



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David



MA Commercial Music Producer Foundation

ADAD7005_LON

Simone Reca

Word Count: 2899

This first song I'll be talking about was probably one of the most complex and challenging tunes I've ever written.

The beat switch is one of the production techniques that fascinates me the most, since I've heard it for the first time in the song "Nights" by Frank Ocean.

It always stick with me, and it has always been something I wanted to try out, but it never felt appropriate, nor the right thing to do, and it's not the easiest way to get out when you're stuck with a song, so I never actually got around to do it.

With the song "\$YRI" though, it felt the most natural thing to do.

I had been working on the second part of the song for a day and by the end of the afternoon I had all the melodies and basically the whole arrangement for that section down.

I felt like that part was really strong on its own so I didn't want to make it longer or add anything to it, but I felt like it needed something else to come before that to make that part super effective and to give to that beat the importance and the attention it deserved.

I remembered listening to Cole Cuchna's podcast "Dissect" where he broke down the whole "Blonde" album by Frank Ocean, and he was saying that "as listeners we go to this really emotional beat. If you were just to hear that beat on its own, it would not be as effective as it is", and that is where I decided to have the beatswitch.

At this point I just spent a lot of time thinking about how to do it;

I started listening to songs that could help me figuring out how to make it, so I obviously listened to "Nights" by Frank Ocean and "SICKO MODE" by Travis Scott and Drake.

After listening and taking notes, there were many variants I started considering: do I link the two beats by using for instance the same refrain? Do I slow it down/speed it up or do I keep the same tempo? Shall I keep them in the same key? How do I make the transition from the first beat to the second one?

I started going through my library of samples to start another beat from scratch, bearing in mind that it was supposed to be the first part of the song and that there was gonna be a beatswitch, so I was focusing on the tempo and on the key of samples and chords I was putting together, but after I spent a while trying things out I started feeling a bit frustrated as it was feeling very mechanical and forced, and I felt like I wasn't going anywhere.

I saved the project and started going through some old beats I made, so that I could work on something else but then one of those beats struck me as perfect for being the first part of the song, so I pasted it onto Ableton and at that point I had two different songs in one project.

The first beat reminded me a lot of Drake, due to the use of samples made by trumpets, Which I then layered with some sax lines that I played.

Since I wanted to use this song with a girl&boyband/collective I put together, I thought of having Giulia to sing on top of this part, to enhance the Drake feel of the song, as he collaborates with a lot of female singers such as Jhene Aiko in "From Time" from the album "Nothing Was The Same".

I decided to ask Liam to sing some refrains interrupting Giulia's part, as he is a very good rapper and he is very capable at writing small but interesting hooks.

The second beat feels overall influenced more by Frank Ocean, at least on a production and arrangement level.

The melodies I sang at 1.40 and 1.55 remind me of Travis Scott, also due by the fact that I used the same autotune plugin called Antares, while Diego's lines coming at 1.30 and 2.18 are heavily influenced by James Blake.

I started listening back and forth to it, thinking how I could link the two parts and work the beatswitch out.

In “Nights” by Frank Ocean, “from the chaos and relentlessness of the distorting dueling guitars, comes an airy nocturnal beat with subtle reverb drenched piano samples” (Cuchna, Cole. 2018).

In the same podcast, Cole Cuchna explains how also “A Day In The Life” by the Beatles uses chaos as a transition and he goes on saying that “we get order out of chaos and the understated beauty of the new musical material is dramatically enhanced by the ugliness that preceded it”.

This “arranging technique” comes from a theory concept called musical frisson, which is defined as “[...] A musically induced affect that shows close links to musical surprise” (Juslin, Patrik N. And Sloboda, John. 2010).

This comes in very effective as “music taps into this very primitive system that we have which identifies emotion on the basis of a violation of expectancy” (NPR staff, 2012).

At that point I was sure that I would have used a similar approach to the beatswitch, as the second beat feels very intimate and laid back, with a sad feeling to it which I wanted to enhance and get the listener to feel completely involved and lost in it while listening.

In between the two parts, I created this whole section of about ten seconds, from 1.10 to 1.19 where some swells come in, the sax gets distorted put in the background with lots of reverb and delays and the whole song starts getting slowly pitched down until it changes key from C which is the key of the first beat, to B, which is the key of the second part of the song.

When the new beat comes in, all the tension is released.

To create most of the swells and distorted sounds I sent some sounds I had in the songs such as the sax parts or some sample from Ableton to an analogue pedal called Infinite Jets made by Hologram, which is a resynthesizer.

“SICKO MODE” feels like three different songs, where the elements and the singers

change, without keeping anything from the previous sections apart from the tempo and the key: on the contrary in the song “Nights”, the chorus/refrain is the same for both beats. The backing changes, but Frank Ocean sings the same melody on both parts. That is something that intrigued me and that felt more challenging, but I thought that in the long terms and songwriting wise it would have made more sense, so I decided to take the part that Giulia sang in the first beat from 0.38 and repeat it in the outro of the song, at 2.45.

The switch comes after a minute into the song, which will leave us with a couple minutes of the second beat.

The second beat sounds more more chilled and laid back, even though it's actually faster than the first beat, but it feels slower as it's half tempo.

The second song I'm submitting is called “Close To You” and it was written and produced during Tileyard's Songwriting Camp, in collaboration with a student from the songwriting course who wrote the lyrics, with the intention to pitch it to IV JAY, an up and coming rnb new artist.

This task was very challenging for me as I've never written an rnb song before this one. I watched IV Jay's live at VEVO on YouTube and I was surprised by the fact that the drums were electronics, played on the SPDSX and that the guitar was absent for the most time, joining only in the chorus with some octave power chords.

This gave me the freedom to go for a more slightly electronic beat and backing, which is what I usually do with my productions, so instead of playing chords on the piano I went through my sample library, picked one, chopped it and pitched it in order to create a chord progression and then worked on the beat.

I based the tempo and the structure on her song “I’m Ready”, so my tune goes intro-verse-chorus-verse-chorus-outro.

It felt the right thing to do as “Most R&B songs use the same song structures, especially the verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus set up” (the Tunedly Team, 2019).

I also tried to make a similar arrangement to that song, and I worked on it following “The Five Arranging Elements” from “The Mixing Engineer’s Handbook” written by Bobbi Owsinski, paying much attention to when instruments would come in/drop out.

Then I applied the same criteria on the melodies, creating refrains and working on the vocals with the same approach I worked on the arrangement,

When working on the chorus I was aiming on having something very bouncy, made by a lot of words, without many repetitions and refrains, but still to be memorable.

I avoided having extremely catchy lines and hooks as I didn’t want it to sound too pop.

“the storytelling element has remained consistent in R&B. So, focus on telling a story when writing an R&B song. Make it interesting by including little details that people may not expect but can still relate to” (the Tunedly Team, 2019).

Due to this reason, I really needed something to stand out when the chorus kicked in, and after some thinking I decided to go for a choir. Other than sounding good, I thought it would have probably been relatable for IV JAY and her fanbase as she’s very young and being part of a choir it’s something we experience a lot in school during our childhood/teenage years. Also I thought that putting a lot of voices together during lockdown and self-isolation, even if only in music, could have been uplifting for a listener; I remember watching an interview of John Rutter where he was saying that choir “It’s something that goes to the very heart of our humanity, our sense of community, and our souls” (Rutter John for Lyons, Brendan. 2015).

To give it a different vibe from what you would usually expect from a choir, I worked on the doubles and backing vocals following Rob Kinelski approach to Billie Eilish's vocals, as I wanted them to sound modern and fresh.

The most interesting part of the process was to keep everything very dark and dry, and to work on the phase of the doubles to create different sounds, so I "I liked using the S1 stereo imager for some width on the vocal doubles, both gently and sometimes aggressively to the point of absurd. I love it when you push a sample out of phase and make it weird." (Kinelski, Rob. 2019).

Until the second verse, the main vocal is pitched and deformed through a plugin called Little AlterBoy by Soundtoys, and I filtered the whole Master track to cut the high end and create a heavy lofi vibe.

The idea for going so extreme with this process came by Puma Blue last release "Snowflower", produced and mixed by Marta Salogni, an Italian producer and sound engineer who worked with artists such as Bjork, Bon Iver, David Byrne.

I also ran this part of the song through a tape machine, following Marta Salogni's lead on using it for "compression, saturation, looping, delays, transforming rhythms, creating polyrhythms, soundscapes" (Salogni Marta) and just add that analogue low fi and bit distorted sound to that first section of the song.

After the chorus comes a small instrumental part which purpose is to build tension up and lead into the second verse where I introduced elements from an acoustic kit that I recorded at home, such as hi-hat, shaker, tambourine as well as an electric bass I played, to bring more the r&b vibe to the track and get away from the extreme lo-fi vibe.

In the second chorus I played some guitars, one inspired by IV JAI's song playing some octave power chords riff, and the other one played through a bit crusher pedal in the high register covering the high frequencies, to create some ambient.

The outro is made by going back to the lo-fi vibe, where I created a small memorable hook by playing some chopped vocals that I took from the chorus and put them in Ableton's simpler to make it sound more electronic and modern.

The third and last song I'm submitting is called "Midnight" and I wrote it this Summer, after coming home in the late night after having been driving around alone in my car. It took me around thirty minutes to write the chord progression, the melodies and the lyrics.

The chorus was the first thing I wrote and it instantly struck me as something Dominic Fike would write, so I kept working on the verses and the melodies keeping that in mind. Once I played the whole song through a couple times I had the production pretty much down in my mind, and I started working on it trying to emulate Dominic Fike and Kenny Beats, just for the fun and the challenge of creating a track that could be relatable to them.

Also since I started my journey into music as a guitarist into rock and alternative music, it felt fun to "go back to my roots" of musician and put a song together made by analogue gear that I can play.

This is the reason why I wanted to keep the production and arrangement simple, organic and consistent.

The core elements of the song are vocals, acoustic guitar, an electric bass and a beat made by a sample of an acoustic drumkit, layered with some other kicks/snare to feel a little bit more hip hop.

I will record a proper drum kit as soon as I have a chance to do so, but for the moment the sample works fine.

I played the bass on the keyboard, using a the Kontakt plugin for the Rickenbacker, because it sounded nicer than my electric bass, and it can still feel acoustic and organic even though it's digital.

Then I layered it with some analogue Moog Minitaur, playing an acid sound on top of the Rickenbacker.

The chord progression it's very similar to those used by Dominic Fike, especially in songs like "3 Nights" and "Phone Numbers" produced by Kenny Beats.

It is made of the three cords I-VII-III in the key of BMaj played by an acoustic guitar, played with hybrid picking technique and adding 7ths to chords to make the sound more interesting and spicy.

The structure is pretty simple and basic, starting with a chorus that goes into a verse, then there's a middle 8 section, second verse going into a double chorus and outro. The chorus is already long and repetitive so I thought of having only two, one at the start and one at the end of the song, and developing the song through different melodies and raps in the verses, breaking it down with a middle 8 inspired by the song "Sugar" by BROCKHAMPTON, where I broke down the instrumental leaving only a small part of the beat, the acoustic guitar, and the lead vocal singing with the vocoder pedal.

The vocal melodies in this song are typical of Dominic Fike. The chorus is very catchy but also quite articulated, repeating itself twice every time it comes in.

In the verses there are some rap parts interchanging with some more catchy sang melodies, creating a few refrains and hooks but also making the rap parts sound a bit more pop and commercial.

The switch of the register is also typical of Dominic Fike, starting the rap in his low octaves range and then moving to his higher range to make it flow more and keep the attention of the listener, singing fairly complex and different melodies but that overall still sound catchy.

The use of refrains such as “please let me figure it out” at the end of the verse come from BROCKHAMPTON.

In that part of the song, during the last “Please let me figure it out” I layered the vocals with some deep low 808s kicks pitched in a way that they would follow the vocal melody. This idea came from the song “Tutti Frutti” by the Italian artist Roshelle, produced by Don Joe. At 1:45 into the song the melody changes and they followed it with the bassline, using it to go into another section of the song, which is what I did to go into the new part where the beat stop and the vocoder comes in. (Roshelle and Don Joe, 2018)

What I think Dominic Fike manages to do really well is to create a whole chilled vibe with his songs, making you wanna party and dance.

That’s why on the last chorus I recorded some friends singing along to the song, ending the track with just them singing and having fun, enhancing the overall vibe of the song just like Kenny Beats did in “Phone Numbers” explained in the livestream he did in July 2020, where he broke down the production of his track with Dominic Fike.

REFERENCES:

1. COLE CUCHNA, 2018. Dissect. Stockholm: Spotify Studios. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/03q7h39U63z4DBMK7jdpfC?si=hPUKtulDTtuz8iobnJYqpw>
2. JUSLIN, P.N. and SLOBODA, J., 2010. Handbook of Music and Emotion: theory, research, application. Oxford: OUP Oxford.
3. NPR STAFF, 2012. The Ballad Of The Tearful: Why Some Songs Make You Cry.
4. THE TUNEDLY TEAM, 2019. Top R&B Songwriting Techniques and Tips To Be Aware Of. <https://www.tunedly.com/blogpost?blog=SongwritinginRhythmmandBlues>
5. OWSINSKI, B., 2016. The Mixing Engineer's Handbook: . 4th edition edn. Bobby Owsinski Media Group; 4th edition (9 Jan. 2017).
6. LYONS, B., 2015. John Rutter: The Importance of Choir. <https://blogs.jwpepper.com/index.php/john-rutter-the-importance-of-choir/>
7. PARKS, A., 2019. Breaking the Mix Rules with Billie Eilish: Rob Kinelski. <https://www.waves.com/breaking-the-mix-rules-with-billie-eilish-rob-kinelski>
8. OTTEWILL, J., Marta Salogni on mixing Björk, engineering FKA Twigs and working with tape. <http://www.bestdjgearreviews.com/features/marta-salogni-on-mixing-bjork-engineering-fka-twigs-and-working-with-tape/>

9. ROSHELLE and DON JOE, 2018. Tutti Frutti. Sony Music Entertainment Italy. <https://open.spotify.com/track/5cceKu5DczJOAceXg8RKyi?si=8c-iwAFuTuq3xPl6tTfYZg>
10. BEATS, K., 2020. KENNY BEATS] Phone Numbers - Dominic Fike | BREAKDOWN. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xzn-Kxld60w>

