

An Analysis and Practical Execution of Contemporary R&B, Alternative Pop and UK Garage

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Table of Content :

Table of Content :	2
Introduction	3
Analysis and Execution	5
Conclusion	10
Bibliography	12

Introduction

In the past decade, music has been rapidly changing and it is expected to evolve even more in the future. As a difference from the past period, music nowadays is based on exponential technological improvement. Based on that, it is easy to conclude that the evolution of music is directly proportional to the passing of time. .

With the help of Digital Service Providers (DSP), music now, more than ever, has a totally different way of reaching out to different target markets. This has led to a commercialization of musical genres, and different influences. This resulted in one contemporary track including characteristics of multiple genres, which at this point is not that rare anymore. Reflecting on this phenomenon, this was exactly what I wanted to portray in all three of the tracks, and this will be backed up by the portfolio section of the assignment. (Kordestani, 2021)

This essay will be reflected on contemporary music that will be used as a reference for final submissions. The written part of the assignment will be based on a few reference songs that were picked with an idea of genre diversity. All three of the submitted tracks were different in terms of style, with an aim of expanding the perspective of the artist(s) behind it. The tracks will revolve around one contemporary R&B track, one alternative pop track and one UK Garage track. This was in order to challenge both myself and the vocalist and see how well we would do in different genres. Also, it is in order to showcase the skill set of both of the artists involved in the practical part of the project. The ability to adapt to any genre is a skill of very big importance, and this is the impression I wanted to leave. All of the reference tracks will be thoroughly analyzed and the parts taken as an inspiration will be displayed. The paper will be focused on analyzing the techniques utilized in creation of chart-breaking songs. It will also display how these were portrayed in construction of the three tracks that were eventually submitted.

The submitted tracks have one thing in common, which is being in the frame of commercial music. In terms of why I have picked these genres, I would say that their relevance would be beneficial for my portfolio. According to the article in the Vibe magazine, R&B music has dominated last year's charts and brought some new flavors to the scene. To back this up, artists like H.E.R. and SZA have achieved some great results in that period. It is fair to say that 2021 was defined by R&B's influence, resulting in new names, such as Silk Sonic appearing in the scene. (Nelson Jr & Abraham, 2021)

As of UK Garage, as stated in Beatportal article, it has made a huge comeback to the mainstream scene in 2021. This makes it stand side by side with the other commercial genres considered as pop music. Artists like Craig David, Becky Hill, Bklava, and Armand Van Helden are only a couple of established artists to have ridden the UKG wave recently. (Caryl, 2021)

The main goal behind having three vocal tracks is collaborating with other artists and creating something together. It is also important to say that improving my songwriting and mixing skills was also on the list. This was beneficial for me in terms of learning how to work in context in the

process of creating a track. Previously, I did not have too many opportunities to work with vocalists and this is why this project was useful for me. My previous work was based on creating instrumentals that would work well on the dance floor.

The vocals for all three of the tracks were provided by Rudie McCree. She was the one to come up with the initial lyrics and then we worked together on developing the narrative. In terms of building the tracks, we would start with the message we wanted to send out.

Analysis and Execution

Track 1 : Rudie McCree - Flow State (Produced by VÄHN)

Reference Tracks : Jhené Aiko - 'The Worst', Nona - 'Forever Yours', Alicia Keys - 3 Hour Drive (feat. Sampha), Anomalie - Dribble

The first track of the portfolio section is a mixture of R&B music and Soul music with elements of Funk, taking inspiration and key features from all the genres. For decades R&B, short for Rhythm and Blues, has been dominating the charts in different shapes and forms. With the rhythms and rhymes more similar from hip hop, R&B today is a source of inspiration for most of the chart topping songs. This makes it one of the most successful genres in music history. (Masteclass.com, 2022) Artists like Alicia Keys, Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston are just a few examples of inspiration for the artists like Ariana Grande, The Weekend, Bruno Mars..

One of the main features of the genre are mellow jazz chords, which can also be found in my track. In the track 'The Worst' by Jhené Aiko, some complex voicings were used in order to accentuate the chords. These chords are usually played on the analog keyboards or even pianos, which is the case with the first reference track. In the track I have submitted, there was an analog keyboard emulation as a foundation of the track. In these scenarios, keyboards are a bit behind the vocals in the mix, which leads to them being attenuated in the low-mid area. (Tingen, 2007) Another key feature is sampled or even recorded drum grooves that set the rhythm and the swing of the track. As it can be heard in the 'Forever Yours' by Nona, It is fair to say that they are heavily influenced by hip hop drum loops. These drums are usually highly compressed and distorted in order to stand out and be in front. I decided to implement these techniques in order to bring out the track in full effect. With techniques such as parallel compression and distortion, the drums were able to be distinct and prominent. Another common element in these genres are heavy bass lines performed either on a bass guitar or an analog synthesizer. Along with the drums, regardless of the genre, the bass line is the most important element that drives the track. As in the foregoing track, 'Forever Yours' bass line can be heard following the chords, which is the formula that I have used. Another commonly used production technique to make the bass sound more prominent is distortion, which helps enhance the harmonics of the sound. With a bit of the low frequency enrichment, the bass was pretty much ready to go. This can be heard in all three of the tracks, making the overall track sound a bit warmer. (Nona, 2020)

Another important characteristic of R&B music are smooth and airy vocals with techniques such as melisma and falsetto singing techniques for an extra flavor. The vocals are the essential part of the R&B track that set out the emotion and send out the message. In '3 Hour Drive' by Alicia Keys and Sampha, which was used as a reference for vocal performance, the vocals seem to be thin and dreamy. They give away a melancholic and nostalgic feeling, which is exactly what we were going for in 'Flow State'. In terms of performance the vocals were spotless, so I applied just a bit of pitch correction just in case. In order to leave the space for the vocals in the high mid area, I decided to dynamically reduce the 4-5Khz range of the synth group with an equalizer. This needed to be done because the vocals were previously de-essed in that range, so they felt a bit weaker in that spot. In terms of general processing there was compression and eq, that just helped in keeping the vocals clear, and controlling the dynamics. With techniques such as reverb and delay I was able to replicate the space around the vocal. In '3 Hour Drive' it can also be heard that the reverb and delay signals are not muddying up the vocals. This is

where I applied sidechain compression on the reverb and delay sends in order to prevent the mix from being muddy. With the Abbey Road reverb technique I was able to clean the vocals even more. Cutting down the unnecessary low and high frequencies helped getting the clearer signal. (Trumm, 2020) What can also be heard in that track is that the vocals sound fairly warm. That is usually achieved by running vocals through analog compressors or amplifiers. (Keys, 2020) Due to the lack of analog equipment, I decided to run the vocals through the VST distortion plugin in order to achieve this effect. (Masterclass.com, 2022)

On the other side, only the keys, drums and bass felt a bit empty for the foundation of the track. This is where I decided to add organ melody and the bass riff that are intermittently playing. To achieve this I have used virtual emulations of the analog synthesizers found in KORG and Arturia Bundles. The idea behind this decision was having some kind of controlled chaos that keeps listeners' attention. I would say this is where the funk influence comes in. As Masterclass.com states, syncopated bass lines are one of the key features of this musical genre. (Masterclass.com, 2022) Something like this can be heard in the track called 'Dribble' by Anomalie. Even though a lot more jazzy and hectic, this track served as a perfect reference for the additional synths part. (Anomalie, 2021)

Track 2 : Rudie McCree - Denial (Produced by VÄHN)

Reference Tracks : Tems - Try Me, Tems - Free Mind, Coldplay - My Universe (feat. BTS)

The second track of the portfolio is an R&B driven alternative pop track with a Nigerian artist, Tems, taken as a reference. Tems that has taken the world by storm is defined by contemporary R&B sounds with elements of afropop. Originating from the African continent, she has merged the elements of that territory with contemporary R&B music. (Barnes, 2021) For ages, there were musical misfits that occurred as a result of genre evolution and growth. Today these mixtures of genres are more popular than ever, making a huge stamp on mainstream music. Even though alternative pop records reached the mainstream heights, artists are still releasing their music independently. In that sense, alternative music is a total opposite to pop music, but is still popular. To support this, Tems, declared as alternative artist, has put out tracks with trending artists such as Justin Bieber and Drake. (Conteh, 2021)

As mentioned in a Give it A Spin article, this encouraged artists to release more music independently. This phenomenon is predicted to lead to the reduced popularity of signing with labels in the future. (McCray, 2021)

As described in the PAM article, Tems' main characteristics are Nigerian influenced Afrobeat rhythms and neo soul vocals. As a genre bending artist, she keeps pursuing her own style that seems to fit in the alternative pop category. (PAM.com, 2021)

While her music is being defined by minor chord progressions played on software keyboards, a sampled 808 bassline, deep vocals, and african rhythms, her track '*Try Me*' was the one taken as a reference. The track is giving away a cheerful vibe, but contains a strong message, which is exactly what we were going for with this track. (Tems, 2020)

In terms of songwriting, when coming up with the concept, we wanted something that matches Tems' narrative. Based on personal stories, we came up with the lyrics and topline together, resulting in the final submission.

When analyzing the Tems' track '*Try Me*', I would focus on the arrangement first.

The track includes an 8 bar intro that brings in the main melody in order to familiarize the listener with the theme. This first half of the intro section of the track does not contain anything but the melody and that later appears in the chorus. The second half of the intro is being filled with the hip hop influenced drums that are appearing later in the track. It is followed by the 8 bar verse introducing the rhythm section and chords of the track leading to the chorus. Most of the time, these tracks are defined by four chord progression that keeps repeating throughout the track. Variations usually happen in the bridge or Middle 8 section of the track, which was the case for *'Try Me'* as well. In terms of production, it is fair to say that the track is not overproduced and there are not too many elements, which leaves enough space for the vocals. Drums, that are usually samples in tracks like this, are not over processed or over produced, which suits this genre of music. Vocals sound clean and are not being obstructed by synths or bassline. Altogether, it's a simple track with a clear message and joyful vibe at the same time. (Tems, 2020)

When arranging the track, we pretty much followed the same formula, with slight variations. In order to keep listeners' attention, I added the pizzicato synth in the chorus section acting as the lead sound. This is more of a technique used in Pop Dance or EDM tracks, but we decided to keep it because it gives away a feeling of uniqueness. Furthermore, the track opens up with that synth in the intro, which is a commonly used technique in pop music. Something like this can be heard in a track *'My Universe'* by Coldplay and BTS. To prove the point, that particular track starts with the vocals that appear in the chorus later on.

Apart from the main 808 bass that covers the low frequency range, there is a distorted 808 bass appearing in the chorus. The idea behind this decision is to cover a bit of low-mid and fill in the gaps between vocals in the chorus. Before I added it, I thought there was space left to fill and the chorus sounded a bit empty. In terms of vocal production, as stated in the previous section, vocals were performed very well. In that manner, there was no pitch correction happening at all. In terms of processing the vocals and blending it with the rest of the track, the vocal chain was pretty similar to the previous track. I had to make sure the synths were not getting in the way of the vocals and vice versa. There was another technique that helped the vocals stay on top but still have the other elements playing liberally.

Multiband Sidechain Compression is the technique that was utilized for this effect. By ducking the low frequencies of the vocal, I was able to maintain the balance between the two. (Last Haze.com, 2020)

In order to have the space around the vocals I applied the time modulation effects such as reverb and delay. Aiming to have something different happening in the track, we added the harmonies to the main vocals in the bridge section. It helped the vocals sound like a choir and lead the track into the third chorus.

Track 3 : Rudie McCree - Dreaming of You (Produced by VÄHN)

Reference Tracks : Becky Hill - Could Be My Somebody (feat. S1mba), KURUPT FM - Summertime (feat. Craig David)

The third track was in the style of UK Garage as it has experienced a huge comeback on the mainstream music scene. Originating from the 1990s, it is a type of Electronic Dance Music (EDM) born on the territory of the UK. Influenced by the modern musical genres such as Dubstep, Future Garage and UK Funky it came back with a blast. According to Daily Beast, Disclosure were the ones to bring UKG back with their debut album '*Settle*'. (Trinh, 2017) Some of the key features that define this genre are the groovy basslines, housy beat, and catchy vocals. (Masteclass.com, 2022)

Without further ado, I would focus on the first reference, which is '*Could Be My Somebody*' by Becky Hill and S1mba. The track features hard drums consisting of heavy clipped kick drum and hard snare, followed by the open and closed hi-hats. Those can also be heard in my track, replicating pretty much the similar rhythm. Drums that were used in my track are samples, supported by some chopped up drum loops to give it some movement. As for the bassline that is so prominent in the mix, the sub seemed to be layered with another bass. This is what I also did in my track in order for the bassline to be transferred to different sound systems. Along with the drum rhythm, the bassline sets the groove and the foundation of the track. Going forward with the reference track, the plucky top melody can be heard. In order to set the main theme of the track, Rudie and I came up with the catchy melody. It was played and recorded in the software and quantized afterwards. (Hill, 2021) In terms of the lyrics, most of the tracks that I have analyzed are love songs. This can be heard in '*Summertime*' by KURUPT FM and Craig David. It portrays the happy and melodic vibe that we were led by in our process. Talking about fantasizing about someone, I think we have managed to fit into that narrative. (KURUPT FM, 2021)

In order to achieve some additional swing, I added a synthesized organ that compliments the melody. This way I achieved the additional fullness in the track, leaving a better overall feeling. In terms of treating the vocals, they were recorded pretty well, so just a bit of noise reduction and pitch correction were applied to the initial signal.

Mastering

All of the tracks were mastered similarly, with the idea of being in the standards for the streaming platforms. I decided not to go over - 14 LUFS (Loudness Unit Full Scale) in order to avoid the compression and keep the dynamics. This number has been an industry standard for the streaming platforms for some time now. (Mastering the Mix.com, 2020) I believe there shouldn't be the same exact formula for different genres, but this just felt safe.

Conclusion

Looking back at the process, this project has taught me a lot about working in context and collaborating. I have learned a lot about the philosophy of collaborating and bringing the best out of the artist. In terms of production and mixing, with some research, I have managed to understand how to work on these songs as a whole. Having used the reference tracks, I was also able to recreate what I heard, and add my own twist to it. It is fair to say that this project has helped me grow creatively and professionally. I feel like this has helped me get a sense of working in a team, and I hope to have a long term partnership with Rudie.

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