

An Analysis of 1980s Pop, Female Rap and Eurodance

RADU MUNTEANU

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Ever since the pandemic of 2020, music has irreversibly changed. It has not only changed in the way it is being consumed, considering Spotify streams were down by 11%, 3 months into lockdown (Cooper, 2021), but it has also changed in the way it is being created. Having a lot of time to create since the live gig industry had officially taken a long break, artists have found new ways to collaborate. Because working together remotely had never been more accessible, the music industry suffered a boom in the quantity of music generated and released. This is why one of the aspects of a classic pop track that has drastically changed, regardless of the sub-genre it belongs to, is its duration. Tracks have considerably become shorter. This is one of the aspects that I am going to cover in the following essay. I will also look at 3 different genres of commercial music pieces - 1980s Pop, Female Rap, Eurodance. I will discuss how I captured and how I translated their essential features in my own production as part of this assignment and tackle their significance in today's social climate.

1980s POP

An official re-comeback of the 1980s has definitely been more present than ever. Whether it is tactile, through the sale of merchandising like cassette tapes by Lady Gaga or visual, through the lycra and sweatbands in Dua Lipa's workout video (Holden, 2021), the 1980's have never probably never been more present in popular culture since the actual 1980s.

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Their presence was commercially popularised by artists like Dua Lipa and The Weeknd. Following the more organic and live like disco of the 70s, building on the back of George Moroder nicknamed 'Father of The Disco' work, the following decade is described by a synthetic sound, consolidated through the use of the popular Roland TR-808 Rhythm Composer. Looking beyond the characteristic 1980s sound, I wanted to tackle this assignment from a lyrical concept point of view. I therefore looked at artists whose lyrics have a character of self-reflection, self-discovery and have a deep realisation feel to them. That is why I chose 'Good Ones' by Charli XCX. Its lyrics not only tackle compulsive self-destructive behaviours, but also come to support my statement in regards to how the duration of pop songs is diminished every year.

'Charli ultra-popstar ' version of herself, but uses this persona to examine her very human tics...As the song begins, Charli snarls over punchy production. But when this energetic opening dies down, she pairs her falsetto with lonesome synth to make a fragile admission: "You couldn't have loved me any better."' (MORELAND, 2021)

'So many pop songs drag on for too long, but this one could stand to stretch its legs. Perhaps that's the point: the good things always slip away too quickly.', (MORELAND, 2021)

Agnes is a winner of X factor Sweden whose debut single 'Release Me' spent 19 weeks at number 3 UK TOP 40 in 2009 (AGNES | full Official Chart History | Official Charts Company, 2021). Twelve years later Agnes's sound is far removed from the X

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factor characteristic pastiche genre. Collaborating with Swedish producers Vargas & Lagola and Kerstin Ljungström, Agnes's product is full of spiritual awakening references and symbolism.

"'24 Hours' is about going through the fire and the pain. How your life is turned upside down. Something extreme had to happen for you to wake up and see everything clearly. It is a sliding door moment where you choose the path forward."
(Universal Music Publishing, 2021)

As far as the lyrical content of 'More Than I Can Take' the concept comes across clearly even from the title. The song opens a conversation about addictive behaviours and the difficulty of saying 'No' that the people who suffer from them experience. Whilst '24 Hours' has more of an analogue production feel to it with real life instruments, sampled and programmed into the track, especially when it comes to the drums and bass lines, I particularly wanted to emulate the synthetic 80's feel in 'More Than I Can Take' through my choice of instrumentation and arrangement. The use of the same synth riff throughout the track, like in 'Good Ones' is very characteristic of the 1980s. Huge hits like 'Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)' by Eurythmics, Annie Lennox, Dave Stewart are built around one main melodic motif. I felt very strongly about wanting to replicate that in my track, because I want to cater to a scene that is particularly a Charli XCX fan - the LGBTQIA+ community. The aspect that I resonated with in Agnes' track and Angele's 'Bruxelles Je t'aime', is the juxtaposition between very rough and saturated synths used in the production and the angelic feel of the vocals. This is why I chose a similar singer, whose voice has a breathy falsetto and whilst recording the vocals on a Lauten Audio Signature Clarion

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FC-357 Large-Diaphragm Condenser Microphone, we made the conscious decision of avoiding belting on this particular track, as we were aiming for breathy and ethereal vocals. The juxtaposition gets taken one step further by the addition of distortion on the angelic voice, blended through a separate bus, especially on the choruses. All the songs that I have referenced as part of this genre are written in minor keys. 'More Than I Can Take' is no exception as it is played in the key of E minor.

Another aspect of Charli XCX's track that I wanted to reference in the song writing, was the use of a melodic and rhythmic riff over one syllable. Like Charli uses the word 'go' to build her chorus, we replicated the process with the one syllable word 'take'. From a social point of view, the fewer words a chorus is built from, the more memorable it becomes. According to Billboard, people are more likely to remember a chorus if they are able to sing it whilst under the influences of alcohol. (Unterberger, 2021)

The 'pumping' dance characteristic of 'Good Ones' is highlighted by the heavy use of sidechaining not only on the bass, but also on all combinations of synths that play the main riff that the track is built upon. Serum and Alchemy, are the digital synths I used on the production of the track, because I felt that they probably have the most 80's sounding character. Sidechaining is overused starting with the second half of the first verse at 00:20 and. It was also applied on the down lifter and uplifter samples used in the track. This was done in order to achieve the same 'pumping' effect which is used characteristically in EDM and Dance music. (EDMTips, 2021). When it comes to the tempo of my track I personally found 'Good Ones' to be too

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fast for the phrasing and lyrical content and concept that we created. Instead of 131BPM I decided to use 121BPM.

FEMALE RAP

Female rap has a history of black women and not only, raising awareness and claiming their space, stating their rights and their power in the context of a heavily male dominated scene. From Lil Kim's sexual lyrics (Kim, 1996), to Niki Minaj's bizarre creature's references (Minaj, 2010) to today extremely explicit lyrics of Cardi B, regardless of their theme, the one character that nevertheless translates with every track, is being a political statement. 'Feminine Slice' is my interpretation of this particular genre. 'Feminine Slice' is a track that I wrote during Tileyard Song writing Camp in October 2021. Advised by Jamie Searls during an A&R session, I decided to bring a guest rapper who could deepen the meaning of the political message I initially wanted to convey. I wanted to push boundaries from a gender perspective, as I identify as a man who sings about actions that socially and systemically could be described as characteristics of a woman's behaviour (Stewart et al., 2021) - 'Watch me slide this skirt/ On my feminine thighs'.

Whilst trying to embody the political character of this genre, it was very important to choose a rapper who would be capable of expressing a relevant point of view. Jadeya is a trans rapper who is not only a trans activist by nature, but who also speaks openly about her experiences as a sex worker, just like Cardi B speaks about

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hers as a stripper, (Bate, 2021). At the same time, I strongly believe in the value a feature can add to a product. A feature will always translate in more exposure and therefore could improve the way one track performs.

Whilst trying to emulate the body parts, physical references and graphic lyrics of 'W.A.P.' by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion: '*Wet ass pussy make that pull up getting weak*', we made the conscious decision of trying to capture the feel of this particular genre, without including explicit words, but still referencing physicality in our lyrics: '*Waist on petite just like my booty, face is giving beauty/Damn Jadeya's such a cutie*'. This decision came purely from wanting to maximise the radio potential of the track.

On all the reference tracks, alongside the intimacy of the lyrics, the vocals themselves also feel very intimate due to the processing. We recorded vocals with 2 microphones: Lauten Audio Signature Clarion FC-357 Large-Diaphragm Condenser Microphone, which was placed upside down on top of a Shure SM7B, which served as the main microphone. The Shure SM7B, normally used in podcasts, enabled us to capture the warmth of Jadeya's vocals and offered the mid-range and lower end of Jadeya's spectrum a very rap specific intimacy. These vocals were blended occasionally, on key sections with signal from the Lauten FC-357 microphone to emphasise particular words. This signal was panned to offer a wider stereo feel. In this particular instance, while recording vocals, I realised too late I did not set a level high enough on the Focusrite Pre-Amp for the SM7B input. I unfortunately lost a lot of the intimacy of the vocals.

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Sampling is an often-used technique in rap. A recent article shows that 48% of the songs on the Grammy-nominated releases for Best Rap Album include samples, (Sparrow, 2021). 'W.A.P.' is also part of that 48% and Ayo the producer, speaks openly about the importance of sampling *Frank Ski - 'Whores in This House'*, (Youtube.com, 2021). *When choosing what sample was the most relevant to use in 'Feminine Slice' I was very lucky to find a track by Frank Ski, the same artist sampled in 'W.A.P.' This sample captures the sass and aligns with the gender bending character of 'Feminine Slice' - Frank Ski - Tony's Bitch Track (Original Dirty Version) - (Youtube.com, 2021), where a male artists sings 'Bitch I'll take your boyfriend, Bitch I'll take your man' at 00:30.*

The most fascinating fact I came across when researching the production of 'W.A.P.' is that Ayo, the producer, never actually heard the lyrics until the track was released, because of the high level of security Cardi B's labels had put in place to protect her material. (Youtube.com, 2021). This is why for me it was very important to make sure the instrumental had already a very strong groove before the vocals were added. His main focus was figuring out how he was going to create different dynamics in the groove without 'doing too much'. (Youtube.com, 2021). *'Feminine Slice' s beat is a classic 4/4 hip hop beat at an 80BPM, with an almost constant hi-hat running at a 1/8. The construction of the bass runs on semitones in the key of G; however, the track moves from a melodic harmony feel in the key of G Major during the choruses and modulates into G minor over the verses.*

EURODANCE

When we are looking at this choice, we find that this is not a political statement by genre. This genre does not necessarily carry an intricate or innovative production.

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The actual choice is political for myself, because I wanted to shine a different light than the context this particular genre's success was originally placed in.

'Among the best known are Edward Maya and Inna, now worldwide dance floor stars - and the pride and joy of this former communist country stuck in an economic crisis and still fighting a reputation abroad as corrupt and poor' (Independent, 2011)

I tackled this particular genre because even though this does not necessarily represent something I am used to producing, I believe it is a great potential source of income and I wanted to challenge myself to create something that could emulate its radio friendly character. In terms of structure the genre tends to stick to a classic pop track structure. (Team, 2019), just like INNA's 'Flashbacks', my song 'My Nudes!', starts with a verse, pre-chorus, chorus, a slightly more instrumental based drop with a repeated lyrical motif. This combination repeats once more before going into a bridge and then eventually into a final chorus/drop. Lyrically, 'My Nudes!' tackles a subject that is more specific, but less poetic than INNAs. 'My Nudes' tackles a more current subject rather than an existential reflective monologue. 'My Nudes!' speaks about virtual nudity and the respect this property requires.

The bass pattern has a heavy role as in most instances and it follows an offbeat pattern, playing what a snare would play in a reggaeton beat. Contrasting the heavy character of the bass sound, the genre tends to have quite a romantic or even a nostalgic feel when it comes to the performance, which is why I chose to perform the verses in spoken word instead of actually singing the lyrics.

On this track I wanted to stay true to the romantic character of the genre but also wanted to think outside of the box and innovate in terms of instrumentation as much

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as possible. I believe I have done this by using a harp like arpeggiator on pre choruses and applied quite heavy distortion on specific key vocals. Throughout the process, I have discovered that I generally identify a lot with vocal sounds that do not necessarily classify as singing. A lot of the non vocal sounds make the human brain identify an emotion or a state of mind quicker than singing (Anikin, 2020). I used recording of moans, laughter to take the listener on a journey and to highlight specific words or help translate different emotions. A technique that I used when recording some of the vocal sections on this track, requires actual smiling enunciating specific lyrics, to help that particular feeling translate in the way the air is projected through the shape of the mouth. (Song Exploder, 2020). Eurodance in 2021, sometimes makes use of ethnic, Eastern European sounding instruments, which in my case were replicated by a distorted high-pitched synth pre-set in Serum. At a 110BPM 'My Nudes' imitates the use of percussion on Inna's Eurodance tracks, with claps instead of snares and tends to be quite minimal in terms of vocal layering and adlibs. 'My Nudes!' is in the key of F# Min, only because this was comfortable for my voice but is easily transposable to either D Min or C Min which seem to be the key the two examples of Eurodance songs, I am referencing in this instance are written in. However, looking at the similarities between these two from a key point of view, it is fair to say that both have a similar nostalgic feel also because they are written in minor keys.

Solely relying on the specific features of each genre I believe it is fair to say that each of the tracks chose to represent their specific genre and stand their ground. Whether they are referencing nostalgia, are sampling, therefore contributing to the recycling movement in music or are simply just adding value to the way a specific geographic area is perceived from the outside, I believe the most fascinating aspect

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that I have learned while analysing the three different genres is that, politically every single one of them has incredibly important things to say. And even though music has changed the way it is consumed, considering that some markets have dropped by 7-9%, (Brambilla Hall, 2021), music will never change the way it is perceived or lose its intellectual and political significance.

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