

An Analysis and Interpretation of Hyperpop, Soul-Pop, and G Funk

by Vittorio Tondo

MA Commercial Music Producer

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Student Number: 2114159

Since 2015, the music industry has started seeing a steady growth in revenue, after around twenty years of steady decline, caused by the rise of online piracy (IFPI, cited in Jimmy Stone, 2020). More interestingly, the exponential rise in the market share of music streaming services, which now account for 61.2% of all recorded music revenues (IFPI, 2021), can be translated into an ever-growing availability of all music genres for the average consumer. With this essay, I will analyse three genres, Hyperpop, Soul-Pop, and G Funk, their salient idiosyncrasies, and how I have decided to implement them in my own portfolio submission. Further, I will examine the critical points of discussion around each genre's characteristics.

Hyperpop is a micro-genre that has recently seen a rise in popularity since editor Lizzy Szabo created and started curating the "Hyperpop" playlist on Spotify, in response to the online service's metadata showing the genre's name (Dandridge-Lemco, 2020). The genre is characterized by a maximalist, deconstructive approach to pop music, and is represented by artists such as A.G. Cook, Charli XCX and 100 geecs (Vitagliano, 2020). It is characterized by excessive sounds, and elements from contrasting genres such as Eurohouse, Trance, Hip-Hop, J and K Pop, Emo and nu-metal. Furthermore, the use of synths and catchy auto-tuned vocal melodies is a staple of the genre, as is the use of heavy distortion (Pritchard, 2020).

Since its inception in 1997 and its popularization by artists such as Cher and T-Pain, Auto-Tune has become a mainstay of vocal production in the popular music landscape (Tinsley, 2021). Hyperpop however, has taken the use of the effect a step further and has made it a *conditio sine qua non* of the genre: tracks such as 100 geecs' "money machine", and SOPHIE's "Ponyboy" both feature extensive pitch correction, pushed to an extreme that causes the artist's vocal performance to sound

inhuman and robot-like. I decided to implement this particular aspect in my own production, considering its prominence in the genre: the vocals were heavily pitch corrected and pitch shifted by both a fifth, an octave up, and an octave down; further, the vocal formants were adjusted in order to create different timbres: this was done with 100 geqs in mind, as they are a duo and have distinct vocal characteristics. Additionally, the vocal takes were layered, in order to achieve Hypepop's characteristic "thick" sound. To bring the vocal further forward, a heavy use of compression was applied, a main characteristic not only of Hyperpop, but of Popular music itself (Cox, 2016). As previously mentioned, the genre is characterized by a heavy use of distortion, therefore both heavy saturation and overdrive distortion were applied to the vocals. Reverb and delay were used subtly in the production, with the objective of achieving harmony between the vocals and the other element of the track, rather than to impart any sonic characteristic to the material: this decision was taken as the effects are not usually prominently featured in Hyperpop.

According to Hyperpop Producer Blackwinterwells:

"the hallmark features [of Hyperpop] are that it's really loud, there's usually a distorted bass, a pretty arpeggio, and a funny snare drum. The drums might be the most significant part, because everything else could be anything. Distorted 808s, distorted kicks, and distorted snares. It's just pop-rap, but loud." (Enis, 2021)

In line with the above, both 808 drums and bass were used for the composition, then treated with heavy distortion and compression, to achieve the "really loud" sound mentioned. In the same way, chip-tune inspired arpeggios were created through subtractive synthesis and bit-crushing, and used throughout the song, in order to achieve the genre's trademark contrast of opposing elements

(Kornhaber, 2021). Furthermore, heavily distorted electric guitars and a sampled drum kit were used for the end of the song, as some organic elements do appear in Hyperpop tracks such as 100 geecs “mememe” and Alice Longyu Gao’s “Underrated Pop Star”, however, the lower frequencies of these elements were equalized out, in order to leave space for the presence of the sub bass, an important element of the genre.

A lot of Hyperpop tracks are characterized by a very short running time, for example 100 geecs’ “money machine” is 1 minute 50 seconds long, and Alice Longyu Gao’s “Never Coming Back” 1 minute 48 seconds long. This is a trend taking place in the music industry at large: according to a 2019 Quartz survey: “From 2013 to 2018, the average song on the Billboard Hot 100 fell from 3 minutes and 50 seconds to about 3 minutes and 30 seconds.” (Kopf, 2019). However Hyperpop song lengths are substantially inferior to the average, therefore making this a distinctive genre characteristic. The production length was therefore kept to a length of 1 minute 42 seconds in order to conform with the above.

Lyrical themes in Hyperpop are eclectic and often nonsensical, like in the case of 100 geecs “money machine”, however they often seem to be centred around a feeling of anger and themes relating to internet culture (O’Regan-Reidy, 2021). For this reason, the lyrics of the portfolio production are centred around the themes of social media and mental health, while the lyrical delivery is both melodic and aggressive at different times, in order to convey a feeling of mental unbalance and angst.

Despite some sensationalist headlines hinting about the polarization of opinion that Hyperpop has allegedly caused (Pritchard, 2020, Yalcinkaya, 2021),

it is virtually impossible to find any publication referring to the genre as anything short of a multifaceted, captivating phenomenon, that gets pulled in all directions but manages to stay uncompromised and identifiable. According to Kornhaber, a link between rebellious genres such as Punk and 70's Rock and Hyperpop can be drawn:

“The straight white normie is a hyperpop bogeyman as potent as the yuppie was for hardcore punk, or as the senator’s son was for the Woodstock crowd.”
(Kornhaber, 2021)

The genre is often referred to as “the future of music”, and in an era in which “conventional” band music seems to be on the decline (Lynskey, 2021), and music is easier to create than ever, due to the advent of digital audio workstations, it is possible to see this as an accurate prediction.

Overall, I am very satisfied with the track produced, and I think it’s a faithful representation of the reference tracks presented. In the same way I feel like I have added elements of my own production to the final product, such as live guitar and my own vocal and lyrics.

In stark contrast with Hyperpop, the genre of Soul-Pop, as exemplified by artists such as Whitney Houston, Adele and Lana Del Rey, is defined by clear, masterfully delivered vocal performances, pitch correction is used in a subtle manner if at all, in order to keep the emotion and delivery of the recording as organic as possible. In modern times, the instrumentation used for the genre often includes a mixture of organic and digital instruments, however, emphasis is put on organic instruments such as pianos, strings, drums and guitars, as seen in both Adele’s

“Hello” and Lana Del Rey’s “Blue Jeans”. Furthermore, the deliberate use of reverbs and delays is a main characteristic of the genre, Adele’s “25” mixing engineer Tom Helmhirst mentions using “about seven or eight” different reverbs and delays, as well as a reverb chamber only to treat the vocals on her track “Hello” (Weiss, 2015)

The process of writing and producing a song with a singer is as much a technical endeavour as it is a people’s management task. According to Rick Rubin the goal of a producer is “to create a setting where artists can be completely vulnerable, and feel completely free to be themselves a hundred per cent [...] a safe space [...] where to show their innermost soul” (Rubin, 2020), in a similar way Adele’s co-writer and producer Greg Kurstin mentioned he was alone with Adele while writing and recording “Hello”, underlining that he tends to do that with all the artists he works with (Weiss, 2016). For this reason, the writing session was organized with this sort of intimacy in mind: only I and the songwriter were present in the writing room and the free flow of conversation was allowed, with no pressure to compose. As the conversation went on, the writing then started to take form organically on the basis of common life experiences.

The central characteristic of Soul-Pop is the performer’s voice, therefore a great percentage of production time was spent focusing on vocal recording and processing. The vocals were recorded with a large diaphragm condenser microphone, as it was the case in Adele’s “Hello” (Weiss, 2016). Furthermore, heavy compression was applied to the part, in order to bring the vocal forward in the mix. In order to underline the emotional content of the singer’s voice in the louder parts of the track, some subtle saturation was applied, a technique that can be heard in Lana Del Rey’s “Blue Jeans”. Furthermore, four different reverbs (Room, Plate, and two

Hall reverbs) and a delay were used on the vocal track at different times, keeping in line with the genre's characteristics. Some pitch correction was also applied to ensure a consistent delivery. Lastly, three different backing vocalists were recorded all at the same time, to keep in line with the genre's gospel origins (Origins and Influence of Soul Music, 2019), as well as the backing vocals featured on Adele's track.

As previously mentioned, the instrumentation of the genre is often kept mostly organic, with some synthetic elements. For this reason the portfolio track was mostly produced using sample libraries. Orchestral and instrumental sample libraries have seen a recent rise in popularity due to advances in sampling technology, logistical convenience and economic reasons (Davies, 2020), and are now being used across the board in the music industry. Furthermore, in line with the genre, Lana del Rey's breakthrough hit "Video Games" featured the use of a string sample library rather than real strings, as well as other sampled instruments (Tingen, 2012). Although it is still open for debate whether humans are able to detect the difference between sampled instruments and their real counterparts, a recent online study has found that of a sample of 602 participants, 72.5% successfully identified whether an orchestral composition was sampled or performed live (Kopiez et al., 2016). In order to mitigate this effect in the composition, careful automation of performance parameters was used, as well as layering and a heavy use of reverb. In order to exalt the higher frequencies of the vocal performance, the piano was purposefully kept dull and had most of the frequencies above 7kHz equalized out. Lastly, white noise was added during choruses to enhance impact and ambiance.

Thematically, the reference tracks refer to past relationships, as well as the themes of nostalgia and regret. This was something that was identified and explored during the first writing session, therefore the decision was taken to draw from personal experiences of a similar ilk to write the lyrics.

I have found I have learnt a lot during the composition and productions of this piece, as I have found myself outside of my area of expertise, having never worked with this particular genre. I feel that the effort to be personable to make the artist feel at ease worked in my favour, and I will be exploring the skill in my further productions. Lastly, I think the track produced is a faithful representation of the genre, however, it is my intention to use it as a demo and reproduce it with real instruments and a new vocal session, to get the best performance possible.

On the other side of the musical scope, G-Funk is a subgenre of Rap that emerged in the West Coast of America during the early 90s. It is characterised by live instrumentation, heavy bass and high pitched synthesizers with high portamentos, as well as little to no sampling (Krimms, 2000, p.74) and is represented by artists such as Snoop Dogg, N.W.A. and Dr. Dre.

Digital sampling first appeared on the music scene during the late 70s, with the advent of the synthesizer, sampler and audio workstation Fairlight CMI. However, it was not until the 80s that sampling became more affordable, with samplers such as the E-MU SP-1200 and Akai S950. This allowed DJs and producers (who were previously relying on looping breaks on turntables for rappers to rap on) the possibility to sample previous records with unprecedented ease (Computer Music, 2014). The practice of sampling which fundamentally created the genre of Hip-Hop is now widespread, however it is still surrounded by significant

debates on its morality and legality. There used to be specific unspoken rules regarding sampling that were followed by the producer community (eg. “don’t sample a record that’s less than ten years old”, or “only sample records off vinyl”), however, as expressed by Laurent Fintoni on Fact Magazine: “For many producers today it is no longer a case of “should I sample this?” but of “can I get away with sampling this?” (Fintoni, 2013). Although it has been found that there is an empirical necessity towards a more detailed legislation and definition of fair use in relation to sampling, in particular with regards to musical genres such as Hip-Hop, which use the technique as a central element of their craft, sampling remains a grey area. However, it seems the case that most of the time it is the record companies that hold the original tracks’ copyright that benefit from the lawsuits, rather than the artists that created the tracks in the first place (Vella, 2012). Furthermore, it is apparent that sampling has the power to stimulate creativity and promote innovation as whole genres have been created because of it, such as Hip-Hop, Drum and Bass and many more (The Economist, 2011).

Dr. Dre has arguably been one of the creators and foremost exponents of G-Funk, unlike other producers of his time, however, he moved somewhat away from sampling (With notable exceptions such as “Lyrical Gangbang”, in which Led Zeppelin’s “When the Levee Breaks” drum sample is used), preferring instead to use real musicians to replicate melodies from other records, thus creating a new sound (Lynskey, 2014). In my own production, I therefore introduced live percussive elements to replicate this, as well as a live recorded guitar. In the track by Snoop Dogg “Who am I (What’s My Name?)”, as well as Dr. Dre’s “Deeez Nuuuts” a Moog MiniMoog Model D is extensively used for both bass and lead sounds (Brewster, 2021). In order to replicate this, a VST Moog emulator was used for the bass,

layered on three tracks to obtain the characteristic “thick” bass sound. For the G-Funk signature “west coast whistle”, high pitched lead sound, the same emulator was used, with a high portamento rate. The drum beat was programmed on an in-DAW sampler, using pre-recorded samples from a library.

The vocal delivery was centred around having both rapped and sung vocals. Instead of leaning towards a female backing singer (backing female singers are often a characteristic of G-Funk), the decision was taken to have a backing male performance, in the style of Dr. Dre’s “Deeez Nuutz”. The vocals were heavily treated with both compression and saturation, to keep them as the main element of the track. A small amount of reverb was used and automated to come in and out in different sections of the track, and the same was done with delay. Reverb and delay are, however, not usually identified as a main characteristic of the genre, so they were used sparsely. Lastly, G-Funk tracks are usually performed by more than one artist, in order to reproduce this in the production, the artist was instructed to record several different takes using a variety of vocal timbres that were then layered and panned across the stereo spread thus giving the illusion of multiple voices.

Arrangement wise, the track is fairly similar to Snoop Dogg’s “Who Am I”, being characterised by three, 16 bar verses, two 8 bars choruses, and a 16 bars chorus, with a 4 bar outro. It was decided to keep the track shorter than the reference, in order to keep in line with the current trend of shortening tracks, of which above.

The themes usually discussed in G-Funk tracks are usually centred around the “thug lifestyle”, aggression, sex, marijuana, alcohol consumption, and hedonism (Hip Hop Music History, 2019, Lynskey, 2014). The direction in which the production was taken lyrically was more focused on the hedonistic themes, in line with Snoop Dogg’s

track “Gin and Juice”. An aspect of the G-Funk lyrics that we decided to move away from was profanity. Although this is a characteristic present in a great majority of all rap genres (Powell-Morse, 2014), it did not strike as important as the use of correct instrumentation, arrangement and techniques.

In synthesis, I felt very confident while producing this particular track, as it features a lot of the elements I use in my own production, such as layered synthesized basses, and organic percussion elements. I also felt at ease and familiar with the artist, which in turn relaxed him and contributed to a laid-back feel to the takes, typical of G-Funk. In the future, I would like to try and add a female backing vocal to the production, in order to add an extra layer of variation. Summarizing, I think this is a good representation of the genre.

In conclusion, the musical landscape is more varied and connected than ever before, and continues moving forward exponentially, in unexpected and creatively interesting ways. The current growth of the industry, which is being led by the seemingly unstoppable rise of streaming services, represents an exciting time and a great opportunity for any artist that is a part of it. Producing and analysing these three contrasting genres has given me more of an insight on production techniques and critical points that I was not aware of, which will help me to move forward and continue working on becoming a better producer.

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