute range of disco, namely 108 bpm and 110 bpm in a 4/4 time signature. Dua Lipa’s “Don’t Start Now” on the other hand, plays at 124 bpm, underlining the fact how well the genre operates in tempo ranges usually associated with electronic dance music. All three songs follow a quite straightforward arrangement, from a short intro to verse, pre chorus and eventually the chorus. There are some variations after those sections, Dua Lipa’s song for example does not have a traditional bridge section but rather repeats the pre chorus in this section again (Fig.1b.). Due to that change there is also a slight variation in song length: 2:41 (“Hardworker”), 3:03 (“Don’t Start Now”), 3:33 (“Can’t Feel My Face”).

A feature that brings all the songs in this genre together is its impactful chorus that different from for example drum and bass songs places its importance on reduction rather than on enlargement. Here the chorus gives a feeling of dryness and emptiness that is compensated by the syncopated bass that drives the whole song (Garofalo 2014). The fact that this reduced section works so well is due to the pre chorus that is filled with a variety of different instruments and a completely different approach to the mix. In the pre chorus the vocals are put in the backspace of the mix by adding a lot of reverb on them. Other instruments such as a piano (“Don’t Start Now”) or synth pads (“Can’t Feel My Face”) are also used with a lot of reverb, which in conjunction with the vocals, creates an enormous sound space. When it comes to the drop, everything is reduced and the approach to the mix is completely different. All instruments are taken out and only the bass is playing. Together with the vocals that have nearly no additional reverb, just a small room, it creates the signature sound of modern disco songs. In order to get the bass and vocals in front of the listener even better, the snare and clap drums are panned to the left and right in order to not take up space in the centre of the mix. Different to drum and bass where the snare is in the centre, the disco drums leave space for the bass and vocals. In addition to that, all three songs use vocal percussions created by recording human breaths and layering them on top of the programmed drums. The mix is quite straightforward, pan them to the right and left and use close to no reverb on them, giving the impression as if someone is whispering directly in your ear. The central part of the chorus, the bass, can be layered with synth basses to give it an even bigger impact. These created synth bass plays the same notes as the original real bass, however, its lower frequency spectrum is cut, so only the high frequencies are playing along (cut at approximately 150-200hz). This leaves the original low-end of the primary bass untouched but adds a bigger sound to the higher frequencies.

When looking at the instrumentation of “Can’t Feel My Face” it becomes quickly clear that it is a quite unusual disco song. Instead of using the signature string sections, electric pianos and electric guitars, it incorporates a variety of growling synth pads. Already in the intro a highly reverberated saw synth is piercing through the song, one could argue it should emulate the characteristic sound of an organic string section. A horn sound, certainly created by a synth, is

playing in the pre chorus and showing us that disco is able to sustain even with a modern production behind it. In my song “Hardworker” I decided to go for the more classical sound palette of disco music, nevertheless, I chose to go for a quite modern production as well. Instead of going for the usual legato or staccato strings used in the genre, I went for piccicato played ones. In the pre chorus I recorded an electric guitar with one of the colleagues from the course. The guitars create a sense of rush and urgency and are panned hard to the left and right to surround the vocals completely. The vocals are mixed with a lot of reverb as it is typical for the genre. When it comes to the chorus I incorporated all the signature elements of the genre. The close to dry vocals, the snares and claps that are panned to the left and right, the bass that stands in the centre of the mix, and lastly the vocal percussion elements that were recorded and added on top of the drums.

Similar to the lyrics of “Don’t Start Now” I decided to go for a theme that empowers independence. Dua Lipa’s song talks about a breakup that made her eventually stronger and directs the listener directly. My song goes in a similar direction and uses a very direct approach to the listener as well. The idea behind it was to create a sequel to Dua Lipa’s song; somebody that is long past a breakup and is now able to explore their own strengths and do whatever they want.

Hip Hop Music

Hip hop music first emerged in the 1970s at block parties in New York and expanded over the next decades to become one of the most popular genres (Dyson 2007). Hip-hop experienced an evolution that most other genres did not go through. When comparing rap songs from the 90s with a recently released song from 2019, there is not only a difference in sound quality due to better mixing techniques, but a completely different palette of sounds is being used nowadays. New rap songs with modern drums are even referred to with a new term namely trap music. However, in the reference tracks that I chose for this analysis the focus is not specifically on the

drums or bass sound selection, but rather one element that connects all three songs: a vocal sample.

The three songs “Jesus Walks” by Kanye West, “Taste” by Tyga featuring Offset, and my production “Love and Frequencies” performed by Boy Nash, all have a vocal sample as its focal point. All tracks start with an intro in which the sample is playing, leading into the rest of the song (Fig.1c.). From then on, the sample is never turned off and is playing throughout the whole production. In the case of “Jesus Walks” the vocal sample is taken from a song called “Walk With Me” by The Arc Choir and is layered with an underlying bass and sampled drums. Different to this production, Tyga’s “Taste” and my own song have a much shorter sample used, which is looped throughout the whole song with only slight variations. Similar to “Jesus Walks” I am layering the main male vocal sample that I recorded myself, with a female vocal to give more impact whenever the pre chorus and chorus set in. The recorded humming is processed with the stock Ableton Live plugin Erosion which adds noise to the sample. This is running than through a multiband compressor known as OTT which gives the whole vocal hum an even breathier sound, which is desired in this case (Fig.2.). I also use quite similar drum sounds as “Taste”, which would be categorized as trap drums, which is different to Kanye’s new school hip-hop song that uses sampled drums from Lou Donaldson’s song “Ode To Billie Joe”. Nevertheless, the vocal sample as the main element of the song prevails.

Kanye West’s and Tyga’s song both have a rather traditional tempo for hip hop music, 85 and 98 beats per minute respectively following a 4/4 time signature. My song on the other hand has 112 bpm which is a bit unusual for the genre, but by using characteristic instrumentations this is compensated. Song lengths differ and so do their arrangements as hip-hop quite often does not follow a traditional structure and is such a wide genre consisting of all kinds of variations: 3:14 (“Jesus Walks”), 3:52 (“Taste”), 3:03 (“Love and Frequencies”).

Tyga’s “Taste” only consists of two chords F and C and is written in C Major, which is representative simplicity of hip-hop songs of the 2010s. My song follows the chord structure of

D# F# G# A# throughout the whole song and is written in C sharp major. Kanye's "Jesus Walks" changes its chord structure quite often and has quite a unique progression. The song is written in E flat minor and its main chords are Eb Bb Ebm throughout the song, followed by certain sections with Gb and B.

The usage of vocal samples as main driving force in the song has been used extensively in hip hop music. "Lord Knows" by Drake, "On Fire" by Eminem and "Hollow Bones" by the Wu-Tang Clan are only a few more examples of its popularity. It is an element that has been used from the very first emergence of rap music and is something that will be used for decades to come.

Conclusion

The songs picked are perfect examples of how modern productions are able to sustain the traditional characteristics of each respective genre. Music as one of humans oldest art forms will be able to travel through time and be passed on through our technological formats. It will be recreated and reimagined but its initial inspirations will remain and bleed through every song that is referencing back to it.

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Appendix

Pink = Intro / Pre Chorus = Green / Bridge = Dark Blue / Verse = Blue / Chorus = Yellow

Fig.1a.) Drum and Bass: *Hardworker, Runnin' (Lose It All), Work It Out*



Fig.1b.) Disco: *Hardworker, Don't Start Now, Can't Feel My Face*



Fig.1c.) Hip-Hop: *Taste, Jesus Walks, Love and Frequencies*

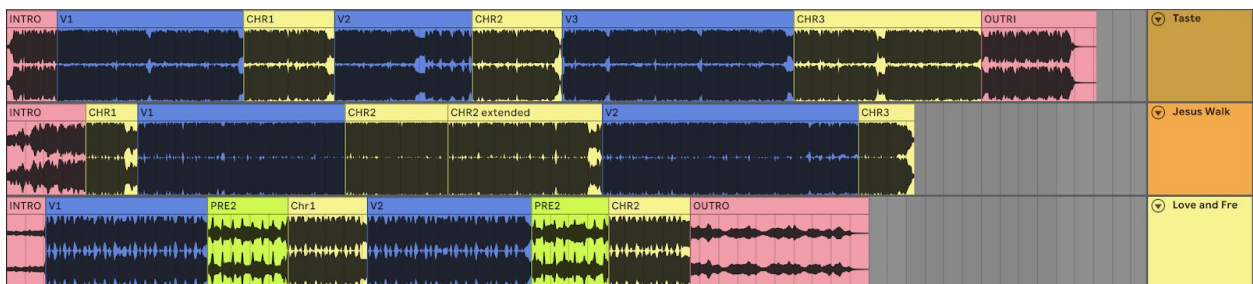


Fig.2.) Processing of vocal sample in *Love and Frequencies*

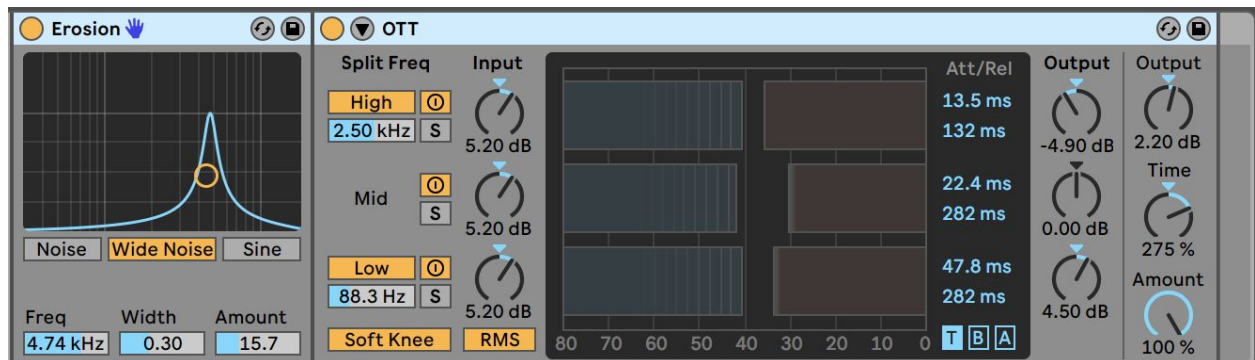


Fig.3.) Kick and snare drum groove in drum and bass

