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PROJECT: INCORPORATING DISPARATE INFLUENCES INTO POP MUSIC

With this project, I propose to create a portfolio of pop and dance-pop tracks that incorporate disparate influences from world and historical music, influences that have not yet been heard in any major hit songs this century. The success of the project will be measurable by whether or not the finished tracks are deemed to have commercial potential, by a panel of industry experts.

The aim of this project is to increase my versatility as a pop writer-producer, as I adopt a holistic view of music. This stems from a firm belief that, the more styles a producer understands, the more interesting techniques they will have available to call on when arranging tracks. This should lead to a higher quality of music being produced, perhaps even a more timeless result. In the words of legendary producer Quincy Jones, when discussing modern producers: "People limit themselves musically, man. Do these musicians know tango? Macumba? Yoruba music? Samba? Bossa nova? Salsa? Cha-cha?" (Marchese, 2018). I believe that what he is saying is that it is easier to stand out in music when you make it your aim to understand all genres besides the one you specialise in.

In creating songs with hit potential, the hope is that one of these songs could get cut by a known artist and turn into an actual hit song. This would propel my career along rapidly and could be leveraged into a publishing deal and sessions with more high-profile artists/writers.

The reasoning behind selecting this project is based on a few of my own observations over recent years in respect to what gives a song 'hit potential'. These observations have been researched further and shall be discussed below as sub-headings.

DIFFERENT BUT NOT TOO DIFFERENT

There is seemingly a paradox with hit songs: at the time of release, they must fit in with the current chart landscape to sit neatly on radio playlists, yet they must also stand out from all the other similar songs. An obvious way to strike this balance is by creating a typical song then including precisely one rare influence, be it melodic or harmonic, in the arrangement or in the sound design, the lyrics or vocal performance. This strategy has indeed been used successfully to create recent hits such as Jason Derulo's *Talk Dirty*, which features a prominent middle-eastern melody played on the saxophone). However, these types of songs are still quite rare in the pop charts, suggesting that it is difficult to make disparate influences work together effectively in the same track. Learning this ability should have excellent commercial applications.

Interestingly, the need for newly released songs to fit a specific radio format is actually a function of how the human brain works. The brain is wired for pattern recognition, and hence will always try to categorise a new experience so it can compare with past experiences to predict an outcome. For example, a listener who likes pop music but dislikes rock might subconsciously dismiss a new song that falls within the grey zone between both genres, because they fear they might not understand the song, musically speaking. The brain likes things that are predictable, as it receives a dopamine hit when it has made a correct prediction. However, the brain also likes novelty. When an unexpected event happens, the brain receives an instant adrenaline hit to elicit a fight or flight response; when the event is deemed not to be a threat, a dopamine hit is delivered. In music, this occurs at the micro level whenever there is a surprise in a piece, such as a middle-eastern melody in an otherwise typical pop song. (Powell, 2017).

Below is a selection of recent smash pop hits incorporating elements from different musical traditions and genres in order to achieve the goal of 'different but not too different'. It could certainly be argued that the inclusion of these influences were the leading causes of success in these songs, and hence I plan to study these tracks to determine how these influences were incorporated so seamlessly in each:

- African High Life - 'One Dance' by Drake
- Caribbean Dancehall (specifically the 'Dembow riddim') - 'Sorry' by Justin Bieber, 'Rockabye' by Clean Bandit, 'Work' by Rihanna
- Caribbean Reggae - 'Side To Side' by Ariana Grande
- Classic Latin grooves - 'Wild Thoughts' by DJ Khaled
- Middle Eastern - 'Talk Dirty' by Jason Derulo
- Indian Banghra/Bollywood - 'Toxic' by Britney Spears, 'Mi Gente' by J.Balvin
- Native American pipe music- 'Stole The Show' by Kygo
- American Bluegrass - 'Timber' by Pitbull, 'Old Town Road' by Lil Nas X
- Folk/Celtic - 'Wake Me Up' by Avicii, 'It Ain't Me' by Kygo

(Spotify, 2019)

STREAMING AND GLOBALISATION

With the proliferation around the world of streaming services (e.g. Spotify launched in India earlier this year), there is greater centralisation of visible sales metrics by which the public can judge an artist's success. Social proof is a strong motivator for many listeners, and so an artist with 200 million streams is much more likely to attract further listeners than an artist with 2 million. In previous decades it would have for example been possible for an artist to have phenomenal record sales and fan-base in South America yet be entirely unknown to the US and UK markets. Whereas today, any phenomenal streaming activity from one location will eventually attract some level of global attention.

This mechanism could be seen to underpin the global success of Luis Fonsi's Despacito (even before the Justin Bieber remix made the song more palatable for radio in English speaking countries). Now the same mechanism is bringing top reggaeton artists like J.Balvin and Bad Bunny, and K-Pop groups such as BTS and BlackPink, into the US pop charts on a consistent basis. This suggests that genres of music from around the world will continue to spill into each other, in a growing trend. Music producers fit for purpose in this future market will need the ability to blend genres with ease.

THE 'ROSE-TINTED GLASSES' EFFECT, NOSTALGIA, AND THE CYCLIC NATURE OF MUSICAL TRENDS

Articles such as Reuters (2012) and McAlpine (2018), which claim broadly that "music is getting worse" tend to compare the cherry-picked mega-hits of the past with the average of current chart content. But using this method of comparison, old music will always appear more favourable than current music. This is an example of how we view the past through 'rose-tinted glasses', and one reason why some people will always prefer older music. An amalgamation of elements from their historical genre of choice may be enough to convince these individuals that they like a new chart song.

Another reason to include influences from the past is that people typically like music that reminds them of their youth. This is seen frequently with throwback hits like 'Uptown Funk' by Bruno Mars, and can also be observed more subtly at the macro level: trends repeat with each generation, as parents play for their children both current hit songs and the music of their own youth. Recently, there seems to be an increased appetite for more adventurous music, as happened previously during the prog rock era. Atypical song structures now often appear in hit songs, and slightly more experimental artists have come to the forefront (such as Childish Gambino and Billie Eilish). A particularly good example of this trend is the very successful yet very weird track 'Sicko Mode' from Travis Scott. Hence, tracks with experimental edge (perhaps blending genres) are likely to have a commercial edge in the current market climate.

SUMMARY OF INFLUENCES TO INCORPORATE

To produce 30+ minutes of music, I will create 9-10 finished tracks (each between 2:30 and 3:30 in length). I have selected a range of influences that should prove appropriate for inclusion within pop. These influences are split evenly between world music and historical music. Preliminary research has been conducted for the world music genres, as the challenge with these is to find unfamiliar elements to use. For historical genres, the challenge is to include familiar elements that haven't been successfully used before within pop, and hence these choices are based on my own tastes, observations and experiences rather than on research.

WORLD MUSIC

- Apala: This genre of percussion based music from the Yoruba people of Nigeria dates back to the 1930s. Typical features of Apala music are the use of 'talking drums', agogo bells, a rattle and a type of thumb piano that is very similar to a kalimba, which lays typically pentatonic melodies. Compositionally speaking, Apala is similar to most African traditional music in that it follows the prosodies of speech of the language of its players, including elements of call and response as if a conversation is taking place within the music (Oludare, 2018). Hence a natural fit for this in a pop song would be to base the drum rhythms upon the vocal rhythm implied within the lyrics. Indeed there are many examples of tribal-style drumming in pop songs, but these are typically very simple rhythms made to fit around the pop song, usually summoning a vague tribal flavour but with no specific histories being drawn upon.
- Bossa Nova: a mellow yet danceable Latin music that originated in Brazil in the 1950s. Its main feature is the use of jazz chords in a specific clave-based rhythm, featuring interplay between the root notes and the rest of the chord tones. It is traditionally played on a nylon-stringed guitar, with rhythmic South American percussion layered around this pattern to develop a deep groove. A semi-recent example of Bossa Nova influence in chart music is from the 2006 Black Eyed Peas remix of "Mas Que Nada" by Sergio Mendes, which alludes to Bossa Nova and Samba but doesn't actually feature the classic Bossa Nova nylon string guitar patterns. (Wikipedia [a], 2019; PianoGroove, 2017)

- Carnatic Music: one of the two main types of Indian classical music, this genre was developed in the 12th century in south India. It does not feature the sitar, tabla, and the extensive improvisation of Hindustani music, it's north Indian counterpart; but it shares many musical concepts such as ragas (a set of scales to be used for creating melodies), talas (a set of rhythmic building blocks to be used), and a non-even 22 step octave which sounds microtonal to ears used to the 12TET tuning system. Carnatic music is generally made for vocals and its ragas and talas are shorter and faster than that of Hindustani music, which should make it a suitable style to include within a pop piece. (Wikipedia [b], 2019)
- Gamelan: the word means "striking" and indeed it is largely based on percussive instruments and mallets/metallophones. This genre is played using instruments from Indonesia, Bali, and Java; these instruments should sit neatly in a pop arrangement, as they are not dissimilar to the marimbas used in many recent hit songs. Each country has its own sub-genres, tunings, scales and rhythms, though these can be broadly categorised into soft- and loud-style. For inclusion in a pop track, it could prove interesting to contrast these two styles in the verse and chorus sections. Gamelan has several interesting concepts which would be novel to pop music: one is the ebb and flow of time rather than following a consistent tempo; another is having the music breathe with pairs of instruments tuned either slightly sharp (the inhale) or slightly flat (the exhale) - these can also play together to create a beating that can represent the heart, life or the divine. (Indoindians, 2018; ThoughtCo, 2018)
- Spouge: a little known Caribbean genre born in 1960s Barbados as a fusion of ska from Jamaica with calypso. It features similar instrumentation to the widely known style of ska, but with a different rhythmic feel and prominent use of cowbell to accent this rhythm. The less syncopated rhythms used in spouge are compatible with the four-on-the-floor beat used in much of modern pop (especially pop EDM). (Wikipedia [c], 2019; Walcott, 2019)

HISTORICAL MUSIC

- Baroque: based mostly on compositional techniques, categorised by heavy use of rule-based counterpoint, fluid modulations between modes/keys, and writing for small ensembles of instruments, this genre could certainly be suitable for performance with modern instruments such as synthesisers. There could be room for baroque counterpoint techniques in an EDM drop, creating something like a more complex version of Avicii's 'Silhouettes'.
- Classical/Romantic: this music is typically written for orchestra. Clean Bandit are a current example of a successful pop act who often incorporate a classical-style string quartet into their work, but even in the song "Symphony" there are no other prominent symphonic elements. Recording an orchestra is not feasible for this project, due to tight timelines. However, there is potential for building a track around a sample from a powerful piece such as Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake', a piece which may not be familiar to the youth of today.
- Swing: this music is typically written for a 'big band' featuring a 9-piece horn section as well as drums, double bass, keys and/or guitar and sometimes strings, and featuring complex jazz harmony. Similarly to classical music, it would be difficult within the given timeframe to master the composition of such a complex genre, but there could be hit potential for a modern cover of a classic swing song, featuring big-

band samples from the original recording; this is the approach that will likely be adopted.

- **Rock-n-roll:** this early, upbeat style of rock music was usually based on 12-bar blues, often featuring a prominent melodic guitar or piano riff in the intro and moving slowly through a I, IV, V chord progression (often using seventh chords). Simple drum grooves like the 'Bo Diddly beat' were used to create songs that were danceable. Recent hits such as 'Bad Guy' by Billie Eilish and 'Bar Liar' by Selena Gomez have alluded to this style, employing some of the genre's harmonic techniques. However, a more immediate way to summon the 1950-60s nostalgia of this genre would perhaps be to sample a classic riff like the intro to Roy Orbison's 'Pretty Woman', using that as the basis of a new track.
- **Classic Rock:** a later sub-genre of rock music, the most memorable guitar riffs from the 1970-80s hits of this genre perhaps tended to be more harmonised than those of the earlier rock-n-roll. Riffs were often dyad-based or used full power chords for a thicker and more powerful sound, normally with a distorted guitar tone. Note that this distortion adds many harmonics to each note, filling out the frequency spectrum without needing to add extended chord tones or without the need to play the third of each chord. This technique is applicable to also modern EDM-pop, so it may be appropriate to replace a supersaw synth with a classic rock riff to create a fresh EDM drop. Another feature of classic rock is the use of guitar solos, and again, this could be used to great effect in a similar way.
- **Punk:** categorised by fast, loud and 'nasty sounding' distorted guitars playing power-chords and by fast drumming, it should prove difficult to get these elements to sit within a polished pop arrangement. The plan is to cover a punk song in a pop style, while retaining as many of the punk elements as possible. The closest recent pop has come to punk has been with the song 'I Don't Care' by Icona Pop and Charli XCX; this track will be examined for useable techniques with which to make my own arrangement work.

CONCLUSION

The project should prove interesting insofar as it will bolster commercial awareness of musical trends from around the world and history. The music charts are a dynamic environment with commercial, cultural, and technological forces counteracting each other. To retain a commercial advantage in what has become a very crowded marketplace, it is important to understand the interplay between all these influences.

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