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F2 Essay

**Commercial Music Producer
(Online Blended)**

2925 words

Contemporary Folk - *Complex* by Katie Gregson-Macleod

Contemporary folk music has its roots long before the invention of recorded sound, where the songs were passed down orally from generation to generation as well as being 'collected' and written down by musicologists and classical composers such as Ralph Vaughan Williams in England and Béla Bartók in Hungary who not only collected folk music but reused the material in their contemporary compositions. Béla Bartók, alongside fellow composer Zoltan Kodaly recorded (on an Edison phonograph) and notated hundreds of songs from small villages in rural Hungary and Romania¹, with Bartók using some of these melodies to create one of his most famous compositions *Romanian Folk Dances, Sz. 56, BB 68*.

The idea of modern folk as part forming a party of contemporary popular music can be traced back to the Carter Family in the first half of the 20th century, with the lineage passed down through American musicians such as Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan and Neil Young, as well as The Pogues and The Cores in the UK.

My reference track, *Complex* by Katie Gregson-Macleod, is clearly inspired by the contemporary titans of folk music Phoebe Bridgers, Julien Baker and Laura Marling², with Gregson-Macleod describing it as her 'saviour complex song'³ when the chorus went viral on TikTok launching her career. The lyrics are intimate and personal (I'm twenty-one / The edge is razor thin / Between being numb and feeling everything) telling a distinct story about a relationship that is over in all but name (We won't be together, but maybe the next life). The track also taps into the so called 'sad girl' aesthetic that has become hugely popular in the last few years "thanks to artists like Mitski and Phoebe Bridgers and even the more mainstream Billie Eilish, who have collectively evolved the style to also articulate what it's like living in a world on the brink of climate (and various other kinds of) collapse."⁴

I set out to write similarly intimate lyrics, writing about meeting up with an ex-partner months after a breakup and the difficulty of moving on whilst a part of you stays with the other person (Looking at you now / I see a ghost / Once home but now). I also intentionally wrote the song a semitone or

¹Alsop, M., & Simon, S. (2007, September 15). *Bela Bartok: Finding a voice through folk music*. NPR. Retrieved March 23, 2023, from <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14416746>

² Caramanica, J. (2022, August 30). *Katie Gregson-Macleod sang about a 'complex' love. TikTok responded*. The New York Times. Retrieved March 23, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/30/arts/music/katie-gregson-macleod-tiktok-complex.html>

³ *Songfacts - Katie Gregson-Macleod Complex*. Songfacts. (n.d.). Retrieved March 23, 2023, from <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/katie-gregson-macleod/complex>

⁴ Garcia-Furtado, L. (2022, February 14). *The joy of sad girl music*. Harper's BAZAAR. Retrieved March 23, 2023, from <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a38647867/the-joy-of-sad-girl-music-february-2022/>

two too high for my natural range, as I wanted to emulate the strained singing found in some Damien Rice songs such as Cannonball and achieve the emotional power that sort of vocal portrays.

As in *Complex*, I opted to use a simple arrangement largely based around vocals and piano. Unfortunately I didn't have a real grand piano like Gregson-Macleod uses on her record and so struggled to get the warmth and depth in the piano recording that *Complex* features so heavily. I tried several VSTs before settling on the Spitfire Labs Grand which, after adding saturation and heavy EQ with a Pultec, sounded as close as I could manage to the reference. *Complex* is also quite a 'noisy' track, with pedal and stool noise being quite prominent and adding to the raw and intimate feel of the song. To try and emulate that I added sampled stool sounds, pedal noise and other background noise to the track at key points.

Complex also uses elements more often found in Folktronica ("a catch-all for all manner of artists who have combined mechanical dance beats with elements of acoustic rock or folk"⁵) including a heavily filtered snare and kick drum, as well as a added manipulated snare tail reverberation used every other bar that is relatively dry. I used a similar drum pattern and initially used heavy band passing to achieve the filtered effect, however later replaced this with an extreme use of a Pultec EQP-1A upon the advice of Ciarán Robinson as it better preserves the impact of each drum hit. Gregson-Macleod also introduces a shaker on each beat in the latter part of the song to create more momentum, which I emulate in my track. There is a subtle bass synth in *Complex* which I didn't emulate as I felt my arrangement got busy enough especially considering my song is considerably shorter than *Complex*, and features more pronounced backing vocals and harmonies.

Gregson-Macleod uses a few subtle vocal harmonies in the second half of the final chorus, however I decided to employ vocal harmonies more obviously in the bridge of my song. My chorus is considerably shorter than the chorus of *Complex*, which left me with space for a bridge which I wanted to contrast sharply to the rest of the song, particularly as this is where the drum kit enters. I opted for three close harmony layers creating a sound inspired by Simon & Garfunkel - themselves a key proponent in the 1960s 'roots revival' folk movement in the United States with The Sound of Silence being a contender for the first 'Folk Rock' song⁶. Vocal harmonies are used extensively by Phoebe Bridgers, for example in her song Graceland Too she uses 3 and 4 part harmonies all singing the same lyrics panned across the stereo image.

5 Scott, Derek B., ed. (2016). The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology. Abingdon-on-Thames, England: Routledge. p. 90.

⁶ Did Simon & Garfunkel invent "folk rock"? Goldmine Mag. (2017, January 16) Retrieved April 4, 2023, from <https://www.goldminemag.com/features/simon-garfunkel-invent-folk-rock>

In terms of vocal processing and overall production I tried to keep the song as simple as possible. There is very little reverb on Gregson-MacLeod's voice in the verses of *Complex*, and no delay at all, with the reverb becoming more prominent in the pre-chorus. I used a fairly minimal reverb setting on the vocal, but wanted to use a little delay. To avoid this getting too 'wet', I used a compressor after the delay plug-in side chained to the dry signal to duck most of the delay out of the mix whilst the vocals are audible.

Disco - *Cosmic Girl* by Jamiroquai

Disco music has been going strong since its underground beginnings in the 1970s in clubs catering to black, gay, and Latino dancers in New York City and Philadelphia⁷. The music was popularised in the mainstream by the Bee Gees, Gloria Gaynor, Giorgio Moroder, Earth Wind & Fire and other internationally successful acts. Ultimately the systemic racism and homophobia that led to the emergence of disco helped contribute to its downfall.⁸ The author Fran Lebowitz said that ““Disco Sucks” was a kind of panic on the part of straight white guys. Disco was basically black music, rock ‘n’ roll was basically white: those guys felt displaced.”⁹ Disco declined in popularity towards the end of the 1970s, particularly after “Disco Demolition Night” - a stunt by US ‘shock jock’ Steve Dahl and the White Sox baseball team where a crate of disco records was blown up at a baseball field with the hope of attracting rock fans to the game.¹⁰

Disco has had a resurgence since the 1990s with Nu-Disco being popularised with three hits in 2001: Jamiroquai's *Little L*; Kylie Minogue's *Love at First Sight*; and Sophie Ellis-Bextor's *Murder on the Dancefloor*. More recently, Daft Punk had a huge hit with *Get Lucky* in 2013, featuring Nile Rodgers on guitar, which peaked at number 2 in the charts behind another Nu-Disco inspired song: *Blurred Lines* by Robin Thicke. Beyoncé was heavily inspired by Disco in her newest album *RENAISSANCE* and her 6 minute disco-funk song *Virgo's Groove* was a reference track alongside my main reference *Cosmic Girl* by Jamiroquai for my submission: *Cosmic World*.

⁷ Garofalo, R. (2023, February 15). disco. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/art/disco>

⁸ *All about disco: Inside the history and influence of disco music - 2023*. MasterClass. (2021, June 7). Retrieved April 4, 2023, from <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/disco-history-and-influence>

⁹ Robinson, L. (2010, January 6). *Boogie Nights and the beginning of Disco*. Vanity Fair. Retrieved April 4, 2023, from <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2010/02/oral-history-of-disco-201002>

¹⁰ Ealsea, D. (2004, December 11). *Disco Inferno (extracted from Everybody Dance: Chic and the Politics of Disco, Helter Skelter 2004)*. The Independent. Retrieved March 30, 2023, from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/disco-inferno-680390.html>

Taking influence from up-beat Motown, syncopated funk music (Fred Wesley, James Brown's trombonist, is recorded as saying that "Disco music is funk with a bow tie.")¹¹ and soul, Disco is characterised by a four-on-the-floor drum beat, a syncopated bass line often featuring lots of 'broken octaves', so called 'chicken scratch' guitar popularised in James Brown's funk music by guitarist Jimmy Nolen¹², and use of electric pianos against orchestral instruments.

Not having access to a bass player, I spent a considerable amount of time programming a baseline for the song, including a lot of syncopation and broken octaves particularly in the chorus. I tried as best as possible to emulate the sound of the bass guitar in Jamiroquai's *Cosmic Girl*, using Native Instrument's Rickenbacker Bass VST and adding lots of treble and mid to the amp to get that slightly edgy funky sound that would make sure the syncopation and broken octaves cut through the mix. To get the chicken scratch guitar sound I used a loop sample from Splice and used the 'Auto-Funk' pedal in Logic to add a wah-wah phasing effect and shape the transients.

Reflecting on the drums that I programmed for the song I am happy with the overall sound. They sound acoustic and orchestral fitting into the overall acoustic nature of Disco music and match the references. However, having researched more into the genre, a four-on-the-floor kick drum would have worked better, especially in the chorus. Another key element of Disco is a subdivided and very loud hi-hat. This supposedly originated from an error in recording the 1974 song *Bad Luck* by Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes which left the hi-hat too loud¹³, and is evident in both the Jamiroquai and Beyoncé reference tracks. I used the subdivided hi-hat in *Cosmic World*, with 16th notes used throughout, and the hi-hat is used alone in the verses, but in hindsight it could be consistently louder in the mix to add more of a Disco feel.

Jamiroquai's *Cosmic Girl* uses 'disco strings' extensively throughout the song, playing hooks and melodic lines as well as simpler pads. I wanted to use more strings than I did in *Cosmic World* but I was limited by the quality of VST available to me. I used Spitfire Labs Strings sounds, which sound OK when playing pads/long notes and the pizzicato notes that feature, but when attempting to write fast lines with varying articulations, note bends, slides and other elements and articulations found in the reference song they sound far too artificial. Regardless of the limitations of the VST I tried to get the 'Disco' sound as closely as possible, and compressed the strings quite hard especially during the hook in the chorus. They also have relatively heavy reverb, and a delay to create a retro feel, however I think I could have done some extra EQ work to boost the 'brightness' of the strings to match what is found in the references. Next time I produce a

¹¹ Robinson, L. (2010, January 6). *Boogie Nights and the beginning of Disco*. Vanity Fair. Retrieved April 4, 2023, from <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2010/02/oral-history-of-disco-201002>

¹² Jordan, O. (2021, March 25). *5 funk guitarists you should know*. Premier Guitar. Retrieved April 4, 2023, from <https://www.premierguitar.com/artists/5-funk-guitarists-you-should-know>

¹³ Sanneh, K (2021). *Major Labels: A History of Popular Music in Seven Genres*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Cannongate Books. p. 364.

track in the Disco/Funk genre I think it will improve the outcome having as many live instruments on the track as possible, rather than relying on VSTs.

Another key element in Disco music is the use of backing singers performing harmony lines and counter melodies. This is particularly evident in the chorus of *Cosmic Girl*. I am happy with the vocal harmonies that I wrote for *Cosmic World*, but I think having a different singer/group of singers record these harmonies would have lifted the track and made it sound less 'pop' and more Disco, especially if I had female backing singers.

R&B/Electropop/Hip-Hop - *Escapism*. by RAYE

Escapism. by RAYE is song that is hard to classify. Known for her top-lining and writing work in electronic and dance music in collaboration with D.J.s like Joel Corry and David Guetta, RAYE felt pigeonholed as "the girl who sings on dance songs" that she didn't like¹⁴. *Escapism*., and *21st Century Blues* - the album that came after, is a reaction against chart friendly dance records and the influence of Polydor, the major label she left before releasing *Escapism*. in 2022. RAYE is "not interested in being a 'singles' girl"¹⁵ and that is clear in the 4'32" of *Escapism*., a "verse-carried R&B banger, with dramatic pianos and strings giving both singers' vocals a lush bed of instrumentation to rest on."¹⁶ While RAYE is known for her work in the R&B genre, *Escapism*. has more of a pop sound with electropop and hip-hop elements. The song is uptempo and has a catchy, upbeat melody, which are common characteristics of pop music.

I tried to utilise many of these features in my song: *Following My Head*. One of the most striking elements of *Escapism*. is the uptempo distorted drum beat that carries the verses and pre-choruses of song. The kit is heavily compressed, with the side stick snare and the open hi-hat being particularly prominent. I recreated the beat as closely as I could, using compression distortion within the Addictive Drums VST on each kit part, as well as further compression on the channel strip followed by bx_subsynth to give a real low end thud to the kick drum.

I also emulated the piano and organ sounds that together make up the majority of the harmony in RAYE's track. The compressed and bright piano sound articulates the organ chords that sit fairly low in the mix. The rest of the orchestration in the reference track is made up of a noisy bass synth which I recreated as best as I could moving down the scale from the tonic, and an inverted

¹⁴ Hans, S. (2023, February 3). *Raye, tired of Music's Waiting Game, releases an album at last*. The New York Times. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/03/arts/music/raye-my-21st-century-blues.html>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Nevares, G. B. (2022, October 15). *Raye drops dual release with 070 shake, "escapism/the thrill is gone"*. HotNewHipHop. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from <https://www.hotnewhiphop.com/440947-raye-drops-dual-release-with-070-shake-escapism-the-thrill-is-gone>

drone/riff on a retro style synthesiser outlining an arpeggio all the way through the song. I opted for a simpler riff, but kept similar elements such as the portamento slides and the vintage sound. Where as RAYE uses strings, particularly cellos, in her track I instead opted to use a muted trumpet VST. Whilst this creates a different sound world it is still within the sound of RAYE as an artist, as she uses a soul style horn line up in her live shows and in other tracks on the album such as *The Thrill Is Gone*. I had to be cautious with the levels of the muted trumpets, as otherwise their artificial sound becomes too obvious in the mix. Much like in my Disco track, much of this could have been improved by recording live musicians.

The form and structure of *Escapism*. is also unusual partly because of its length but also because the chorus is the softest bit of the song. This is in part a rebellion against the narrative that “you can't release a song longer than three minutes and twenty seconds”¹⁷, but also because the song is so verse led, with an extensive narrative and long lyric sheet. Whilst *Following My Head* is only 3'00”, I tried to incorporate some of RAYE's ‘rule breaking’ by also having a soft chorus. In the first chorus the drums fully drop out leaving only the organ and an ethereal sounding pad punctuated by piano intervals, with the second chorus being joined by a clap on beats 2 and 4 and a bass drone to add depth. To try and recreate the bridge of *Escapism*. which transports us via a different range of RAYE's voice and a stripped back orchestration I changed the key centre for my bridge and re-pitched the vocals using Little AlterBoy. Ideally I would have recorded the vocalist singing in the new key but when we tracked vocals I had not finalised the bridge yet. Regardless I think the re-pitch and formant effect adds a unique feel to the bridge despite the lyrics, as in *Escapism*., being the same as the chorus.

Lyrically “*Escapism*. is about running away from reality as fast as you possibly can,”¹⁸ after a breakup, but there is also a strong feeling of independence in the lyrics, with the character taking what she wants and making it happen on her own (I met him at the bar, it was 12 or somethin' / I ordered two more wines, 'cause tonight, I want him & “And I'm out on the town with a simple mission / In my little black dress, and this shit is sittin’). Co-writer Aaron Lewis-Welch and I tried to channel this independence and need to move on in *Following My Head* with our character determined not to fall back into the arms of an ex-partner and instead follow their head instead of their heart, and talking about how they don't want to allow the ex-partner to reduce them to a shadow of themselves.

¹⁷ Smith, C. (2022, December 2). *Exclusive: Raye talks taking escapism. top 10 as an independent artist*. Official Charts. Retrieved April 2, 2023, from https://www.officialcharts.com/chart-news/raye-celebrates-her-first-ever-top-10-single-as-a-solo-artist-with-escapism-its-such-a-blessing__38007/

¹⁸ Jones, S. (Ed.). (2022, October 14). *Raye announces pre-order for Highly anticipated album 'my 21st century blues'*. Simon Jones PR. Retrieved April 2, 2023, from <http://www.simonjonespr.com/news/2022/10/14/rayenbspannounces-pre-order-for-highly-anticipated-album-my-21stnbspcntury-blues>

Vocally, the performance on my track is not as good as it could be. There are moments where it loses rhythm and, despite being tuned extensively, still sounds a little pitchy at points. I produced the vocal tracking session in person, but I am not as good at getting the best takes out of a singer as I would like to be. I need to have a clearer idea of what the end result is going to sound like before I record, and be less afraid of going back over takes if they are not tight - essentially I need to listen more keenly whilst the vocalist is recording. Despite this I utilised some vocal processing and arrangement ideas from the reference track. RAYE frequently highlights important words or lines by having them doubled or tripled in the stereo image as if being doubled by a hip-hop MC, which I have done in the verses and pre-chorus. There are also moments where octave dropped vocals are used to thicken up the lead vocal, which I have used at the end of the pre-chorus.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have created three tracks that I believe do justice to their references and give a true and fair representation of where I am as a producer. Across the three tracks I think it is the vocal performances that are the weakest link, despite being three different vocalists, and a lot of that comes down to my skill as a producer 'in the room'. This can be developed and improved with self awareness and practice, which I will have a lot of as I continue to write and work with different vocalists.

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