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INTRO

My portfolio consists of three tracks each from a different type of genre. Music genres are used to categorise types of music and are particularly useful to marketers as trends and behaviour types can be associated with different genres. Pop music is one type of genre but quickly looking at the latest 'Now That's' compilation reveals a very wide range of sub genres within it.

The Collins dictionary defines a musical genre as a particular form of music that can be seen as a separate class because of special and unique characteristics.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

My first portfolio track belongs to the genre of contemporary R&B which is an evolution of late 50's & 60's American rhythm & blues. The rhythm part is emphasising the backing drums, bass and guitar possibly with a horn section consisting of sax, trumpet and trombone. The blues is typically represented in the progressions associated with 12 bar blues and in the performance of the vocalist in a group or backed by harmony who perform catchy hooks and melodies with heart felt emotion.

As the genre has evolved more keyboards, synthesisers and drum machines are in use and the influences of hip hop has continued to blur the line between the two. This can be traced to new jack swing in the early 90s to current artists such as Chris Brown and Rihanna.

It is a hugely popular genre and there are many sub genres, the reference track I chose, Too Early by The Dream featuring Gary Clark and released 2013 can be sub divided because of its slow pulse and 6/8 key signature of 6/8. This was a common feature from early blues in the 1930s - 60s period, the song "House of the Rising Sun" covered by The Animals in 1964 is a good example of this signature in its history.

The second track in my portfolio was based upon UK Garage (UKG) which emerged in the late 90's. This is a sub genre of dance music drawing upon existing influences popular at the time such as breakbeat, jungle and house. Defined primarily by its swung kick and snare shuffle every 2 bars rather than four to the floor and a swift tempo around 130-140 beats per minute (BPM). An early example being the Kelly G 2-step remix of "Never Gonna Let You Go" by Tina Moore released in 1997.

I chose to reference the production of MJ Cole in particular, who is a classically trained oboe and piano player. He was successful in 1999 with an album titled sincere and stands out because of his use of live recorded instruments whilst other producers in the genre who were using mainly entirely sample based techniques with a synthesised bass.

Garage tracks are usually feel good love songs and share or even sample R&B themes. In contrast my third genre, UK Drill, is the opposite with overt and explicit references to selling drugs, gang violence and sex. These lyrics have caused controversy in the media but with the reference track Body being this year's no1 song on TikTok it has proved its commercial success.

I also referenced a track by Digga D produced by M1onthebeat, this emerging genre has taken influence from American drill, trap and hip and hop and merged it with regional grime and dubstep. Typically UK drill music features a sliding baseline and 808 drum kits. The tempo is

usually 140bpm and interspersed with dark atmospheres but often catchy and melodic hooks. UK drill beats are generally structured around a triplet hi-hat pattern, with snares landing on the fourth beat instead of the third every 2 bars.

ANALYSIS & PRODUCTION

I started to analyse the reference tracks using a combination of repeated listening and software to aid my understanding. Repeated listening includes reduced listening as named by Schaeffer in the 1930's, in this form it allows the user to focus on particular intrinsic features of the sound

The software I would use is Rekordbox which has an algorithm to detect the BPM and the key signature. I then used this information to set my DAW's transport, import the tracks and check the grids match so that I could take notes, map instruments and track the arrangement. I also used Melodyne and frequency analysis plug-ins to further analyse key signatures and modes as well as harmonic intervals.

In addition I also attempted to learn and play the chords and patterns used in the reference tracks on piano to give me a better understanding of the compositional elements and rhythm.

TEMPO & TIME SIGNATURE

I then started production of each track and set tempo's and time signatures. With the Garage and Drill music there was an easy decision to make. "Crazy Love" is 4/4 and 132 BPM and "Woi" is 4/4 140bpm both a dominant feature of their genre so I set these two portfolio tracks to correspond.

With 'The Vibe' I was constrained by the time signature of 6/8 but there was scope within the genre to speed the tempo by 10bpm and I felt this helped energise the rhythm.

KEY SIGNATURE & MODE

The key signature and the mode of the piece of music combine to give a track identity, feeling and mood. The modes of minor and major are often used as clear contrasting examples, the former being less happy and bright in comparison.

By analysing the keys and modes I wanted to make use of the music theory to try to capture the style of the genre and reference track. I wanted to stay inside the mode but not necessarily the key signature allowing me creative freedom to transpose if desired.

"Too Good" is in the key of C minor and a minor mode is very common to the genre. I knew I wanted to voice a top line melody with minor chords and grace the odd blue note, the result being "The Vibe" which is in the key of G minor.

Crazy love is in the key of Am but it is the use of minor7th and suspended 4ths that were so successful in creating a memorable and unique sound associated with MJ Cole. I was able to use this theory when programming the chords and top line melody of "Kitty DO".

The piano played in "Woi" are by CC Beats and in the key of F, however as the harmonies play 2 suspended chords on the C and G it was possible to determine the mode as Lydian. Using this mode inspired me to write the parts for the portfolio track "Dirty Money".

INSTRUMENTS

When producing my portfolio track I wanted to pick instruments to fit within the genre. In some cases this was more important than others. All the reference tracks use instrumentation typical to

their genres and each genre allows within it a different range of variation in particular elements. For example Drill must have a sliding 808 and triplet programmed hi hats but the instrumentation in-between could be anything as long as it was dark and melodic. MJ Cole type garage on the other hand is typified by the use of live recorded instruments such as the Rhodes piano or bass guitar whilst others were using sample based playback with a synthesised bass so choosing any other instruments would be a clear style choice.

I programmed the guitar in "The Vibe" using massive. With both Dirty Money and Kitty Do I was able to use Kontakt and program more realistic articulation so this was an improvement but I would want to record a session guitarist, bassist and violinist to capture vibrato and dynamics which were difficult to programme in stringed instruments to either replace or mix with the existing midi.

All the drums are programmed with drum kits and choosing suitable samples. The garage 2 step beats were usually programmed on AKAI's MPC and so I chose samples that reminded me of the genre and then emulated the swing with a groove template.

I set triplet patterns for the Drill 808 drums as this is a defining feature along with the compressed snares.

For the sliding bass I used glide and pitch bending with a reversed loop to emulate the reference tracks. I spent a lot of time analysing the bass frequencies to try to match the clarity and tones of the reference tracks.

The Wii reference track also had a woman talking in Spanish at the beginning and end. I was looking for samples and one of the last things I added after recording the vocal was a rip from the movie Scarface. This was inspired by the artist and slightly cliché but also in line with many songs in this genre using samples from 80s film and recordings.

I also created a sample based instrument of my kitten meowing as a last addition to the "Kitty Do" song. This was a creative decision based on the songwriting. I feel it is inline with the samplers used from the period such as the E-Mu but not a stylistic choice I could imagine MJ Cole making and actually moves the track away from the more serious UKG genre to a more tongue in cheek fun song that would fit well with YouTubers and TikTokers.

ARRANGEMENT

I was inspired by the arrangement in the reference tracks and used this in my basic production templates to different degrees. All the tracks have had commercial success and highlight good practice and recognised techniques.

MJ Coles work for example uses voice leading in the violins with the vocal and introduces new parts and phrases proceeded by the withdrawal of others all of which are classically trained techniques.

Garage being a sub genre of electronic dance music, the edits are longer than the typical pop track and feature 32 or 64 bar intro and outros as the music is primarily played in a club setting and makes for blending of one track to another seamlessly. "Crazy Love" has a structure typical to the genre, allowing a long 16 bar intro giving space to build before the vocal drops in and a long 1min 30 second outro. I took this structure but cut the track to a more radio friendly 3:20.

The arrangement for "Dirty Money" is typical to the genre for example the instrumental of "Woi" and "Body" are arranged almost identically. Each song is made unique by the artist performance, lyrics and micro edits in the drum patterns and interplay with the main vocals. Both of these songs contain especially catchy, singable hooks and this was an important element to capture.

In contemporary R&B the vocal will be introduced quite early into the track however my track diverges and delays that quite substantially in that the vocal doesn't start until bar 16 and the bass not introduced until bar 33. The aim was to allow the vocal maximum impact and then support the 808 kick with a rolling baseline. On reflexion the arrangement could definitely be improved by re-arranging instruments and introducing all elements earlier. There is not enough emphasis on harmonising and double tracking the vocal to add thickness, presence and interest. I wanted to put more ad libs, backing vocals and harmony in all of the portfolio tracks but found it difficult to identify the appropriate space quickly and identify it as an area for continued improvement.

FX

In the 'Vibe' track I used delay and low pass filters on the guitar chords, a style borrowed from hip hop, to give it a contemporary feel and blur genre boundaries a touch.

R&B typically uses a lot of fx on the vocals such as compression, reverb and delay to get lush thick vocals. This has evolved and some artists have made use of vocoders and voice formatting. In the reference track it sounds like Gary Clarks vocal has used voice formatting to pitch down his voice. These vocals processing chains have become common to many popular musical genres and I was able to share techniques learned here when processing the drill track vocals and to create a denser call and response break in "Kitty Do".

Garage typically uses phasers, filters and echo delays. The only FX that stood out on MJ Coles "Crazy Love" was an arpeggiator on the outro but "Sincere" is full of pitched vocal stabs and reversed sample effects.

My drill track "Dirty Money" makes use of the cassette tape effect to stop and start the instrumental and create additional impact when the beat returns. It is also used to add a bit of fuzz to the mix. I was considering featuring some rewinds and low pass filters on the vocals and would have liked to add these in if time permitted. I also used obvious auto tune on the chorus which is not used in either reference track but there are lots of examples within the genre and neighbouring genre trap so I felt it was appropriate. It also gave the performer added confidence to deliver the vocal in knowing that effects can be applied to correct and enhance the recording.

MIX EQ

To help my track in relation to the reference track I used EQ analysis plugins to A/B and achieve a balance in the comparative levels. I checked LUF meters and aimed for -13 as this is the normalisation level for most streaming services which is the most common distribution of music currently. However to more accurately reflect the reference track I should have measured the LUF levels against each other rather than against current industry standards.

I measured the stereo field and dynamic range and used the reference tracks to match readings as far as possible by widening the stereo width of the backing vocals and top end of the percussion to fill the spectrum.

I ensured everything under 150hz was a mono signal to prevent phasing. And I aimed with the R&B and Drill tracks in particular to present the vocals very clearly and at centre stage.

I spent a lot of time working on the vocal chain to achieve as close to the reference as possible using combinations of eq, compression and stereo delay. I recorded using a Focusrite digital audio interface and Behringer c-1 mic which is a home setup. I would have liked to record through the Neeve at Tileyard and use an Sm58 to match the recordings of the reference material more closely.

CONCLUSION

In all it was a test of my listening and creative skills and as Smalley (1997) points out: “after one has perceived very fine intrinsic audible features in a sound, it may become very difficult to regain a normal listening mode. Low- level investigation, such as focusing entirely on the background at the cost of the foreground, tends to magnify details of minor importance”. I definitely found identifying the changes I needed to make in EQ for example taxing and technically difficult as well as identifying the exact production techniques used in the reference tracks.

When I started choosing the genres to work in and songs to reference I wanted to step out of my comfort zone and I did this in various ways. I wanted to record a band in an Indie Rock Lo-Fi style but this wasn't logistically practical so I chose to produce an R&B song in 6/8 timing, a garage track in the style of MJ Cole and a drill type beat were all new to me in some way.

In production I realised some genres have more freedom for expression than others but something that I didn't consider was that Drill is usually in the key of F because this has a root bass frequency 43hz which is a sweet point for speakers and human ears. By using the key of Bb which has a bass frequency of 29hz I encountered an issue in the mix being too low and muddy unless I cut above this frequency and sacrificed the root note.

I was also now collaborating with artists and songwriters which has its own positives and negatives. For example “Dirty Money” is performed and written by Aze who I networked with specifically for this project after making the beat. If we could have made the beat and lyrics simultaneously the combination would be more in sync. It was also his first time recording and after coaching about consistent mic distance and direction he delivered very close to what I envisioned a UK Drill track to sound like. His lyrics are full of clever word play, metaphors and unapologetic in nature much like N.W.A style gangster rap.

On the other side the R&B song was reliant on a singer song writer who wasn't inspired to finish the lyrics and we weren't able to record together because of logistics. The result is a poor delivery that is mistimed and lacking conviction. We want to finish the project and there is space on the track for a reply to complete the project.

With “KittyDo” the writing completing changed the direction I was looking for originally however I liked the humour and immediately thought about songs such as Tiko - “Fishy on Me” that are quickly amassing billions of views but will never play over a huge speaker or in a club. As ever changing tastes and cross influences germinate to create new genres and sub genres and artists such as NasX who notoriously crossed the seemingly impossible boundary between hip hop and country are born.

The Categorisation of music is after all retrospective, Pflugfelder “The most identifiable and significant features of a genre are always identified after they've actually occurred”. I would argue that the majority of artists do not want to be labeled as belonging to a certain group or bound by the convention therein, the heart of music lies in the freedom to create.

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