

Insight into the production process: Defining the characteristics and musical styles of the genre, production techniques used and how these have been incorporated, or not, in my own body of work.

Introduction;

In this essay, I examine three different genres of music, their characteristics, production styles and how the artists and producers in my reference tracks have had a defining impact on my own musical body of work.

The three genres of music I have chosen are; Hip Hop / R&B, UK Garage and Pop Music. I will share my analysis of these genres through research of the reference tracks, which were used to inform and create my body of work.

My analysis will evaluate the musical styles used within the genre; specific production techniques common to the genre and my methodology in creating the body of work.

I will provide critical self-evaluation on my own interpretation of how I have conformed to these characteristics, or not, and if not, why I have decided to challenge the status quo?

The three reference tracks are;

Hip Hop - (Tre Mission, Ft Thes, "Stigmata") released 2014.

UK Garage - (The Streets – "Has It Come To This?") released 2001.

Pop Music - (Sean Paul, Tove Lo, "Calling On Me") released 2020.

In order for me to truly understand the characteristics, orality and the artistry, it was important to immerse myself into each genre, listening to multiple tracks, finding commonalities, that provide insight and perspective, specifically on the production process.

"It takes lots of 'cajones' to be a nonconformist. Going against the grain is one of the biggest risks that any musician can take. Trends often drive sales, with artists joining the bandwagon because they don't want to be left behind. That said, nonconformist musicians are often the ones that keep music the most interesting. Sometimes nonconformity pays dividends, while other times it creates quite a pain in the derriere" Brent Faulkner, 2014, Pop Matters.

The first genre I spent time researching was Hip-Hop / RnB, the main reference track I used, was, (Tre Mission, Ft Thes – Stigmata).

The reference track itself, contains all of the ingredients that you would come to expect from a Hip-Hop / Rap song, that borrows and takes characteristics from other genres.

Tre Mission, uses melodic sounds that play throughout the duration of the track. We are first introduced to the slightly warped sound of a piano, that has been reversed with added FX of reverb, bit crushing, filtering and a delay. This is a creative and clever use of sound design to capture the emotion of the listener. What struck me, was that this sound remains throughout the entire track, but for the first 20 seconds of the production, it is the only sound we hear.

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This is not uncommon when you reference this with other tracks written and released around the same time and specific to this genre.

Will.i.am (feat. Cody Wise) Birthday 2014

Beyonce (feat. Jay Z) Drunk In Love 2014

Rihanna Unapologetic

Charlie Baltimore (feat. Ja Rule, Ashanti & Vita) Down 4 U

What I discovered through a small sample size of other reference tracks, was that they all followed a similar arrangement, by using vocal harmonies followed very quickly with syncopated hi-hat patterns and or drum rifts.

From further evaluation, I discovered that the real commonalities that define this genre include, heavy usage of basslines, 808s, syncopated drumbeats, sampling, layering of multiple sounds from synthesisers, chord progressions and stabs and now more common in today's commercial landscape, the use of musical loops.

"If you go down the [Billboard] Top 40 or Rap Caviar, a good majority of the records on these charts have loopmakers on them," says Adrian Nunez, the vice president of A&R for Sony/ATV Publishing,

It is, however, the art of storytelling and the deep meaningful lyrics, often poetic, that raise social issues, or provide commentary on personal challenges that are used to draw the listener in and create an emotional connection, the artist does this through their orality. It is this characteristic that truly brings this genre to life on a social scale.

In an interview carried out by Fader, Tre Mission was asked:

"You draw on both grime and hip-hop on Stigmata, how do the two music's relate in your eyes?" RUTH SAXELBY, Aug 2014.

"Well, I think the most obvious would be that they're both MC-driven genres. I believe I'm an MC before anything. A rapper. A lyricist. Whatever you may call it. I don't necessarily put that first always, but it's the core of who I am as an artist" Tre Mission, Fader 2014.

I was personally inspired and curious to start at the same place the reference track does with the reversed piano sound. I researched the specific techniques of how to programme through midi, the chords I had selected, in the key of Dm. Layering the piano with different styles of pianos to build a sound pallet. I sent this to an aux bus, where I created a channel strip that had reverb, bit crushing, modulation and stereo delay. This technique enabled me to create my own style from the reference track,

(See Element 1 - appendix One, Audio Body of Work for the original piano,)

(See Element 1 - appendix two for the example, once I had manipulated the sound.)

I watched a tutorial on youtube, from MusicTechHelpGuy – Feb 2016.

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I found that the reference track does incorporate many of the fundamental characteristics of the core genre. Specifically, the use of storytelling and orality. It was Tre Mission's artistry that inspired me to relook at my own track. The first version of my song used various vocal samples; these samples did not formulate a narrative that had the same level of emotional impact on the listener as the reference track did. My own work originally felt staged and ungenune and it wasn't capturing the very essence of the core characteristic of the genre.

(See Element 1 - 01 appendix_Three_Original_Vocal_Samples.mp3)

Unfortunately, due to covid19, I wasn't able to get a rapper to record live, so I purchased an acapella and transposed and time stretched the vocals to fit with the key and bpm of my track.

The use of female vocals to provide a contrasting listening experience adds additional tone warmth and depth. The use of female vocals is used in multiple tracks across the genre.

Other examples that I used as part of my referencing include;

*Fabulous (feat. Tamia) Into You,
Ja Rule, (feat. Ashanti) Always on Time,
Fat Joe, (Feat Ja-Rule & Ashanti) What's Luv?.
Jay Z (Feat. Mary J. Blige) Can't Knock The Hustle.
Jay Z (Feat. Kanye West & Rihanna) Run This Town*

My own body of work, includes examples of harmonies I created and hooks pulled together.

(See Element 1 - appendix_4_Vocal_Harmonies_Guilty)

(See Element 1 - appendix_5_Female_Vocal_Hook_Guilty)

One of the key themes from a production perspective is the use across all three of my chosen genres of music, of the 808 and the impact on the mix. if the 808 and the kick are fighting for the same space.

"Getting an 808 to cut through a mix is difficult. It competes with the kick and bass, causes various mix problems, and even disappears on small speakers" Rory PQ, April 2019, Iconcollective.

Slate Digital provides examples and tutorials as part of their 'all access' pass on their platform. They have a specific module on the 808. I watched this series of short tutorials a number of times, they shared a couple of production techniques that I have incorporated into my finished body of work. The first production technique is using compression and its side chain capability to duck the 808 when the kick plays.

By adding a compressor to the kick and routing the sidechain to the 808, in the compressor, I then had to find the sweet spots on the attack, release, ratio and threshold. Whilst you are able to create some additional space, it will not help if the mix is muddy. Another

production technique, that I used was to add multiband saturation in the mids and distortion in the lows, sweeping the frequencies from around 70Hz to 3kHz.

I incorporated these techniques into my final submission. I have included an example of the low-end muddiness prior to implementing these sound design and production techniques.

(See Element 1 - appendix_6_Before sidechain_808)

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For my second reference track, I used (*The Streets – “Has It Come To This?”*) released 2001.

When I first listened to the *Streets - Has It Come to this?* I was heavily influenced in the way Mike Skinner, was able to bring his own personal style of rap, hard hitting social lyrics, that openly discussed society, to a genre that was;

“born out of New York’s Paradise Garage nightclub in the mid 1970s, UK Garage shared with this an emphasis of dancing but the influences included RnB, Swing, Ragga and Dancehall” Ewan Spencer, UKG Nov 2013.

Mike Skinner references that he was heavily influenced by US hip hop and RnB musical styles and this shows in his music.

“Has It Come To This?” is not only the most original, lyrical British rap in memory, it also (alongside So Solid Crew) charts an evolutionary route for UK garage” NME Ted Kesler Sep 2005.

I have always personally been fascinated by Mike Skinner, who describes himself as an “outsider”, yet he was the one who was able to take UK Garage as a genre of music, into the mainstream UK charts with “Has It Come To This”, peaking at number 18 in the UK top 40. “OCC” (Official Charts Company)

I am able to draw parallels to certain aspects of his life, the feeling of being an outsider, is something that I certainly feel, especially when it comes to music production. His approach to music production, is very similar to mine, he now prefers to work outside of the box. (DAW)

“I was probably one of the first people in the charts, really, to be totally in the box. My first album was done in Logic” Mike Skinner 2015.

Inside the box Vs outside the box, has been a personal conflict of my own, I prefer working with outboard that I can physically touch. As I looked at other artists in this genre, I came across a tutorial hosted by Point Blank, with MJ Cole. Another self-proclaimed “old school logic user” MJ Cole.

Listening to the various interviews, I decided that I would, for this body of work, do everything inside the box (DAW) follow their methodology for writing, finding inspiration, composing, arranging and mixing the track completely in Logic. I knew that this would take me outside of my comfort zone, as Logic is not a tool that I am overly familiar with and I have not tried to create a Garage track before.

The genre has many identifiable characteristics that are unique. Immediately telling the listener that this is a garage production or a subgenre.

As a genre, the defining characteristics include; a syncopated “2step” style that took over from the 4x4 (four to the floor) as the dominant trend. The programmed / sequenced drum patterns sat at the very heart of the genre. The tempo of the genre sat between 124-140bpm and had a solid groove. MJ Cole, in the interview with Point Blank shares his perspective and approach to creating a garage track on the fly. The key takeaways from this

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interview in my opinion, is the need to have your samples and sounds organised so that you have a range of kicks, snares, hi-hats all laid out in the sampler. That the groove needs to have a swing on the drums of at least 52% quantization. Claps are crisp, short and sharp but natural. Simplicity is key.

The variance of velocity is a key technique that provides a human element to a machine-driven drum making process. Whilst the rhythm and groove identify the genre. The other key characteristics include, vocal chops, often pitch shifted, or time stretched, that complement the rhythmic structure.

Use of reverbs, filters, flanger and other DJ tools, were used throughout.

One of the reasons I enjoy Garage music is because there are no fundamental musical rules that you have to follow. In fact, Garage was all about breaking all the musical rules.

Instruments would be out of key, out of time, producers were using old synthesisers. It was heavily crafted around producers creating repetitive loops, sampling, using midi outboard 1U racks like the E-MU, Planet Phatt and tools like the Akai S Series.

My body of work has tried to incorporate the natural components of this genre. So much so, that I have ended up making many versions of the track using different vocals, harmonies and melodic flows. From a production perspective, I have created a groove and built around it, not following any specific rules. This approach pays homage to the genre, as I outlined earlier with regards to Garage breaking all musical rules.

The biggest challenge with this piece is the arrangement and the mixing down process.

Mixing down inside the box (DAW) is something I am not used to, but it forced me to make decisions, that were reversible, whereas mixing down outside the box, typically requires a commitment to print the EQ or the compression, or your master bus.

In my submission, you will find a number of alternative ideas under the *progress audio folder for this genre*.

The final version is as close as one can get to the reference track, especially due to the lyrics from Mike Skinner

When you listen to the master track, you will hear that I have tried to play around with different drum kits, one of the drum kits is panned to the right whilst the other is hard left and another one in the middle. I tried this as a different technique to add warmth, and to remove phasing. At the very end of the track you will hear reverb from the drums, this was left intentionally.

For my third and final genre and reference track, I looked at pop music, specifically, ("Sean Paul – Call On Me" and "Sean Paul – "Dream Girl")

The characteristics of pop music include; A defined structure and arrangement, use of melodic, rhythmic hooks, specific chords that move from major to minor / minor to major, the main outcome is providing resolution to the listener melodically, often key changes take place. I have incorporated this into my own music, where I have worked in the key of Am but was able to move to C Major as its own counterpart, you can hear this as we move to the second chorus with the instrumentation, specifically the string sections.

The reference track, starts with taking the listener straight to the chorus, as do many pop songs today. You can clearly hear the sonic difference as you move into each of the sections of the track. It is building a wall of sound, that is heavily driven by the rhythm of the drums.

Whilst my track follows the structure and arrangement characteristics of the reference track, I believe the track needs to be remixed again and mastered to provide that same level of finish that is needed.

Vocals are the prominent driver in the mix, pop music is all about the vocals not just the lead vocals but the harmonics of the backing vocals too, use of autotune and other pitch tools have become synonymous with pop music.

In my master and in the vocal mix down, which is in the appendix folder

Crawford_S_Creation_Element1_ previous versions, the file is Vox Mix Get Out My Head.mp3, you will hear how I have changed the pitch of the female vocal to create a male vocal that sits gently underneath.

This is where I spent a lot of my time in the production process, trying to create the perfect vocal that would be catchy and provide the balance across the track. I took a lot of inspiration from the vocals of (Lady Gaga “Rain On Me”) One of the big production techniques I reviewed was using gain automation on the vocals.

“Pop vocals tend to have a very tight dynamic range but trying to apply too much gain reduction at once can make your vocals sound like they’re slamming into a brick wall. To avoid this, you’ll want to use gain reduction in stages.

The first step is to apply gain automation to your raw vocal recording. I’ll typically perform this process in my DAW by either automating the level of a utility device or by automating audio clip gain. It doesn’t matter how you do it, as long as you do it”
Charles Hoffman, April 2020 – Waves.

I also spent time looking at how to double the vocal sound, whilst I don’t believe I achieved the final result I was looking to achieve it did add texture to the overall song.

Vocal doubles for Pop music tend to be quite tight when it comes to how they’re lined up with one another. The doubles are usually offset in time using a delay that’s barely large enough to breach the listener’s echo threshold. This means that listeners will often perceive the main vocal and doubles as one wide vocal instead of 3+ separate ones. In the track “Bon Appétit feat. YA-LE!” by Shaun Frank, you can hear this effect.

One of the main features is repetition, from repeating choruses, melodic tones, easy listening drum grooves. Pop music, actually borrows many characteristics from other genres for example – Rock, Latin, Urban, Dance, Country

The idea of ‘pop’ music. It is, of course, an abbreviation of popular but this in itself does not take the meaning of the word a great deal further. If we were to look at music that was popular a hundred years ago, we would be listening to and thinking

about a very different range of music than if we consider popular music in the 21st Century; although parallels do exist. Dr Johnathan Wildridge - Dec 2019

Dr Johnathan Wildridge raises an interesting perspective and when I personally think about pop music, it is always changing and adapting with each generation. What was popular during the 90s, is very different to what is popular today. The Independent journalist; Ludovic Hunter-Tilney goes on to provide some context;

“Not only does each generation get its own popular music, it also experiences music differently from previous generations. Never has that been truer than now, when computerisation and the internet have transformed the way songs are made and listened to” Ludovic Hunter-Tilney - November 8th, 2019

It was this concept that made me look at Sean Paul, he started his music career in the early 1990s but has thus far kept his career moving upward. Recent hits include “Mad Love” “Cheap Thrills” and “Rockabye” to name but a few. Whilst a Reggae and Dancehall artist, Sean Paul;

“maintains a multi- national presence with numerous collaborations in genres such as pop, Latin, EDM, soca, and afrobeats. The cross-over icon also boasts a remarkable fan base in Latin America, Japan, Europe and USA”
Alex Hardee – Responsible Agent, at time of writing.

It was Sean Paul’s collaboration into the realm of Pop that influenced my own journey for this part of the assignment. The way he brings together various influences into his productions, but still follows the rules of the genre, whilst finding creative ways to incorporate his own signature characteristics. “With a bang, bang, bang” - Sean Paul.

Conclusion

Art and music are subjective, the characteristics of musical genres have over recent times, blurred. Whilst there are very specific attributes that will inform the listener what genre they are listening too, as popular music continues to evolve alongside technology and creation, these lines will continue to become blurry. The biggest takeaway from all of the research and the assignment experience, was that so many of the production techniques

are universal, from working with compressors, sidechaining, gating, reverb, EQ, mixing. From a personal development perspective, I will be spending more time on understanding how to mix, and when to use FX. Specifically spending time over the coming weeks looking at EQ and understanding the different frequencies, so that I can incorporate this into my production technique. From a writing and programming perspective, I will be further investing in researching programming drum techniques and music theory. I felt at times these challenges held me back in where I could go, within each of the productions.

]Appendix

Notation of piano part from Track 1 – Guilty.

1

000-Custom Soft Piano

1 5

9 13 17

21 25

29

Notation from Element 1 - Track 2 – In 95

1

1

Brooklyn

Untitled

Untitled

5

The image displays a musical score for three tracks: Brooklyn,Untitled, andUntitled. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of two systems of three measures each. The first system is marked with a '1' and the second with a '5'. The Brooklyn track is in the bass clef, theUntitled track is in the treble clef, and theUntitled track is in the bass clef. The Brooklyn track features a continuous eighth-note melody. TheUntitled track features a continuous eighth-note melody. TheUntitled track features a continuous eighth-note melody. The Brooklyn track features a continuous eighth-note melody. TheUntitled track features a continuous eighth-note melody. TheUntitled track features a continuous eighth-note melody.

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