

Name: Jeremiah Bolarinwa

Student Number: 1910015

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Module Lecturer: Ciarán Robinson

This essay will discuss the defining characteristics of Trap, Afrobeats and R&B music. A brief introduction to each genre will be given, showing where each of them derive from and/or get their influences from. Characteristics such as instrumentation, structure, production techniques will be looked in to in order to investigate how each genre achieves a different sound and feel. I will also look into my chosen reference tracks and how they conform to the characteristics of the genre. Then I will discuss the personal musical decisions I made during the creative process which I believed would help further develop each track into fitting better within each genre. I have used images in the appendix section to further explain and justify certain production decisions.

TRAP

To begin I will give a brief insight to Trap music. Trap music is a subgenre of southern hip hop which derived out of the New Orleans USA. Which explains why you'll find many elements of hip hop being used in Trap music such as the drum patterns being used or heavy use of 808s etc.

There are several features of trap music that are distinct from other genres which help allow for trap to stand out, for example the use of hi-hat patterns. This is a significant feature of trap music that helps clearly define the trap sound. A lot of trap songs use either a rolling hat pattern or a pattern that consists of the same hat using two different pitches. This allows for an interesting pattern to be created. Many trap songs are minimal in instrumentation, consisting of mainly drums, bass and a couple of melodic instruments running a motif. Another characteristic of trap is the fact that it is usually bass heavy with major use of 808 sub bass. As mentioned above, trap music derives from southern hip hop, so you find that the drum pattern tends to be a variation of a slowed down hip hop, break beat.

In terms of vocal production, there tends to be evident auto-tune used on vocal lines in trap songs. Unlike other genre's the auto tune isn't to be subtle. Both the reference tracks chosen show a great example of this, where there is blatant autotune. Also in both reference tracks the way the hi hat is used is unusual. As opposed to just being the conventional "time keeper" the hi-hat is actually made more complex by using rolls or different pitches to develop the drum pattern further.

“Trap didn’t emerge as a rap style worthy concept of its own until T.I.’s Trap Muzik in 2003 and Gucci Mane’s Trap House in 2005. By this point it was also starting to take shape musically as a synthesis of most every other southern rap form to date, ... with the inhumanly agitated hi-hat rattlings of Mannie Fresh and Shawty Red.” (Richard Stacey, Redbull Music)

This quote is taken from an article titled “A guide to the many styles of hip-hop, from hyphy to horrorcore” by Redbull Music. It gives a brief insight to the many sub genres of hip hop this particular piece of text was extracted from the trap section and it makes reference to the significance in hi-hat patterns with trap music.

There are several other ways in which the reference tracks conform to the defining characteristics of trap such as the use of blatant autotune on the vocals. This has influenced my decision to put a noticeable amount of autotune on the vocals in my trap track. Structure is, another feature of trap music that is, rarely drastically changed within songs across the genre. Trap songs tend to follow a similar structure which is shown well between the two reference tracks. The general structure tends to be:

Hook – Verse – Hook – Verse – Hook – Verse (With the typical option of a breakdown) – Hook.

This shows quite often that the hook of a trap song tends to be used for both the intro and outro. I have therefore adopted a similar structure for my trap song, whereby the song begins with some vocal riffs before the hook coming in. The hooks and verses run in the same order with the hook finally coming in again for the outro. This is shown clearly in Fig 1 (Appendix)

The use of 808 sub bass is a major characteristic of trap music.

“Trap music emerged primarily from the southern United States as a subgenre of Hip Hop. It is a genre filled with a hard attitude that you can feel in the sound of the brass, triangle, triplet hi-hats, powerful kicks, snappy snares and low end 808 bass samples that are used when composing tracks..... Moreover, one of the distinct characteristics of the, right now very popular, Trap music genre is without any doubt that boomy bass sound with lots of low-end frequencies.” (SoundBridge Academy)

This piece of text shows the importance of the sub bass in trap music. In others it could be said that trap is somewhat bass led. The quote also mentions some typical instrumentation, with specific characteristics, used in trap music such as brass, triangle, triplet-hats etc. This shows how minimal trap songs are in instrumentation compared to other genres. Genres such as afrobeats for example would have much more instrumentation, especially traditional percussion instruments, layered up to thicken texture however in trap a thicker texture can be achieved through the bass line. Fig 2 (Appendix) Shows how I have adopted this minimalistic idea and have kept the whole production down to 10 instruments.

AFROBEATS

Afrobeats is a danceable genre which derived out traditional music from West Africa. Origins of this music can be traced back to the 1960s & 1970s through the music of Fela Kuti. Fela Kuti, who is also known as the pioneer of this afrobeat style, was a well-established, highly respected musician. With his fusion of Jazz with traditional Nigerian Juju/Fuji music, his meaningful lyrics which constantly challenged those in power at the time he saw a great amount of success. He was known for boldly addressing social issues which caused poor living standards for the masses.

“Fela Kuti, who was renowned for his eccentric character, musical talent and involvement in post-colonial African politics..... is now considered one of the most influential musicians in the world. His albums The '69 Los Angeles Sessions, Best of the Black President, Expensive Shit, Live!, Zombie and The Underground Spiritual Game remaining extremely popular.”
(Mary Pettas)

This text just gives more of an insight into who Fela Kuti was and the way the public felt towards him and still do today.

Afrobeats is one of the fairly new genres to go mainstream however, there's no doubt that it has recently become undeniably popular.

“Disturbing London founder Dumi Oburota has told Music Week that the wider music industry has no choice but to “pay attention” to the surge in popularity of African music and culture. Oburota is co-curating this weekend's AfroRepublik festival with Wizkid and Obi Asika-Iweka of Echo Location Talent Agency. He said the event.....is the culmination of a sustained period of “natural growth” (Ben Homewood)

This simply shows that due to the growing number of people listening to afrobeats, the music industry was almost forced to acknowledge the genre to the point where we now have radio programmes dedicated solely to afrobeats such as on capital xtra. The text goes on to say that:

“..... Wizkid, Not3s, Yxng Bane, Maleek Berry, Mr Eazi, Tekno and Tiwa Savage....These are massive artists performing around the globe and Live Nation is a global business, so they need to get involved with the new acts that are [heading for] world domination,” said Oburota, who helped organise Wizkid's 5,000 ticket sell-out Royal Albert Hall show last year” (Ben Homewood)

It's clear to see that the genre is being widely accepted so much so that events are being held in such prestigious venues like the royal albert hall.

Afrobeats, as we know it now, typically uses similar rhythms and cross rhythms as in the 60s and 70s. Giving that danceable groove to the music. This is heard clearly in the reference tracks where the different percussion instruments play simultaneously at a different beat in the each bar, resulting in cross rhythms. This consequently gives a thicker texture as each beat of the bar is constantly occupied, leaving less room for space in the rhythm.

Traditional percussion instruments such as the woodblock, shekere (shaker), bongo's etc are still used heavily in afrobeat music. Which is why you will see in afrobeat sessions, many of the tracks are dedicated to merely percussion instruments. The way the different instruments interact with each other is what gives the traditional African groove. Fig 3 (Appendix) shows the percussion instruments used to make up the rhythm section in this track. Out of a total 23 tracks, 14 of those have been dedicated to percussion. This just goes to show the heavy African influence in this music because traditionally there is more of a focus on rhythm than melody when it comes to African music.

Other melodic instruments that are typically used in afrobeats are mallets, electric pianos, electric guitars, bass guitars, bells etc. The bass line in afrobeats is very important, and is often seen as the driving force of the song. For this reason, the bass tends to be more present within the mix than in other genres. I have adopted this idea in my own afrobeat track and have made it bottom heavy. To emphasize this, the bass is purposely layered in later on in the track to give more of an impact.

Vocal production on afrobeat songs tend to be layered up in certain sections. A section of music could have a vocal line doubled but with one vocal line recorded an octave lower. This is evident in the reference tracks, most especially the Burna Boy track and it gives the vocal a warmer feel. I have therefore decided to include this technique in my own production.

Afrobeat song rarely sways from an A-B structure with a hook following each verse. This structure also reflected in my afrobeat composition. I have chosen to develop my own afrobeat composition by adding in a drop, which consists of a high frequency cut. The idea of breakdowns within a piece of afrobeat music isn't something that is common but in this case I believe it works very well.

NEO SOUL

Neo soul is a musical genre that emerged out of a fusion of soul and r&b. The term "Neo Soul", literally meaning new soul, was coined by Kedar Massenburg. The genre is heavily based in soul music.

"Neo-Soul music is essentially modern-day soul music, with contemporary attitudes and sensibilities." (Mark Edward Nero)

It is less of a danceable genre and rather has more of a laid back feel. The interesting choice of chords shows a jazz influence in the genre which explains why the genre is sometimes thought of as an "jazzy r&b". There is heavy use of extended chords (mostly 7ths and 9ths), and a mixture of diminished and sus chords. This immensely contributes to the unique neo soul sound and feel. Most Neo soul songs are in a minor key which is why I made the decision to have my neo soul track in a minor also.

Most Neo Soul artists are women, which differs greatly from how women are represented in music as a whole. This helped shape my decision to have a female vocalist on the song seeing as women are represented more in neo soul.

The same text goes on to say:

“It differs from contemporary R&B in that it's obviously more soulful, and it also tends to have deeper messages and meanings than R&B.” (Mark Edward Nero)

The lyrical content within Neo Soul is a significant factor to the genre, with lyrics being typically conscious-driven and uplifting. Having said that, there are also a lot romantic based lyrics which is well complimented by the feel of the music.

Neo Soul tracks tend to be minimal in instrumentation which helps provide the laid back feel for the listener as there isn't too much going on at once. Instruments such as electric guitars, bases and electric pianos are common within the genre. Snaps and clap sounds are often used as a replacement for the snare in a neo soul track.

For my own Neo Soul composition, I have used a similar selection instruments as shown in Fig 4. I made use of electric piano, clap sounds instead snare drum sounds, tambourine as background percussion in order to keep the soul element. However a change I made was that I used a sub bass sound rather than an electric guitar just because I felt that it made the track bit more chilled and laid back. The bass sound chosen is similar to that of a smooth simple sine wave bass synth. The production has been kept minimal in order to maintain that neo soul laid back feel. This idea of minimal instrumentation is evident in the reference track “Nothing Even Matters” by Lauryn Hill and D’Angelo because this track is limited to drums, keys, organ, bass and vocals.

Vocal production in Neo Soul differs to other genres in that the vocals are produced to come across as natural as possible. So effects such as autotune and large wet reverbs wouldn't be heavily present within the mix. This is due to the fact that most neo soul vocalists have a soulful voice and usually want to portray that as authentically as possible in their music. I have emulated this technique in my own song and have decided to mix the vocals lightly putting minimal effects on in order for as much of the natural performance to come through as possible.

Another way the general feel of the genre is achieved is through the way the drum patterns are played. The rhythms in neo soul music tend to be swung which hugely impact the feel of the music giving it a lazy, chilled feeling, as opposed to if every beat was played exactly on each beat of the bar. Some Neo Soul tracks even exaggerate this swing so much to the point where it sounds just about on beat. This swing in the drums features heavily in the reference track On & On by Erykah Badu. I have therefore implemented a similar swing on the drum pattern in my neo soul track.

Neo Soul can be said to be heavily bass led as a genre. This is due to the fact that the bass guitar tends to hold the groove in Neo Soul. The kick drum essentially follows the groove of the bass and plays something to match. For this reason I have decided to have a groovy running bass going through out to match the neo soul feel. Unlike the other two genres where the bass is layered in late in the songs, here the bass is the second instrument to enter, establishing a groove quite early on.

There are some additional musical decisions I made on this track in order to develop it further such as implementing an organ in order to add to the soulful feel. Also the addition of a synth lead and strings in order to draw at the r&b influence of the genre.

In Conclusion this essay has shown that Trap, Afrobeats and Neo Soul music, although they have some similarities in their characteristics, such as the fact that they're all typically in the same 4/4 time signature, they all differ from each other immensely. The production for each genre, therefore, differs depending on which genre you're working on. This essay has shown that there are some production techniques needed in order to clearly define a song as a specific genre. For example, the great amount of autotune usually used on a vocal in a trap song or the fact that cross rhythms need to be create within the rhythm section of an afrobeat to give off that African groove. Structure is another factor that helps associate a song with a genre. Even though it is a subtle factor, this essay has discussed how different genres take up different structures. Finally I have justified the chosen reference tracks by showing how they each conform to the characteristics of each genre.

APPENDIX

Fig 1 –



Fig 2 –

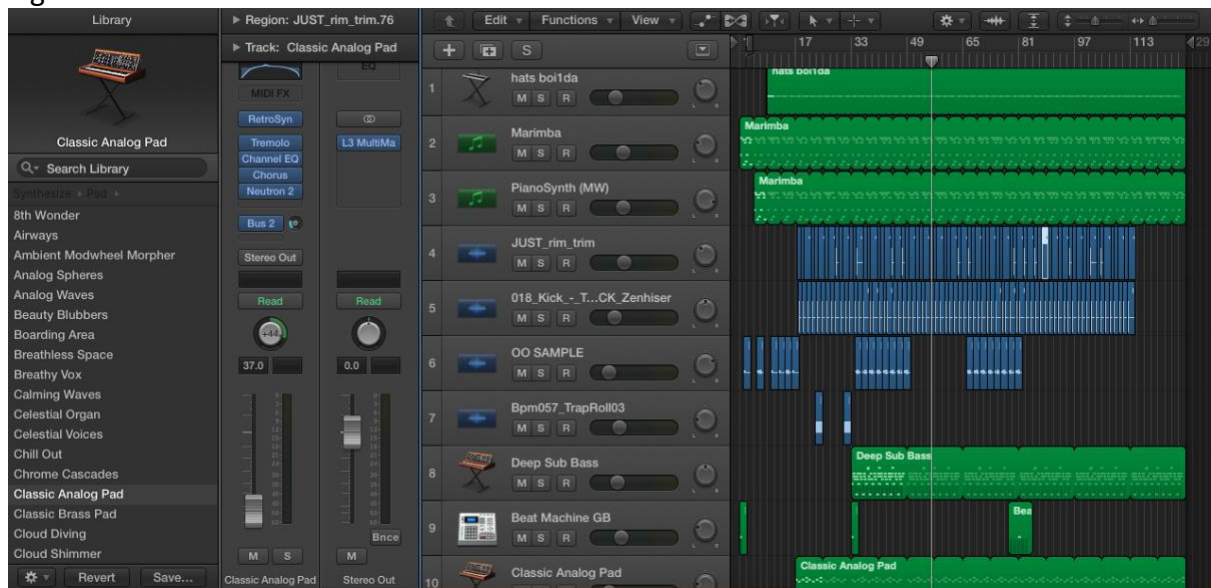
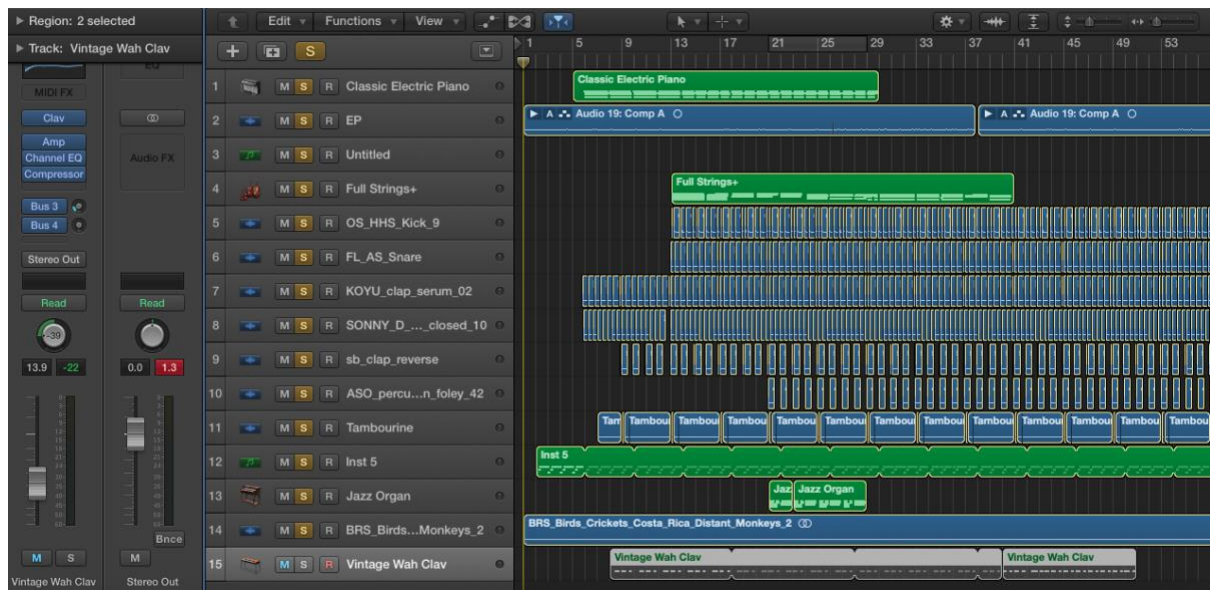


Fig 3 –



Fig 4 –



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