

AN ANALYSIS OF HIP-HOP, SYNTH-POP AND SHOEGAZE

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Wordcount: 3246

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Introduction:

As streaming services ever expand their libraries, our musical intake is at an all-time high. The Press Association reports the average person spends 18.4 hours per week listening (RTE, 2021), and with all-encapsulating subscription prices, our wallets no longer restrict us to conforming to just our chosen genre. Personally crafted discovery playlists have allowed the lines between genres to become blurred, and consequently, listeners are increasingly accustomed to a wider array of styles.

In this essay, I am going to be evaluating the characteristics and techniques of three genres, how these are used in example tracks, and methods I have researched and put into practice in the creation of my own style-specific productions. I have chosen to evaluate Hip-Hop, Synth-Pop and Shoegaze, selecting two reference tracks from each, to accurately highlight the stylistic traits.

Hip-Hop

Background and Defining Characteristics

Born out of the Bronx borough of New York City in the 1970s, Hip-Hop was formed to “express the dissatisfaction of social conditions that plagued blacks” (New York Jazz Workshop, 2021). With musical instruments virtually inaccessible, pioneers chose new

devices to use, expressing themselves through rap, turntable DJing, breakdance and graffiti (Kugelberg, 2007).

Continuing to develop throughout the 1980s, sampling became a unique aspect of the genre. Public Enemy's first studio album, 'Yo! Bum Rush the Show' (1987) was created largely using the method, as Producer and group Founder, Hank Shocklee, explained:

I wanted to compose the whole thing only using the samples inside the drum machine and using the DJ as the musician. Scratches and cuts were the instruments being played (Barrow, 2016)

This allowed artists to explore their extensive record collections, and crucially mix genres to create collages of compositions.

Hip-Hop has only grown in popularity since. At the 2018 Grammy Awards, Childish Gambino won Record of the Year for his release 'This Is America' (2018) (Grammy, 2021). The popularity of UK Hip-Hop has also exploded, with an influx of artists infiltrating the pop charts and streaming playlists, such as Dave's critically acclaimed LP, 'We're All Alone In This Together' (2021), which hit number one in the Official Albums Chart in August 2021 (Official Charts, 2021). Loyle Carner symbolizes another success story, with his compositions often exploring jazz elements, inspired by the works of classic Hip-Hop artists of the early 2000s, such as Madvillain and J Dilla.

For my reference tracks, I will analyse two modern examples of the genre: Loyle Carner's 'Still' (2019) and Nix Northwest's 'See U In The Morning' (2019).

How the reference tracks conform to Hip-Hop

Throughout Carner's sophomore album 'Not Waving, But Drowning' (2019) space is left within the loop-based instrumentals so as not to distract from main vocal lines. Placing an

emphasis on lyrical content allows for ongoing themes to develop, with Carner able to deliver the overarching theme of graciousness in his typically polite and understated way. The record encapsulates what is currently very popular in the genre and topped the Official Hip-Hop and R&B Albums Chart in May 2019 (Official Charts, 2019).

As is commonplace in Hip-Hop, the song is in 4/4 (Zerfas, 2014), and sits in the key of G# Major. 'Still' makes heavy use of extended chords, with the Dorian progression, G#(I) C#7(IV) G#6(I) Gm7(I) F#7(VII), repeating throughout. The use of seventh chords is a common trait of jazz music, which is heavily inspirational to the Hip-Hop genre on both a musical and cultural level:

Both have had immeasurable impact on the cultural fabric of American society and life expressing the plight of African Americans (New York Jazz Workshop, 2021)

My submission for this genre is: Ronnie Maurice - 'Early Days'.

Production techniques

Utilising entirely acoustic instruments, 'Still' is given a lo-fi twist in the production stage.

Featuring a developing, atmospheric build, a four-bar piano loop opens the song before a bass-heavy drum machine loop and reverb-soaked background vocals provide atmospheric pad-like textures to underpin the clean main vocal. A bassline buries itself in the mix, yet conducts a swung, rhythmic feel to the piece. The mix itself is seamless, with minimal dynamic alterations throughout.

The continuous piano motif features heavy lo-fi processing, with distortion, filtering and modulation creating a vintage, tape-like aesthetic. Abrupt polyrhythmic looping, akin to the historical performance style used with samplers such as the E-mu SP1200 and more recently, Roland SP-404, give excitement. Conversely, In the second reference track, 'See U

In The Morning', Nix Northwest makes use of guitar loops, something I wished to explore in my production.

I used these inspirations to create a lo-fi aesthetic to my piece, recording a variety of lead and rhythm guitar tracks before splicing them into four-bar loops and processing them using tape emulations, heavy compression, vintage overdrive and modulation. I recorded the instrumental track prior to working with the vocalist, noting a quote from Matthew T.

Shelvock:

In hip hop, often vocalists work from a pre-composed instrumental while recording
(Shelvock, 2016)

With lyrics being a pivotal part of the Hip-Hop genre, I have limited any processing: cutting unnecessary frequencies below 150hz and adding a subtle amount of room reverb, just enough to add to the space created using an auxiliary channel. Both reference tracks make minimum but effective use of delay on vocals, adding rhythmic excitement to the chorus sections. As a result, I have created a tape-delay send to initiate during the choruses, adding a new rhythmic element to these sections. 'See U In The Morning' uses vocal snippets to add extra layers to the piece, with pitch shifting and panning. I have also used this technique to create rhythmic patterns during the instrumental section.

Carner's album includes several skit tracks, featuring organic background conversations. This addition helps bring the listening into an intimate sense of space, a personal element helping to keep the listener's attention. I decided to use this in my intro section, with the electric piano track fading in alongside a single vocal, processed through a separate reverb and variety of effects to give a distant, aged sound.

Additional musical decisions

With both reference tracks adding new instrumental layers for the second verse, I felt this would be a good place to blend some tonally creative sampling techniques into my

production. Using a technique learnt from electronica producer, Four Tet, I cut loops into 1/8 note lengths, sped up and reversed these sequentially, and placed them underneath the original recording (Future Music Magazine, 2013). This creates an interesting, modulated, stuttering effect, adding an instability to enhance the lyrical journey as it hits the point of troubled relationship. I also unconventionally added a melodic chorus vocal line, in order to keep the overarching message of regret.

I feel my track successfully emulates many of the traits found in current Hip-Hop production, whilst also adding my own artistic imprint. I have made use of my influences from other genres and own judgement to create a piece with its roots firmly in Hip-Hop, but a tendency to fluctuate between other styles, as so much popular music does these days.

Synth-Pop

Background and Defining Characteristics

Dominating the charts in recent years, Synth-pop has seen a nostalgic resurgence in recent times, with hits such as Doja Cat ft. SZA's 'Kiss Me More' (2021) hitting number three (Official Charts, 2021) and The Weeknd's 'Blinding Lights' (2019) holding number one for a total of eight weeks (Official Charts, 2021).

The roots of the genre can be traced way back to the New Wave era of the late 1970s (AllMusic, 2021). Newly affordable synthesisers and drum machines were all the rage, whilst the invention of MIDI allowed for seamless synchronization of devices (Hugill, 2012). As a result, a more accessible electronic sound began to populate the music market.

Interestingly, it's another technological development that has arguably led to this renaissance. Though many of the original devices are retired, hopelessly unreliable or

obscenely expensive¹, the development of Virtual Studio Instruments (VSTs) has given the machines a new lease of life, inside the computer Digital Audio Workstation. Professional and bedroom producers alike now have affordable access to these prestigious tools, through staggeringly accurate emulations.

A great example is Arturia's V Collection; 28 software synthesizers, emulating classics throughout history (Arturia, 2021). Additionally, in 2020, Logic added a Drum Machine Designer feature to the software, allowing the user to choose emulations from within a diverse sample library, as well as the option to build your own (Apple, 2020).

With all this technology readily available, it's the perfect time to attempt a production in this hugely popular style. I will be using The Weeknd's 'In Your Eyes' (2020) and Dua Lipa's 'Don't Start Now' (2019) as reference points for the genre.

How the reference tracks conform to Synth-pop

Canadian singer, songwriter and producer, The Weeknd released 'In Your Eyes' with 2020's 'After Hours' LP. Full of rich pads, saw-tooth arpeggios and plucky synth-basslines, it would be easy to mistake the instrumental for one written four decades ago.

The composition uses a variety of techniques to retain a sense of high energy. Most notably, a funky, syncopated bassline, which duals with a rhythmic, stabbed lead line throughout, a technique also prominent in 'Don't Start Now'.

Though rhythmically constant, the timbre of the drum machine is synonymous with the genre. Though a lack of information is available on this topic, I perceive the kit used to be the LinnDrum: A drum machine manufactured by Linn Electronics between 1982 and 1985, used on many recordings during the 80s era, including Frankie Goes to Hollywood's 'Relax' (1983) and A-ha's 'Take on Me' (1985) (Wikipedia, 2021). Comparing with Mariya Takeuchi's

¹ The Reverb.com Price Guide shows an estimated used price range of between £2092-£3217 as of 6/12/2021 (Reverb, 2021)

City Pop blockbuster, 'Plastic Love' (1984), 'In Your Eyes' has an almost identical drumbeat, bassline and syncopated lead element. I wanted to take influence from both in my own project.

Delivered in the key of G minor, 'In Your Eyes' features the repeated chord sequence IV-VII-I-III. Opening on the subdominant of C gives an immediate sense of anticipation, moving to F before finally resolving to the tonic and progressing to the mediant before repeating. Using the minor pentatonic scale gives a sense of longing to the piece, reflecting the difficult nature of the lyrical theme: a relationship plagued with issues (tony leepeters, 2020).

Though actual linguistic content is not so important in pop, many commercially successful songs use widely relatable lyrical themes to boost interest and personal connection, helping to drive sales (MI College of Music, 2020).

My submission for this genre is: Vaporfunk - 'Eclipse'.

Production techniques

Upon researching co-Producer, Max Martin, I discovered a common trait of his releases is to briefly remove elements from the composition (Genius, 2020). This can be heard during 'In Your Eyes' at 0:50, as the synth and building white noise is abruptly cut immediately prior to the first chorus. An effective way to create suspense and add dynamic interest, I utilized the technique in the same part of my production, heard at 1:01.

In an interview with Sound on Sound Magazine, mixing engineer Carlo 'Illangelo' Montagnese discusses the vocal production on The Weeknd's back catalogue. Speaking of autotune as being a staple of vocal production in modern pop, Montagnese uses the software discreetly to balance pitch, while retaining a natural sound:

if you don't pull a vocal through Auto-Tune these days, it almost does not sound normal...though I apply it very subtly (Montagnese, 2015)

I took inspiration from this, triggering autotune just for the chorus to further enrich the melody.

Both references possess a particularly percussive vocal delivery. In order to best reproduce this, I approached a female vocalist with a pronounced vocal style and asked her to deliver in this way. I found this to compliment the interweaving basslines and stabs used in my composition.

I remained mindful of the following quote by Stephen Thompson of NPR when writing the vocal track:

Strictly by definition, lyrics and singing play a slightly secondary role to music: Music without lyrics is still music, but lyrics without music are poetry (Thompson, 2013)

Consequently, I decided to prioritise a catchy melody over lyrical content. To enhance this, I allowed the vocalist to sing in her native language of French, therefore taking emphasis off the vocal theme, due to the language barrier. I have however chosen to give the song an English name 'Eclipse', to maximise engagement.

As a result of my analysis, using primarily 1980s-inspired synthesised elements in my instrumentation was pivotal for staying in line with the genre. The TAL-U-No-LX Juno emulation VST (TAL, 2021) sets much of the timbre and is used for lead synth pads, whilst Logic's Retro FM synth creates a DX7-like 'glassy' arpeggiator. An electric piano plays looped, inverted chords, whilst I also made use of a piano patch from a Yamaha QY70 MIDI sequencer, which possessed the nostalgic element many VSTs lacked. I added vinyl crackle at the beginning and sent various stages of the mix through tape emulator plugins to increase the vintage feel and add glue to the mix.

Furthermore, I used Logic's Drum Machine Designer, taking elements from both 80s machines: the LinnDrum and Roland TR808. I also added two acoustically recorded but quantised, conga tracks, as a nod to the acoustic instruments of Takeuchi's aforementioned

‘Plastic Love’, and panned elements to keep a dynamic feel. I kept mindful of the following quote on the subject of 80s influence when programming drums:

To give these synths a sense of fullness, producers often weaved percussion between the sounds to keep the rhythm going (Genius, 2020)

Additional musical decisions

Returning to the interview with Montagnese (2015), the quote “I paint sounds” resonated deeply with me. I remained mindful of this throughout the process, adding dynamic interest through automation and instability through destructive mixing, which work together to give the piece its own sense of authenticity.

Shoegaze

Background and Defining Characteristics

Shoegaze has seen a resurgence in recent years, with pioneering groups from the early 1990s releasing new records, and clear sonic inspiration evident across the indie scene.

Evolving from noise pop of the late 1980s, Shoegaze is defined through a heady mixture of effect-laden distorted guitars, droned vocals and intense volume (All Music, 2011). A ‘wall of sound’ puts the listener into a pleasing yet overwhelming trance, whilst the name derives from the players’ tendency to stare at their pedalboards instead of the audience, during performances (Pedal Partners, 2019).

Seen as the genre's flagship release, My Bloody Valentine's 'Loveless' LP (1991) is included in NME's Most Important Albums (Woodhouse, 2012). In his paper discussing the record, David R. Fischer (2006) states:

the distinct guitar work that Kevin Shields produces on this album would become a fundamental staple of the shoegazer sound

Before going on to explain:

Loveless contains sounds unlike anything else in popular music (ibid.)

However, it is precisely that individuality that has held the genre back from full commercial success. An unconventional sound palette and lengthy compositions make the genre virtually inaccessible for the mainstream audience. Slowdive's 'Slomo' (2017), racks up an impressive 6:53, far from the three-minute mark favoured in pop music and radio airplay (Lutz, 2019), let alone the punchy requirements for TikTok material.

Residing in the dreamier realm of the genre, Slowdive's 'jouissance' has influenced the development of 'dream-pop': a glistening sub-genre of shoegaze, popular in modern indie music through bands such as Beach House. In the following sections I will analyse tracks from both artists: Beach House's 'Girl of the Year' (2018) and Slowdive's 'Slomo' (2017).

How the reference tracks conform to Shoegaze

Though traditionally categorised under dream-pop, Beach House's seventh LP '7' features primarily shoegaze elements, most prominent in penultimate track, 'Girl of the Year'.

Walls of synths plague the frequency mid-range as wispy vocals fall into the sonic abyss. A fleeting, overdriven lead guitar line enters the sonic space sparingly, eventually taking a more prominent position towards the finale.

As is common in the genre, both tracks include minimal dynamic range. Distorted, roomy drums are buried underneath masses of reverb, while delay is used to add subtle oscillation to guitar lines, with pan movement creating a sense of instability.

Shoegaze famously keeps a slow tempo to allow space for maximum resonance. 'Girl of the Year' hits a modest 70 BPM, while I chose 71 BPM for my production. Both reference tracks feature simple, repeated basslines, which, crucially, act solely as support for the rest of the instrumentation. In fact, the bassline in 'Slomo' consists of just seven different notes throughout. (Collins, 2017).

With tracks often simply structured around two or three chords and repeated motifs, 'Slomo' has the more conventional structure of the two. In the key of G Major, the piece features the chord structure, E minor, D, G, throughout. Ethereal vocals allow much emphasis to be placed on the lead guitar, whilst further swells fill the sonic space. Towards the climax, these supporting guitars grow in volume, and oscillating delay becomes the centre piece.

In the key of Bb, 'Girl of the Year' follows the verse chord progression of Eb(IV), F(V), Dm(III), C(II), Bb(I), before moving to a minor progression for the chorus, Cm(II), Eb(IV), Bb(I). The structure is repeated throughout, though slightly altered for the final section, Bb(I) F(V) Bb(I) Eb(IV). Though a little complex, the repeated nature and simple delivery with minimal lead interference gives the piece a slow, reverberant feel.

My submission for this genre is: SBBM – 'sun's on its way'

Production techniques

The creation of shoegaze relies heavily on production. Famously, My Bloody Valentine worked with sixteen mixing engineers and in nineteen different studios during the making of 'Loveless', with the production costs driving the group to near bankruptcy (Cavanagh, 2000).

Using heavy reverb to create a washed-out sonic space is pivotal to the genre, and I ensured this was the case in my production. Several multitracked vocals also appear on both references, a technique which gives additional depth to the mix. I took influence from this, adding emphasis to ambient parts, such as during the middle eight section, at 3:25, where twelve vocal harmonies are exposed on a dreamy bed of reverb-soaked guitars.

Akin to the automation of the reference tracks, I used panning to subtly alter the position of the lead guitar line and modulate the reverb and delay sends. I took influence from the heavier side of the genre with a big, distorted guitar solo in the final section and used synthesisers to add sparkle and midrange.

Additional musical decisions

Like the emphatic feel of 'Girl of the Year', I wanted to give my composition multiple 'spaces' as it progressed. Beginning with a lo-fi inspired acoustic section, the synth lead and pads bring a dreamy aura as reverb increases, peaking during the middle eight before clearing to expose a heavy outro.

Conclusion

With streaming no longer limiting our intake, the scope of what is capable of mainstream success is infinite. From the loose production of Hip-Hop, to the highly processed and layered textures of Synth-Pop, picking apart these styles has revealed a more cohesive landscape than apparent at first glance.

Genre forms through creativity. Therefore, a chosen demographic does not necessarily mean the only demographic. Every boundary is there to be blurred.

Overall, I feel the tracks I have created truly represent their style. Using genre-specific methods and my own creative judgement, I have strengthened my ability to produce in unfamiliar territory. I thoroughly enjoyed this process and look forward to continuing my journey of discovery.

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