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When analysing a musical genre, it's important that the fundamental characteristics are defined, and reasons for these characteristics are suggested. Most genres of music today have had prior influence and are versions of their previous selves. Some elements have remained constant, and others have been completely left behind. Advancements in technology, availability of information and access to musical education, are all contributing factors for some of the changes made over time. Some may argue these changes have had a negative effect, and that they have swayed too far from their origin. Some elements of genres have remained constant like the instrumentation, lyrical themes, and song structure, whilst the availability of home recording equipment has allowed for much wider experimentation regarding effects and plug-ins due to the competitive market and the current, heightened know-how. To what extent do all these factors contribute to the formation of Lo-fi, contemporary R&B and modern neo-soul, and how have they shaped the genres as we currently know them?

The genre Lo-fi stems from its unabbreviated term Lo-fidelity, meaning imperfections can be heard within the musical composition that would generally be removed by a producer as they are deemed undesirable (James, 2021). Historically, lo-fidelity recordings would be made from home and are defined by unpolished pieces of music. Such imperfections can include tape-deck noises, vinyl hiss and ambient sounds such as the room noise (Criscuolo, 2022). Throughout my track, a room tone is used, much like in *Toofpick*, (Blue Wednesday, Shopan). This provides a slight crackle to degrade the sound quality alongside with an automated SoundShifter plug-in, which slowly detunes the entire track from 440hz to 409hz, creating the illusion that the track is out of tune and has warped from start to finish, similar again to *Toofpick* (Blue Wednesday, Shopan). With a tape emulation and over compressed drums, I elected to further degrade the audio, playing on the 'old fashioned' feel to create a heightened sense of lo-fidelity music.

Today, these characteristics are what now make Lo-fi such a desirable genre, leaning on a more 'old fashioned' sounding finished product. Lo-fidelity recordings are historically said to be "recorded with inexpensive equipment" (MasterClass, 2021). However, advancements in technology have resulted in better quality home recordings. High quality, affordable home studio equipment may have resulted in the quality of lo-fi music increasing and the degradation of sound quality becoming more of stylistic choice than a result of the lack of high-quality equipment. The accessibility of home music creation in the last decade has massively increased with "a decent audio interface...costing as little as £100" (Checktrade, 2021). I chose to use high quality samples and then to degrade the audio myself using distortions, tape saturation and detuning alongside high pass filtering of the vocal samples to soften the audio and have a gentler sound - drawing on the techniques used in *Hurt By You* (Imfinenow & ÊMIA). Conversely, there is a sample ("*I don't even know what's going on right now*") that I recorded using an iPhone, where the sound quality is very low, further complementing the Lo-fi sound quality.

In continuation with the topic of accessibility, websites such as YouTube have been a major catalyst to the success of Lo-fi music with many producers using it as their preferred platform of distribution due to the genre's extensive links with visuals, such as Anime. Lo-fi producer Lofi Girl, broadcast almost 13,000 hours to 7.5 million subscribers between 2015 and 2017 (Criscuolo, 2022). YouTube is free and is accessible to anyone with a computer, adding to the global reach of Lo-fi.

A suggestion for its success could be that Lo-fi has been linked with 'study music'. The repetitive and easy listening nature of the songs combined with predictable loops and samples, creates a "calming" effect and an overall relaxed environment for studying or working. Lo-fi has also been categorised as background music, where people who are working or studying can consume non-challenging, easy-going music –

especially those who are working from home. In 2020, the Coronavirus Pandemic saw a massive increase of the world's workforce and students operating from home. During the lockdown period, there was an increase of 85% in Google searches for Lo-fi music (Criscuolo, 2022), therefore establishing its place as functional background music for productivity. In opposition to this, The Verge described Lo-fi "not just as background music, but as ways to find community in a difficult time" (Alexander, 2020), suggesting a potential shift in the audience relationship during a global pandemic. Using a simplistic song structure with subtle variation like in *Float* (Misha, Monma, Aiguille), I maintained a background music feel using repetition, steady dynamics, and sparse ear candy.

The inner mechanics of Lo-fi music include jazz influenced chord progressions, laid back drum feels between 60-90BPM, to emulate the heartbeat, and a reliance on samples that are repeated throughout the tracks. Implementing chromaticism, modulation, and extended chords, I used several jazz idiosyncrasies to provide tension and release. I chose 57BPM for this track, slightly outside of the tempo brackets mentioned. I felt at this tempo, the vocal sample felt the least rushed, providing enough space for percussion loops and harmony to be heard most clearly. The lazy drum feel in Lo-fi could be said to have come from J Dilla's approach to drum programming, where the "snare drum is a 32nd note early" (Hein, 2022). This creates an imperfection which provides the drum feel with more swing and humanisation, resulting in less rigid, on-the-grid, drum grooves. The snare displacement technique was implemented where I placed the snare exactly on the 2 and 4 of the beats and used the delay function to 'tick' the snare 38.9ms behind bars 2 and 4 to emulate the 'Dilla Time' technique. I chose to make this a constant as I wanted the groove to be maintained and for the song not to return to a straight groove. The vocal sampling and repurposing aren't dissimilar to the boom bap movement in hip-hop (Neemo, 2022), where Lo-fi draws many similarities regarding sampling.

I think, on reflection, this track does fall within the realm of lo-fi, referencing a range of characteristics and stylistic features. I do think the track could be considered too harmonically rich, referencing jazz harmony too much due to my personal preference and current skillset. A more simplistic set of chords may achieve a more authentic result, complimenting the genres easy listening and background inclination.

The beginnings of Rhythm and Blues, commonly known as R&B, emerged when Billboard magazine journalist, Jerry Wrexler, coined the phrase in 1947 (Britannica, 2022). Today, contemporary R&B couldn't sound further from where it once came, but still draws on some of the fundamental elements that were established 75 years ago like structure, feel and harmony. The redefinition now includes elements of the genre hip-hop, which has been said to be arguably interchangeable when defining contemporary R&B (Agbai, 2020). Using this information, I have created a track that draws on elements of original R&B and combining them with hip-hop. The merging of the two genres works especially well when R&B vocals are combined with a rapper. On reflection, the use of a rapper for this track would've allowed for a more exciting and fuller track. R&B's redefinition caused controversy, with some believing that contemporary R&B became untethered from its origin, due to the drastic changes from R&B from its predecessor in 1947 (Wolfson, 2015). I believe some elements of my track contain enough aspects of R&B for it not to be defined only as hip-hop, which has been quite a challenge to find a satisfactory compromise.

Contemporary R&B found its feet alongside Hip-hop between the 1990s and 2000s eras (Discogs, 2022). The repetitive nature of hip-hop drum loops can be seen in contemporary R&B, alongside simple chord progressions, like those found in early R&B. A constant within all types of R&B could be found in the

general instrumentation of bass, drums, piano, guitar, and vocals (MasterClass, 2021). These elements are all present in my track with a heavier focus on the bassline, like in *Make Luv* -Brent Faiyaz, and vocals. I felt that having this emphasis makes it easier to define the track as contemporary R&B, especially when the vocal is heavily processed, tuned and contains reverb and delay **automation, to add dynamics (Owsinski, 2013)**, like Summer Walker's *Body*.

Maintaining earlier elements of R&B has helped with the identification of contemporary R&B and arguably could have contributed to its success since its origins. These elements could be said to be nostalgic of its previous musical eras and in 2020, at the start of the global pandemic, Spotify saw a 54% increase in "nostalgic playlists" (Spotify, 2020) suggesting forms of music containing familiar elements bring comfort and popularity, especially during challenging times. In my track, I have tried to use elements that could evoke such nostalgia like the use of an 808 bass, first heard in the early 1980s (Roland, n.d.) Additionally, the 2022 Half Time Show saw artists such as Anderson .Paak and Mary J Blige contribute to the increase of the overall plays in R&B and Hip-hop (Spotify, 2022). These artists occupy a different space within Contemporary R&B, as they are from different eras, yet they can be defined within the same genre. For this reason, I have found it a challenge to craft a track that combines elements from several decade of artists, as the genre has been said to have historically been misdiagnosed (Smith, 2022) and abandoned (Kennedy, 2018). I think an element that could've ejected a slightly more convincing feel would've been live drums.

I have elected to include elements and characteristics that I have identified as mostly constant across all contemporary R&B. Simplicity, repetition and accessibility are features easily identifiable within contemporary R&B. Regarding simplicity, I chose to use the chords of a minor blues (i, iv and v) referencing the 'B' in R&B. A fairly static harmony allows for vocal melody freedom, not dissimilar to a chord vamp, common to blues. The vocals contain themes of love (Tavakoli, 2021) that are also explicit. Such themes are common across all types of R&B, from all eras. Additionally, the vocal melody is repetitive, taking influence from many R&B singers like Eryka Badu's *On & On*. Many elements within the track repeat like the bass, drums, and synth sounds. In summary, the track is hip-hop inspired with the use of 808s, with R&B style vocals, as opposed to rapping. Using more modern production techniques, some samples have been reversed, detuned, and transposed to create a more coherent piece of music. I created tension and release using risers and impacts coupled with reverb bus automation, to create a wider, more interesting mix. Tension and release form the fundamentals of music both rhythmically, harmonically, and melodically. I think my use of these production techniques were used tastefully but to some could come across as too frequent.

My contemporary R&B track is, in my opinion, is as true to the genre, as it can be. However, as the genre of contemporary R&B has received a bad press, with some believing "Real R&B" seems like a lost art, I feel that many songs within contemporary R&B could also be defined as other genres. Its wavering definition is quite difficult to pinpoint, with its few defining features overlapping with other genres, like Hip-hop (Kennedy, 2018). I have implemented modern production techniques, alongside the use of a 'traditional' R&B instrumentation. I have added my own personal interpretation of what the genre sounds like. I feel like this is appropriate as it's such a loosely defined genre that can have an open-ended interpretation. Some of my production choices could be said to be uncharacteristic, like the use of a beat change and heavily altered vocals. In future productions within the genre, I feel that it would be most true to focus on a small-time frame of the genre to pinpoint the sound from a specific year, rather than taking reference over the span of several decades. I found that my main limitation during the production process came

from the use of the acapella vocal sample, rather than recording live vocals myself. On reflection, recording a vocalist would've achieved a more malleable recording, one that I could've dictated and shaped to a sound that I was completely happy with.

The term neo-soul in itself is a contradiction, with 'neo' meaning new and 'soul' implying timelessness, with modern neo-soul finding itself in the midst of an identity crisis. This, similar to contemporary R&B, results in confusion as the definition is open to interpretation. However, in the late 1990s, the genre was coined within Motown Records by producer, Kedar Massenburg (Nero, 2019). Albums such as D'Angelo's *Brown Sugar* and Erika Badu's *Baduizm*, place the genres routes within soul, funk, jazz, and hip hop. Many elements of neo-soul run in parallel with other genres with its defining characteristics found within its live instrumentation, use of sampling and carefully crafted basslines. The genre was said to have vanished by the 2000s (UJAM, 2020) due to the demand for more accessible pop music and with neo-soul's quirker attributes, it was said it felt too complex (Kot, 2000) as it didn't fit neatly within a genre. This could be why artists distanced themselves from the term neo-soul and said it was a mere shallow marketing tool (Nero, 2019) to try and convert the genre to a more mainstream audience.

Neo-soul made a comeback in 2020, with community collaborative The Silhouette Project providing music that combatted the current popular music of the time (Winter, 2021). This style of music arguably could have influenced the likes of Conor Albert, who a year later was described as having neo-soul foundations (Cobbald, 2021). These foundations include guitar riffs and solos, the use of synths, straight eighth hi-hat patterns and a lazy drum feel (UJAM, 2020). Neo soul today is more harmonically rich than prior versions of itself, and now it includes more jazz influenced chord progressions like the 2-5-1 (A&R Factory, 2022). More jazz influence can be heard within the rhythmical approaches, where the groove 'lags behind the beat' emulating the swing feel of jazz singers (Carnegie Hall). More stylistic vocal approaches include passages of more spoken word, coupled with singing. Neo-soul demonstrates catchy lyrical themes that follow a soulful tone, but with a much higher level of emotional intelligence. Male vocalists acknowledging their vulnerability is present, demonstrating progressive and modern lyricism.

Regarding the vocal performance in my neo-soul track, I directed the vocalist to implement a style of spoken phrasing in the verses into a more open, hook-based chorus, aligning with neo-soul's attributes. The lyrical theme is one of love and hesitance regarding relationships - feeling out of phase with a significant other. To accentuate the jazz influence in neo-soul, I used a 2-5-1 in the chorus, using an altered flat nine chord to further demonstrate the jazz influence. The verse chord pattern contains a secondary dominant chord, much like in *Get You Again* by Mac Ayres, which provides harmonic interest and the use of tension and release. The bass is played spaciouly, used to punctuate key moments like stops and stabs and further allowing room to breathe. A guitar riff and solo are played, paying homage to Connor Albert's track *Crescent Moon*, however, I elected to implement more jazz motifs and line clichés, as opposed to a more pentatonic and diatonic approach. I used guitar effects like an octave pedal and chorus, playing on my own interpretation but swaying quite far from a neo-soul reference. Similarly, to the Lo-fi track, I implemented the 'Dilla Time' feel (Hein, 2022), with a delayed snare and swung kick pattern, encouraging a heavy head-bobbing groove.

In summary, I really like this track, as it falls within a style that I am very fond of and in general, the component parts work well together and are in keeping with modern neo-soul. The vocal melody is complimentary of the harmony and navigates through the changes assertively. In opposition, the use of

non-live instruments such as MIDI keys, bass and synths oppose a fundamental characteristic of the genre and in future productions, I intend to for only live instruments to be used to create a more authentic track, with a livelier feel.

I am content with the three tracks that I have produced. Specifically, I am proud of the drum groove and feel of the Lo-fi track and I feel that it provides an authentic foundation. Furthermore, I am pleased with how the contemporary R&B track feels, with a powerful bassline and a rhythmic awareness of the flow of the vocal sample. The neo-soul track is where I am most pleased, where I have been able to display my guitar improvisational skills, alongside a competent knowledge of jazz harmony. There are several areas of future improvement, including producing a shorter Lo-fi track, to fit within the typical 2:15 to 2:30 minute timeframe, where the genre predominantly fits, coupled with the use of my own recorded samples, that are at a lower quality to begin with. Further improvements to my contemporary R&B track would be collaborating with singers and rappers to form an authentic, more personal song, where I can input my lyrical and melodic ideas, opposed to being stuck within the confinement of a vocal sample. And finally, when I produce another neo-soul track, I intend to record only live instruments, to add to the human elements of the genre, to further compliment the 'soul' within the genre.

There are many elements that comprise a musical genre, and even with the most intricate subtleties and variations, they can be placed within musical boxes and categories when dissected to their bare bones. Such partitions can include their instrumentation, structure, musical blueprint, like time signature or key and many other measurable elements. What I have concluded from producing three tracks, within three different genres, is that what ultimately defines a genre of music, is an individual's interpretation using the rough blanket terms provided to them from the wider musical world. By placing an artist or a song within the confinement of a genre, it is then a much more marketable product, and the real musical content can somewhat be discarded, when labelled. I believe that the three tracks that I have produced all fall conventionally within the genres I have chosen to label them as, but ultimately, genre is both a musical and social construct.

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