

CREATION PROJECT, REFLECTIVE COMMENTARY

“Fusing 1980’s pop-influenced Synthwave music with modern Drum & Bass production, in the creation of an original long-play record.”

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Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Iain Sumner', with a stylized, flowing script.

Iain Sumner

Abstract

This study's purpose is to explore the potential relationships and contrasting differences between the musical genres of Synthwave and Drum & Bass, in order to determine which elements of these styles would best work together musically. Research for this project will determine the differences and similarities that exist within both styles, their origins, and the prominent production techniques and stylistic features which define them. This research will then be implemented in the production of a musical LP which aims to fuse these two genres. The primary intent of this study is to create a musical work of unique nature with a high level of listenability, with relevant research being fundamental in its musical composition, and ultimately create a record which could be considered a significant creative contribution to both genres.

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1. Introduction

1.1) Project Intentions

It is the intention of this project to fuse together two very different styles of synthesizer-orientated music, which are rarely combined; Synthwave, and Drum & Bass music. Synthwave is a modern genre which pays homage to the pop culture sounds and imagery of the 1980's and early 1990's (Cram 2021), a style which I recently discovered seems to naturally appeal to my own skillset, and my affinity with this style is possibly also due to being was a period when I was first introduced to popular music as a child. Drum & Bass is a subgenre of electronic dance music known for its fast breakbeats and heavy basslines, first dominating dancefloors in the 1990's (MasterClass 2021); the reason for this being that for the best part of the last decade, it has been this area of dance music which has been my primary focal point,

in terms of event attendance, composition, and performing as a DJ.

1.2) Reflection on Project Conception

My recently discovered admiration for the Synthwave genre, in addition to my enthusiasm for media and music relating to it, combined with my longstanding commitment to the Drum & Bass genre, were the principal influences in devising the concept for this Creation project LP. The title of 'Poison Pursuits' was chosen for this LP for a number of reasons; firstly, I found this phrase open to a number of interpretations, the most evident being the destructive impact of pursuits relating debauchery and excess. Because of this, it is therefore also in-keeping with the overall theme of the album. This title additionally hints at American outlaw street racing culture, which was a common theme in movies relevant to the Synthwave genre, such as (The Wraith, 1986). Prominent sub-genres of Synthwave include Darksynth, Cybersynth, Outrun and Vaporwave, with each offering their own nuanced take on the genre; while the primary Drum & Bass influence for this project relates to the Neurofunk sub-genre, which has been my creative focus for the past six years.

While seeking an overview of the fundamental generic influences which are drawn upon in the creation of this LP, my research determined the following summations; Vaporwave's uncanny aural spaces are distortions of a once ubiquitous soundscape: technologies that were once new, hi-fi, and cutting edge reappear as outmoded objects stained with time (Cole 2020). This nostalgic take on primitive technology, specifically music technology, will be a focal point throughout 'Poison Pursuits'. Outrun was the most common name for the genre in the formative days of Synthwave, and remains a useful term for describing the specific musical style established on the earliest Synthwave releases (Cram 2021), and it is this sentimentality for retro gaming music which shall be utilised for many of the melodic hooks throughout the record. Darksynth incorporates bass-heavy electro and industrial music, faster tempos, embraced ultra-violent video games and action movies (Synthwave Wiki 2017), and it is these darker and more atmospheric tones which shall influence a lot of the pad synth composition for this record.

It is certainly the Cybersynth and Neurofunk sub-genres which have the most stylistic themes in common with each other. Neurofunk is a popular modern sub-genre of Drum & Bass; immaculately produced android dance with a distinct mechanistic quality, often populated by experimental rhythms with an oppressive dystopian vibe (Murphy 2018), most notably distinguished by hard hitting drums, distorted basslines, and futuristic themes. Cybersynth artists often mix or replace the 1980's nostalgia of traditional Synthwave with science fiction and Cyberpunk themes for a brooding, futuristic landscape (Cram 2021), and it is this juncture at which Cyberpunk themes and aesthetics meet the retro-future elements of Synthwave. It is the overlying point at which the prominent themes of these two genres overlap that shall be explored most in the composition and production of this project, with noted consideration of their shared subjects and themes being a focal point throughout the writing and production process of creating this album.

2. Research into Synthwave and Drum & Bass Production

2.1) Origins of Synthwave and Drum & Bass Music

Drum & Bass emerged from the 'hardcore' dance music scene; originally called 'Jungle Techno', it marked a radical departure from four-to-the-floor beats of House and Techno, forging its own unique aesthetic; pushing music production technology to its limits, in the creation of a futuristic sound that symbolised the digital frontier on the other side of the year 2000 (Rihn 2021). Live instrumentation in Drum & Bass production was the subject of my bachelor's dissertation, so this work will aspire to not revisit ground already previously covered, and therefore it is likely to predominantly pursue insight on the implementation of Synthwave influences within this dance music format, and examine any pre-existing examples.

While Drum & Bass is constantly looking to the future, somewhat contrastingly Synthwave is always looking to evoke the nostalgia of the past, while also being recognisably modern in terms of production standards. Synthwave began in the mid-2000's, when gamers and horror nerds took a liking to French House artists who were creating sounds inspired by 1980's film score legends, and since the genre has exploded into a plume of modern electronic fury

(Neuman 2015). Recreating the retro-future themes of Synthwave, with the aim of evoking a nostalgic emotional response in the listener, will be key to the external success of this project. Something notable which both genres share in common is their enduring popularity within the video gaming community, with both being considered to add to the stimulation of an immersive gaming experience, albeit in very different ways; with Drum & Bass seeking to add excitement, and Synthwave commonly being used to create a 'classic' cinematic ambience.

2.2) The Development of Digital Music Technology and its Impact on Both Genres

The most common similarity inherent within the genres of Synthwave and Drum & Bass music is that they both rely entirely on modern sampling and sequencing technology in their production. However, both genres utilise this technology to achieve very different creative outcomes. The definition of MIDI and the development of digital audio made the development of purely electronic sounds much easier, allowing synthesizers to dominate the pop and rock music of the early 1980's (Bateman 2012). Aside from breakbeats, the most definitive element of modern Drum & Bass music is the use of the 'Reese' bass sound. "Just Want Another Chance" (Sanderson 1988) was an early Detroit techno record which featured a massive, warbly, chorused bass synth; the breakout moment for this legendary bass sound was when it was sampled in the production of the early 1990's jungle classic "Terrorist" (Renegade 1994). The Neurofunk sub-genre in particular is constantly pushing the limits of this phase-distorted bass sound.

The early models of synthesizers were analogue systems, which eventually became based on computer software instead (Frezza 2021). While Synthwave and Synthpop uses digital emulations of these futuristic instruments to achieve harmonic sounds, and they're employed to achieve melodic compositions; Drum & Bass seeks to distort, manipulate, excessively process and push the boundaries of experimentation in the use of synthetic sound in modern music production. Modern wavetable software synthesizers and audio processing techniques are used to achieve these kinds of sounds.



Figure 1: Recreation of 1980's Music Production Studio (Inglis 2015)

4. Analysis of relevant Synth-wave and Drum & Bass Works

While producing this LP, I watched a significant amount of both modern movies, with Synthwave themes, soundtracks or aesthetics, and every classic 1980's movie I could get my hands on. This served several purposes; inspiration, immersion, and research. A number of these movies stood out, each for significantly different reasons. Immersing myself in a 'Synthwave world' was hugely beneficial to finding sources of inspiration for this project, and allowed me to focus on recreating the most evocative elements of music with 'retro-future' themes. Some movies were nostalgic trips down memory lane, while others were entirely new to me and were the product of seeking suitable movies to view.

The movie which stood out most in terms of futuristic themes and aesthetic was (Tron 1982). The crisp visual effects and 'futuristic' machine-orientated concepts are absolutely the kind of themes I wished to invoke in the creation of my project. (Drive 2011) is certainly one of the most definitive modern movies with a Synthwave soundtrack and aesthetic, however for my own taste and desired outcomes for this project, the music featured was certainly a little 'poppier' than that which is ultimately intended for this project, as my personal music influences are notably 'darker' and 'heavier' sounding.

Both the original movie (Blade Runner 1982) and the recreation (Blade Runner 2049, 2017) were viewed back-to-back for direct comparison, given their significance to the relevant Cyberpunk and retro-future aesthetic concepts. Both movies achieve an unreal level of visual and auditory immersion into the kind of semi-dystopian science fiction future that is now commonly associated with the Cyberpunk genre, formed as a response to a world where corporate power was proliferating and expanding across the globe, inequality was growing, and AI, computers, and other new forms of technology offered the promise of liberation and the potential for new and dangerous forms of domination (Walker-Emig 2018).

In terms of Drum & Bass production featuring distinctly 'Synthwave-esque' elements, there are very few renowned examples, however we shall briefly summarise some analysis of the few which do exist. 'That Smile' (Current Value 2018) features a distinctly Synthwave piece of music which serves as the intro, middle eight, and outro for this track, leading into and out of a heavy bassline, which bears none of the musical features of the Synthwave-style sections in a way that disarms the listener. The poppy, dreamy retro soundscape gives no clues to how heavy this track will suddenly become. 'Penggemar' (Metrik 2016) is another example of a popular Drum & Bass track, however this differs greatly from 'That Smile', with the bright and sunny retro synthesizer melodies forming the basis for all other instruments and composition throughout this track.

Possibly the biggest Drum & Bass influence for this concept album, was certain works of little-known artist Neutral Point, specifically his tracks 'Inner Soul' (Neutral Point 2017) and 'Leviathan' (2015). These tracks feature sound palettes and melodies that, in my view, could be straight from a Cyberpunk/Cybersynth movie soundtrack, and in terms of Drum & Bass, these tracks were hugely influential in conceptualising this record. 'Inner Soul' (Neutral Point 2017) in particular features a melody which evolves with such notable elegance and perfection, stirring emotion in the listener through the use of solely synthetic melodic instruments.

5. LP – ‘Poison Pursuits’

5.1) Composition – Methods and Muses

In the production of ‘Chase is a Race’, classic racing games such as Outrun (1986) and their soundtracks were at the focus of musical influence for this composition; this track intends to evoke memories in the listener, in terms of the type of sounds used, how they were used, and the way in which they were processed. Various analogue modelling software processing units were used to achieve this. The classic game ‘Outrun’ has become so notably synonymous with the genre, that it is used to describe a sub-genre that is darker and melancholy (SoundsRight 2020). Many of the movies watched as research evoked themes I earnestly wished to represent within the record, specifically retro-future themes and concepts found in many science fiction movies of the 1980’s.

Earlier in 2021 I produced a ‘pure’ Synthwave track, titled ‘Synthesthesia’ – originally written at a much lower tempo, a Drum & Bass remix of this track worked surprisingly well. Also drawing on previous work is the remix of ‘Beat the Street’, a game soundtrack which was originally my first effort at fusing Synthwave ‘vibes’ with the Drum & Bass dance music format. However, the remix presented in this work represents a significantly different interpretation of the same musical themes as the original track. The title track or introduction to the album, which plays at half-tempo for most of its duration, throws the listener in at the deep end of the 1980’s-themed ‘retro future’ soundscape that this album aspires to achieve, by relying heavily on arpeggiated synths and sustained guitar tones intended to evoke the nostalgia of classic 1980’s rock and pop music.

‘Magenta Skies’, with its title obviously referring to the sunset-drenched visuals associated with Synthwave-orientated art, retains many of the same musical themes as ‘Beat the Street’; most notably rock guitars driving the rhythms, and 8-bit ‘retro’ synthesizer lead instruments providing the melodic hooks. ‘Metaphysical’ and the Intro/title track ‘Poison Pursuits’ both share the same key, basic chord structure, and some melodic themes. The Intro/title track ‘Poison Pursuits’ jumps head first into this new yet familiar world of nostalgic and emotionally evocative sounds, then later in the record calls back to these musical themes, in an alternative

form, in the composition of 'Metaphysical', in a similar way that a 1980's movie would present multiple different takes on the same theme tune.

'Dystopian Dance' was created by taking inspiration from the post-apocalyptic themes and soundtracks of 1980's science fiction movies, such as (Cyborg 1989), and (Total Recall 1990), and is intended to be a slightly darker, moodier and somewhat robotic piece of music. 'Sequential Seduction' was inspired by the 'cybernetic retro-future' concepts found in movies such as (Tron 1982) and (D.A.R.Y.L 1985), while also utilising some elements of the sonic palate of late 1980's Acid House music, such as a 'squelchy' Roland TB-303 emulation, but still remaining true to the themes of mainstream 1980's music with some whammy bar dives and finger-tapping lead on electric guitar, with a type of chorus lead tone and technique that was popularised by Eddie Van Halen (Horsley 2020), and made possible by guitar developments such as the Floyd Rose tremolo.

5.2) Sleeve Art & Release

Much of the Synthwave aesthetic is focused on classic supercars of the era, such as the Lamborghini Countach & Diablo, or Ferrari Testarossa & F40 models. It's my view that these car designs best represent the most exciting celebration of prosperity, success and optimism of the era. Their angular yet flowing visual designs are an expression of what was considered to be a modern and futuristic aesthetic, during this particular time period, aside from their impressive technical performance capabilities as machines. It was perhaps then some perfect timing that Lamborghini recently [Summer 2021] announced a revival of their Countach model, with many of its design cues echoing the 1980's classic supercar; intended to be "a visionary car of the moment, just as its forerunner was... representing the Lamborghini philosophy of reinventing boundaries, achieving the unexpected, the extraordinary, and most importantly being the stuff of dreams", according to Automobili Lamborghini President & CEO Stephan Winkelmann (Migliozzi 2021).



Figure 2: Lamborghini Countach 2021 Design Concept Evolution (Sato 2021)

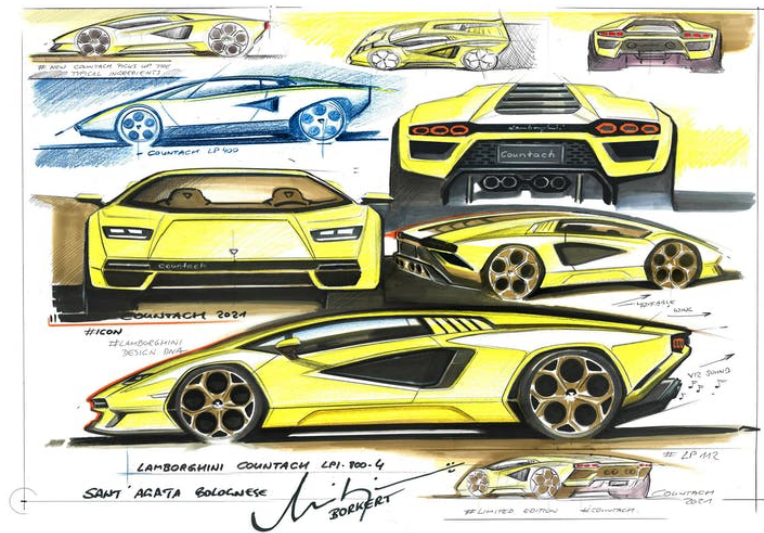


Figure 3: Lamborghini Countach 2021 Design Concept Evolution (Dron 2021)

The new Countach design was therefore a suitably fitting subject for the sleeve art for this album, as both this car and my album concept share a key aspiration; to be the ultimate modern expression and interpretation of the best the 1980's had to offer, fully utilising the best available modern technology with evocative 1980's styling cues. The Lamborghini UK press office was contacted for permission to use press shots, or a potential photoshoot, however no reply was received, therefore the sleeve art comprises heavily processed press shots which were widely available.



Figure 4: "Poison Pursuits" LP Sleeve Art



Figure 5: Draft Sleeve Art Concept 1



Figure 6: Draft Sleeve Art Concept 2

6. Reflective Analysis

6.1) Composition & Production analysis

The primary Digital Audio Workstation used for this project was Steinberg Cubase, however Avid Pro Tools was also used for recording vocal sessions on location with Clair Rollings, at her home. Vocal sessions were recorded using an portable USB interface and Behringer B2 large diaphragm condenser microphone. Digital emulations of classic audio processing and synthesizer hardware were used extensively, with the most prominent being supplied by Arturia and Slate Digital. Once a bank of drum samples and processes had initially been built, this was saved as a preset and used for all tracks, with changes in kick and snare pitch made in order to tune them to the correct key for the track. While classic electric guitar playing and

tone was used throughout the album, synthesizer notation was also almost entirely composed using Guitar-to-MIDI (Roland GR-55 & GK-3 hardware). Xfer Serum wavetable software synthesizer was widely used for bass patches and some synth leads and pads. Possibly the biggest challenge throughout writing this project was being able to answer 'yes' to both questions 'is it 80's enough?' and 'is it Drum & Bass enough?', as these are two concepts which are rarely found in the same works. However, it is my feeling that the net result is something significantly dancefloor-friendly and listenable, and has achieved the desired aims of being catchy without becoming annoyingly repetitive.

Composition for all eight tracks was completed as a priority, then taking a listening break for several days, in order to reset ear fatigue and to put some distance between producer and material. This break was intentional, in order to make more objective finalisation, mixing and mastering decisions. Mixing was completed in UAD Luna, in order to utilise its analogue summing modelling capabilities. Mastering was completed in Steinberg WaveLAB, and utilised plugins such as iZotope Stereo Imager, iZotope Exciter, UAD Dangerous BAX Master EQ, SSL Compressor emulation and UAD Precision Limiter.

6.2) Metrics for Success

In the time leading up to completing the album, 'The Heavy Session' on Beat 103FM in Central Lancashire featured a 30 minute 'Freak Response' DJ mix on Friday 8th October 2021, in order to promote the forthcoming album, with assurances from the hosts that they would also feature the new music once complete. In addition to this, I was also contacted by Dissected Culture Ltd, a record label which has released music by many prominent artists within the Neurofunk sub-genre of Drum & Bass, who are eagerly awaiting the final album – as they are already discussing the terms of an advance, this would appear to be a very promising prospect. Interest from this particular label was based solely on previous material, so this musical exploration into fusing Synthwave with Drum & Bass may not be suitable for this label, however, given that their previous catalogue features much 'heavier' Drum & Bass releases. A press kit will be prepared for wider distribution to record labels as a result of this assumption.

Responses from individuals who have heard the record to date have been mostly positive, however how the work may be received by Drum & Bass 'purists' is yet to be determined. While composition of Drum & Bass with the intention of invoking nostalgia in the listener is nothing new to the genre, this is typically emulating the original sounds of the genre from the mid to late 1990's and early 2000's, which were originally intended to be a futuristic departure from popular music stylings of the same era. It is therefore likely that this record will be most popular with newcomers to the genre. The creative outcome of this project is true to my original vision, and has achieved my artistic ambition of fusing Synthwave with Drum & Bass, and therefore it is my feeling that in solely creative terms the project has been a success. While my own view may not be impartial and objective, listener feedback is scarce at present due to recent completion of the musical work.

6.3) Personal Development Analysis

The main strengths identified in planning this project were; my own desire to discover the outcome of fusing the Drum & Bass and Synthwave genres, and utilisation of my own expansive ranges of artistic influences and varying instrumental skills. This project has certainly satisfied my curiosity in what the outcomes of fusing these genres might be, and my present feeling is that it is a match made in heaven. Therefore, if it is well received by the wider Drum & Bass community, this concept may provide the blueprint for all future music under the 'Freak Response' brand. The widespread use of human input in the composition of this music, through the extensive exploitation of MIDI control devices such as Native Instruments Maschine MKII, iCon Qcon ProX DAW control, Roland TD-4 controlled Electronic Drum Kit, Roland GR-55/GK-3 Guitar-to-MIDI, along with traditional electric guitar. Unremitting use of these digital musical input devices strongly indicates that my own instrumental capabilities have been optimally utilised using the technology available today.

Weaknesses which were also identified in the planning stages included concerns about finishing a project this size within the required timeframe, and running dry on inspiration for composition, and worries that as a sub-genre this is not a musical concept which currently exists as an established niche. It was certainly useful to address these weaknesses, as the composition phase was the primary focus for the majority of the first phase of the project,

which made working to the deadline far more attainable. Easing of COVID lockdown restrictions meant that an almost re-discovery of dancefloor energy provided a much sought-after boost of inspiration and motivation to write, thankfully. With regard to the concept being a little too unique, it's my present feeling that is likely to be a positive overall, while it may mean finding a label willing to publish and invest in this work will be difficult.

Amongst opportunities previously determined were; the opportunity to create a musical work entirely of my choosing, with the goal of significantly contributing to the Drum & Bass genre, combining two commercially successful types of music, and the creative opportunity to develop my own practical music production and composition skillset. These opportunities were maximised upon by selecting a project concept I was happy with, and creating a listenable and 'catchy' piece of work that successfully married both these musical genres. As it was the most significantly melodic music I had written for quite some time, the production of this record without doubt has aided in the development of my own practical skills as a musician and producer.

Threats to the project which were pinpointed were; getting behind schedule with either the production or academic element, by fussing over one element and ignoring the greater scope of the work and becoming ill or demotivated. These were confronted by ensuring that much of the bare essential work for the project was carried out early on, therefore allowing time to address the finer details later, meaning that core ideas and concepts were not rushed. I was actually ill with flu-like symptoms at the start of the project for 2 weeks in August, however still managed to write a small amount of music during this time, and thankfully demotivation was not an issue. Timelines outlined in the Development Plan included in the proposal for this project were usually achieved early or on time, despite the minor setback of being a little ill at the project outset, and it was this time management which allowed close attention to be paid to the quality of the musical works.

7. Conclusion

While the genres of Synthwave and Drum & Bass are in many ways cultural opposites, these two styles have enough 'niche' sub-genres with overlapping themes to selectively utilise

eclectic and desirable elements in a musical work combining them both. Additionally, their sequenced drum rhythms and reliance on synthesizer sound design permitted this stylistic alliance. In many respects the degree to which this was musically effective was as surprising as it was pleasing, and it is my determination that the initial project goals of creating a unique, original, yet dancefloor and listener friendly full-length album have been fulfilled. Therefore, any doubts or concerns regarding difficulties marrying these two styles have been annulled. While some previous examples of this particular combination of musical styles do exist, there were certainly no full-length works of the same concept to analyse.

With a wider response to the record yet to be determined, it is too soon to state if the market and its gatekeepers will share the same view on how successful the fusion of these two genres has been, and therefore ultimately deciding if this will be a direction my future work continues to head in. If the record is commercially successful, and does provide the archetype concept for all future 'Freak Response' production work, it will certainly be very interesting to see how this style will evolve over time. It is my most sincere hope that this work will be widely accepted by both my own peer group and the wider Drum & Bass community.

It is my feeling that far too much modern music only seeks to conform to pre-existing styles and formulas, resulting in tracks that are very predictable and rarely of the same standard as other prominent artists within that respective genre. Therefore, it is hugely beneficial to the wider field of music and the genres people are passionate about, to explore and discover new styles through the means of musical experimentation, of which the currently available music technology provides almost infinite scope. Playing it safe stylistically is far too commonly rewarded, while risk-taking will suffer harsh criticism from die-hard purists of each respective genre. My biggest fear in life is to depart this earth before creating anything of true value, and accordingly the prospect of this work being considered to be a valued contribution to both the fields of Synthwave and Drum & Bass music is enthusiastically anticipated.

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