

CMP: FOUNDATION ASSIGNMENT / ESSAY COMPONENT

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As an artist/producer inspired by a variety of sounds from the past 5 decades, I have decided to analyse three tracks that showcase my understanding and interest in different genres, and how I have incorporated their techniques into my own work.

Song 1: Do I Miss You? (Alternative R&B/lo-fi)

Reference – Partynextdoor – ‘Recognize’

Influence and reference have been gathered from the period of Alternative R&B between 2011-2015, with artists such as PartyNextDoor, Frank Ocean and The Weeknd being prolific names within the genre. Popular alternative R&B began to borrow and utilize techniques commonplace in Hip-Hop and Trap within the previous years; primarily drum techniques and sounds, and delve back into the roots of 90s R&B. [1] 808s kicks were not only altered to be utilised for a punchier rhythm, but have also been tuned to provide harmony to the instrumentation of the track. Rolling hi-hats had become a common staple for the genre, another method commonplace in Trap.

Vocal experimentation with auto-tune was explored further, examples of clear auto-tune use include Kanye West’s ‘Heartless’ released in 2008. Artists could alter their vocal correction and pitch freely, producing a futuristic/synthetic sound that accompanied the synth heavy instrumentals of the piece. [2]

As previously mentioned, futuristic and synthetic sounds have become the zeitgeist for Alternative R&B, and modern synth programs have paved the way for artists to evolve the overarching genre of R&B to new areas. Sweeping pads and EDM leads have been augmented to suit the attributes within the paradigm of R&B.

Specific influence was drawn from the tracks ‘Recognize’ by PartyNextDoor. ‘Recognize’ is one of his highest charting songs, earning a double platinum certificate, and demonstrates how alternate R&B has progressed and fused with other genres. The song is dense with synths, specifically with sweeping pads. These provide an atmospheric ‘spacey’ sound, which coincides with the idea of futuristic elements within the songs. The fusion of techniques from R&B and Trap create a rhythmic balance that place this song in a paradigm between the two – making it Alternate R&B. Trap drums element are implemented within this beat, drum machine rhythms have been used throughout the song to provide a typical trap sound. Lex Luger/808 Mafia influenced percussion, rolling hi-hats and short attack kicks keep rhythm behind the sung rap vocals performed by Party and frequent collaborator/rapper - Drake. This is a major implementation that sways this song from being a ballad like many other songs within this genre to Alternate R&B. The vocals are rich with texture; the lead vocals lay a foundation for frequent adlibs, vocal runs and harmonised melodies to enrich soundscape of the piece for a more stereo mix. R&B allows artist to showcase their vocal talent which PartyNextDoor does not shy away from.

Creative Process:

Synths were my main focus of instrumentation, and Serum has allowed me to create or modify sounds. Pads are a vital part of creating a wider soundscape, they blend into the

background and sit in accompaniment with the lead vocals. I wished to create a 'dark' rising pad that is commonplace in Alternate R&B, and my first procedure was to create a sine wave in Serum that would have a slow rise with not too much sustain.

An additional square wave that had been pitched up by 7 semitones gives more push to the wave frequencies. A low cut-off filter will eliminate the harsh buzz of the sine and square wave, reducing it to the driving lower swells to create the pad sound. Chorus gave the pad a more organic sound with a warble effect, giving it more of an 'airy' sound.

A small amount of detune was used to provide additional dissonance, this is regularly used within pads and synths in contemporary Hip-Hop and R&B.

Audio manipulation is very common within the genre, and has been produced in many forms within this piece. Reversing audio was used many times throughout this piece, and for many different purposes. The first form is in replication of modern Trap sounds and techniques used by professional Trap producers, this being the use of reversed snares. Reversed snares replicate a crescendo effect, like a rise, but are often less climactic in delivery. This can be effective when accompanied with a smaller progression in the song, such as signalling a change in rhythmic flow in the vocals in the same verse.

Reverse was also utilised after converting some MIDI tracks to audio, and the conversion allowed me to manipulate the audio with further ease. This reverse was to give a more dissonant tone to the piece in the Chorus section.

Another audio effect that I have used is Auto-Tune 7 from Antares. This auto-tune does not only let me adjust pitch correction, which is commonplace within contemporary R&B, but adjust pitch as well. Inspiration for the higher pitched vocals came from popular R&B artist Frank Ocean's use, and his use of voice manipulation (especially in tracks such as Self Control and Moon River). The reasoning behind using this effect was in relation to the characteristic of wide, rich vocal textures normally used within R&B; of harmonies panned around the listener hearing to give a bright accompaniment alongside the dense and dark instrumentals.

The keys have an emotional tone, I have adjusted the velocity and placed sustain on the notes to make them feel more delicate and drawn out. A tape delay effect was placed on the main piano melody that runs throughout the song to add to this emotional feel, this giving a shimmering and fading away sound.

As I take great influence from 80s/90s R&B, I used VSTs of older instruments such as a JUNO-106 to add ornamentation to the piece. Bells and synthetic choirs were added in sections as a call-back to the older sounds of R&B. As I have a passion for obscure samples, I found a sample from a TV show I enjoy, pitch shifted and chopped the sample to act as a saxophone outro, giving the piece more of a personal element.

Song 2: Best Yourself (Jazz Fusion)

Reference – Urban Jazz -IMDDB

Jazz Fusion is a broad term that describes Jazz harmonies and techniques being incorporated into other genres, with specific focus here on Contemporary U.K. Jazz Fusion. Contemporary Jazz Fusion has seen lots of Hip-Hop and R&B influence, drum machines replacing real studio drums and manipulated Jazz samples are the popular sound of Jazz Fusion today. We have seen influential Jazz musicians such as Robert Glasper incorporate these styles of

different genres, in which he had to say “[Jazz] *always was a music that was mixed together to make something*”. [3] We can see that “*jazz musicians reaching beyond any strict definition of what qualifies as jazz,*” and in Glasper’s case “*to incorporate R&B and hip-hop*” [3]

The genre of Jazz Fusion has seen a recent spike within the U.K., especially with Female artists pioneering and driving the genre to new avenues with their unique vocal delivery/tones. Names such as Greentea Peng, IAMDDDB and Biig Piig are becoming more and more relevant within the U.K. Global and Urban Charts, three female artists who have taken influence from an arrange of different genres and implemented their techniques into their own.

As this work was a collaboration with a female vocalist, I took inspiration from aforementioned artists within this genre. A track that resonated with me was IMDDDB’s track ‘Urban Jazz’ from the EP of the same name. When discussing her rise to mainstream success, journalist Tara Joshi claims “*With her fierce blend of soulful hip-hop, pounding trap and swirling urban jazz, it’s not hard to see why.*”[4]

The song delves into the artist’s companionship to Marijuana and its relaxing effect on her, this correlates to the laidback swing of the drums and airy vocal performance. IAMDDDB fusion of Jazz techniques with Hip-Hop production forms the basis for a contemporary Jazz Fusion hit. Snare brushes are soon replaced by drum machine claps and heavy 808 kicks, creating a dynamic between the two genres. A deep sub-bass also accompanies a jazz piano sample, which has been gated in sections to give transition into the next part of the song, whilst also attain a Hip-Hop technique of sample chopping. Ambience and spatial dispersion are also important in both Jazz and Hip-Hop, in their respective ways. With ensembles or a large band, recording individual instruments from different locations affects the timbre and texture of their sound. The same can be said for digital instruments (which are used more often in Hip-Hop than Jazz) and the audio effects you can use to replicate the texture of live recording.

Creative Process:

The bass was very important to create the fusion between R&B and Jazz. Discussed in the previous song, the 808 bass has become a popular and prevalent sound within the past decade, and again this has been utilised within my piece. This time however was to be sidechained with the kicks to provide more punch to the piece.

To provide a sense of ambience, the technique of foley was implemented to provide background density and create atmosphere. Sounds recorded from commutes to London and a city soundscape were layered below the main instrumentation for texture, just enough to be audible but not distracting from the song. The background ambience had been compressed and EQ’d so that harsh spikes and high pitch sounds would not cut through the main instrumentals. The high frequencies were brought down by 10dB, but compressed so that the low hums and drones were on an equal volume to the higher frequencies. EQ was also used to ensure there were not too many clashes between the lower frequencies of the piano and the heavy sub bass. Due to the expansive nature of the track, some frequencies were entirely diminished to ensure other ambient drones and textures were audible.

Panning and panning effects were key in creating a more stereo mix for the track. The lead piano was panned to the furthest degree either side, whilst certain melodies and backing vocals were placed in different spaces in regards to panning to create a binaural simulation.

There is also a tremolo effect on the Jazz Guitar in the background of the piece to give spread to either side of the listener. The tremolo had a slight decrease in smoothing and a ¼ rate to give the pan a gradual swing, fitting the groovy feel of the piece.

Reverb was a crucial part of creating atmosphere for the track. The backing vocals were to have lots of parallel reverb ran through a send/bus. As there were two different vocalists for background vocals, with their sessions recorded in different environments, I decided to create two different buses for each vocal. The lead singer's backing vocals were limited and compressed so they did not peak over the main vocals. Making sure to use the same reverb with as similar of a sound ensured the atmosphere and ambience of the piece were the same would ensure the sound is not too displaced and chaotic. I used the 'Valhalla VintageVerb' plugin, using the same 'Mode' and 'Presets' within the plugin.

A technique for punchier vocals was to use Fabfilter's 'Pro-Q3' plugin, and sidechain the compression to the main vocals. The compression will push the reverb up in the pauses and breaths, giving dynamic and colour to the vocals. As the reverb will have much more push in the breaths and pauses, the tail of the vocals will add to the overall space of the piece, hence adding to the overall ambience. To further fill the silences within the song, I Automation is vital for loud and punchy vocals. Volume was automated to bring down the harshness of plosives, whilst bringing different vocal recordings to the same gain level as to eliminate inconsistencies within the recording. Not only for vocals but instrumental fade ins/outs are common elements within most contemporary songs, allowing smoother transitions into the next part of the song, or potentially next track. I tried to use little to no voice correction within this song, as I felt it would deter from the raw feeling the lead vocalist provided, and would sway the genre to another sound. Occasional pitch correction was placed on the backing vocals just to ensure the backing vocals were in the same key.

Song 3: Bad Vibes (Emo Rap/Experimental Hip-Hop)

Reference: XXXTentacion – 'Look At Me!'

Lil Peep – 'Witchblades'

200: Emo Rap has seen a tremendous resurgence within the last decade, with rappers such as XXXTentacion, Lil Peep and Juice WRLD leading the genre to mainstream success. I have placed specific focus on contemporary Emo Rap and its defining characteristics. As with a lot of Hip-Hop sub genres, sampling is very prevalent within a song's composition, with artists going far and wide to search for appropriate samples. Emo Rap tends to sample songs that evoke a sense of nostalgia for the artist and potentially the younger demographic of listeners. [5] The genre can range from original instrumentals built around a sample from a 2000s folk song, to screamo-esque vocals laid over a heavily distorted 808 bass. Emo Rap takes influence from a plethora of different genres, most commonly Pop Punk, Indie Rock and Hip-Hop/Trap music. [6]

The form of vocal delivery in Emo Rap can be a mixture of both rapping and singing, or exclusively either, however artists have used vocal effects and autotune to alter their singing voice to create melodic rap melodies.

Two songs have been selected by artists who have greatly contributed to the genre within recent years, this being XXXTentacion and Lil Peep with their songs 'Look At Me!' [sic] and 'Witchblades' respectively.

'Look At Me!' was the hit that drove XXXTentacion into the public eye, and was a driving force in the mainstream re-emergence of Emo Rap. XXX boasted brash and aggressive lyrics over a soft vocal sample from the song 'Changes' by Mala, whilst pounding bass with harsh distortion fills the rest of the dynamic within the song.

Lil Peep took to a more harmonic side of Emo Rap, merging both singing and rapping to create catchy sung hooks with hard hitting rhymes. His song 'Witchblades' is a prime example of Emo Rap, talk of depression, drug abuse and relationships are addressed over 808 tuned bass and atmospheric piano samples. Trap drums make a reappearance, hi-hat rolls and irregular drum machine beats play alongside the clipping instrumentals. Autotune and vocal effects such as echo and delay are also common for rappers to build warmth behind their vocals.

Another technique that producers have used before it tuning the kick to the same key as the song, this giving further harmony with the sub bass, and less probability of clashes within tuning. Saturation has also been placed to bring out the higher harmonics within the sample and give more edge and body to the sound. The saturation had to be automated, within the chorus and second verse as the sounds are denser, to make sure there was not too much buzz within the song.

Using Logic's built-in sampler, I once again found an obscure sample to base my track around. Once I found a perfect loop for my sample, I used the Flex Time tool and selected the slicing setting so I could place the rhythm of the vocal sample to the correct transients. Sample chopping and manipulation is a common practise within Hip-Hop, I used the VST 'MRhythmizer' by MeldaProduction to chop and loop parts of the sample, creating a melodic rhythm for the verses. Bitcrusher was added to the sample to give more drive to the building aggression within the song.

To create a more ethereal tone in the break, I applied an Arpeggiator tool to the synths playing alongside the delicate vocals. I increased the octave range by +3 to replicate a lowering scale in the same style as a harp would be played.

Emo Rap does not shy away from experimentation within the genre, and experimentation within this track was a priority for me. With this, I decided to run my vocals in the verse through an Amp plugin instead of using a normal distortion plugin. I personally felt that the Amp plugin allowed more versatility and variety in the sounds produced, allowing me to change the sound entirely by selecting a new amp or fine tuning the treble or lows to make sure the vocals were clear enough to distinguish my lyrics.

The ES2 patch built in to Logic allowed me to create my own bass for the track, upon which I decided to create a heavily distorted sub bass, with a short attack and decay so it had more punch. The tone of the bass was tailored to be brighter as to not sound muddy in unison with the other low frequencies within the song. Full distortion was placed on the track, as a personal preference but also in relation to the early works of XXXTentacion and his sound of overpowering bass.

The bass was placed on the legato option, and the glide tool increased to allow a +24-semitone range. This technique creates a more natural slide between bass notes, which can add further dynamic to the piece and accompaniment to the other instrumentation. Inspiration was derived from the bass rises in Lil Peep's 'Witchblades'.

A Limiter was placed upon the bass as to not let the higher frequencies cut through the mix, as the fast rises to a higher octave may be jarring if there is a sudden rise in volume. Another limiter was placed on the kicks with overdrive to ensure they do not clip within the mix.

Bibliography:

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