

Comparative Analysis: Nigel Godrich and Timbaland

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INTRODUCTION

The ambiguous role of a music producer continues to escape common definition, made the more difficult in today's ever growing expanse of musical genres and styles. McKinnon (2006), writing for CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) gives us a broad working definition: "Music producers are like film directors. They supervise the recording process, and are responsible for its final result."

Over recent decades, two significant individuals have had a major impact in shaping this very role; English producer Nigel Godrich and American producer Timothy Zachary Mosley better known to the world as 'Timbaland'. The following essay analyses and compares these two individuals with particular focus on their key stylistic traits, their approach and methodologies and the techniques they employ in the craft of music production.

NIGEL GODRICH

Born in February 28, 1971, Godrich is best known for his close collaboration with the English five piece rock band Radiohead. The noted partnership began with a chance opportunity to record some B-sides during the band's studio sessions for *The Bends*, "a notoriously difficult album for the band to make" (Robinson, 1997). His immediate connection with the band and his thorough knowledge of tape machines, mixing consoles and outboard gear made him the first port of call during the pre-production stages for *Ok Computer* (1997), Radiohead's third studio album. He was initially called in to engineer the newly acquired equipment but eventually became co-producer for the album. The unanticipated overwhelming success of the record catapulted Godrich into the upper echelons of the music industry with "his professional services being sought by stars such as Axl Rose" (Tilney, 2001), Natalie Imbruglia, Beck, Travis and Pavement (McKinnon, 2006).

Since then, he has produced for a variety of artists for albums like Beck's *Mutations* (1998), *Sea Change* (2002), *Guero* (2005) and *The Information* (2006), Travis' *The Man Who* (1999) and *The Invisible Band* (2001), Sir Paul McCartney's *Chaos and Creation in the Backyard* (2005), Air's *Talkie Walkie* (2004) and *Pocket Symphony* (2007), Charlotte Gainsbourg's *5.55* (2006), Thom Yorke's *The Eraser* (2006) and all of Radiohead's subsequent albums, *Kid A* (2000), *Amnesiac* (2001), *Hail to the Thief* (2003), *In Rainbows* (2007) and *The King of Limbs* (2011).

TIMBALAND

Born Timothy Zachary Mosley in March 10, 1971, Timbaland's early career development was in collaboration with fellow Virginian artists Missy Elliot (Melissa Arnett), Magoo (Melvin Barcliff) and Pharrell Williams, the last two of which were co-members of a band they named S.B.I. (Surrounded by Idiots). Timbaland says of the band, "we basically were a bunch of idiots but we turned out to be superstars. It was a great feeling, 'cause we didn't have no hope of getting no deal. We just loved music, so that kept our drive going" (Reid, 2007). His first real mentor was DeVante Swing, a member of Jodeci, who signed Missy Elliot's then R&B girl group *Sista* (Frehsee, n.d.). Swing gave Timbaland the opportunity to meet artists such as Ginuwine and Aaliyah, both of whom would be pivotal in his ascension to worldwide accolade and superstardom.

Timbaland has produced and collaborated on records such as Aaliyah's *One In A Million* (1996), *Aaliyah* (2001) and *I Care 4 U* (2002), Ginuwine's *Ginuwine...The Bachelor* (1996) and *100% Ginuwine* (1999), Missy Elliot's *Supa Dupa Fly* (1997), *Da Real World* (1999), *Miss E... So Addictive* (2001), *Under Construction* (2002) and *This Is Not A Test* (2003), Nelly Furtado's *Loose* (2006), Justin Timberlake's *Justified* (2002) and *FutureSex/LoveSounds* (2006), Björk's *Volta* (2007), Madonna's *Hard Candy* (2008), Chris Cornell's *Scream* (2009) and Keri Hilson's *In A Perfect World* (2009) and *No Boys Allowed* (2010).

PRODUCTION TRAITS

CREATIVE ACCIDENTS

In an interview with Beauvallet (2000) for *Les Inrockuptibles*, a French cultural magazine, Godrich says of his main production agenda "My technique is to set the environment to make creative accidents easier. And then all I have to do is pick the right whim of fate." This methodology emerged during the recording sessions for *Ok Computer* at St Catherine's Court, a Tudor mansion outside Bath (Robinson, 1997). "[Radiohead] recorded in its every nook and corner, with Godrich arranging microphones to take full advantage of the house's dimensions" (McKinnon, 2006). Only minimum room treatments were performed leaving the original acoustics and atmosphere intact. This approach of treatment sparsity and maximum authenticity were also the main agenda during the tracking setup for the band:

"When you're recording a band, it's a bunch of microphones, a mixing desk, and a multi-track tape machine. That's it. There's a bit of computer jiggerypokery if need be, but basically they're a band, and they play together really well...everybody's in a big room, like it would be if they were onstage. Everybody can see each other, they've all got their own foldback mixer, so everybody's happy, and they can just play" (Robinson, 1997).

Vocals were also needlessly overdubbed or re-recorded, with the inclusion of most of the vocal guide tracks in the final mix, as was the case for *Paranoid Android*¹ (Radiohead, 1997), which was recorded as one take. There was also only ever minimal processing on the vocals by way of a Urei 1176 compressor and a Pultec valve EQ. "It's the kind of thing where if you get too analytical, you try and create a false atmosphere" (Robinson, 1997).

Another notable production technique on the album is found on the tenth track *No Surprises*² (Radiohead, 1997). The band desired "a tempo that was too slow to be played well on their instruments" (McKinnon, 2006). Godrich solution, which was borrowed from a similar technique used by the Beatle's producer George Martin for the track *Strawberry Field Forever*, was to record the instrumentation at a faster pace and then have it slowed down for the vocal overdub. "The sum is ethereal and haunting: the guitars sound like harps; each pound of Phil Selway's drums sticks in the ear a micro-second longer than expected" (McKinnon 2006).

¹ Track 01 on CD accompaniment - *Paranoid Android* (Radiohead, 1997)

² Track 02 - *No Surprises* (Radiohead, 1997)

These non-conventional approach were Beck's main rationation for asking Godrich to produce his tenth studio album *The Information*. In an interview for *Remix*, Beck comments on his collaboration with Godrich:

"All of my records tend to have crazy sounds going on to some degree...and I think Nigel and I definitely share that. He brings a little bit of alchemy into it that's sometimes mysterious and sometimes very simple, but whatever it is, it's always just right for what needs to happen...what he uses to get his sound is not all that different from what other people are using - it's just the way he's using it, or what he's using it on." (Murphy, 2006)

An "atmospheric" landscape sonically ties the whole album together achieved mostly by having open mics in Beck's small home studio, where "snippets of conversations, dogs panting, children squealing³...sprinklers and air-conditioning units" were recorded on a variety of Neumann mics that included "a vintage U 47, circa 1948" (Murphy, 2006). Having recorded the core elements for each track, Godrich and Beck set about 'scratching' back the records into the mix with the help of American DJ/producer Z-Trip. The audio was then further processed, mashed, re-sampled, reversed and 'dirtied' up for the final mix. As Beck would describe it, "really the idea was just to be...reckless with them" (Murphy, 2006).

This organic approach to production can be heard in most of Godrich's work and is what allows him to draw out unexpected performances from a diverse range of artists he collaborates with. His sounds have a distinct rich quality that seem sonically synonymous with a production trait "that's based largely on live performances by real human beings" (Murphy, 2006).

THE BEAT MAKER

Timbaland's sound has often been described by many as unique and distinct; "when you hear a Timbaland production... there is no mistaking it for anyone else's work" Birchmeier comments on an article for Allmusic.com. Indeed several descriptors have been used for the fundamental aesthetics of Timbaland's sounds such as "snaking syncopated drum patterns, skittering hi-hats, plinking keyboards and strong, glutinous bass" by Frehsee (2011) or "syncopated kick drum patterns stuttering in triple-time bursts, stop-start grooves full of disconcerting but tense funky hesitations" by Reynolds (as cited in Sanchez, 2002), or "heavy, indolent beats enlivened by skittering syncopation" by Sanneh (2007).

Timbaland's affinity with beat making began early. At thirteen years of age, his encouraging mother bought him a primitive drum machine by Casio (Brown 2007). In the late eighties he continued to DJ under the stage name of DJ Timmy TIm (Frere-Jones, 2008). His first big break came in the nineties when Kallman from Atlantic Records, the then senior vice-president of the label, paired him up with a fresh teenaged R&B artist named Aaliyah. Their collaboration on the title track for the record *One In A Million* gave Timbaland an opportunity to showcase his unique talents. The track, with its skittering hi-hats peppering a slow melodic synthscape, punctuated by chirping birds⁴, was incredibly 'avantgarde' at the time (Brown, 2007).

A similar technique of incorporating non-pitched sample effects into his mixes can be found in Aaliyah's contribution track, *Are You That Somebody* (Aaliyah, 1998), for the film *Dr Dolittle* (1998). The track features a sample of a baby gurgling⁵ triggered in between the dead spaces of a very sparse beat backdrop. "A cross-rhythm of mouth noises, pops and clicks" (Frere-Jones, 2008) were also used on the track. "'I've always tried different stuff in the studio,' [Timbaland] says. 'I use rakes, spoons, cans...I'm a surround-sound type of guy' (Brown, 2007).

³ Track 03 - *Cellphone's Dead* (Beck, 2006) at 0:59

⁴ Track 04 - *One in a Million* (Aaliyah, 1996)

⁵ Track 05 - *Are You That Somebody* (Aaliyah, 1998) at 1:03

Timbaland also pioneered certain crossovers such as integrating sounds from instruments usually found in other genres into the R&B domain. Aaliyah's "...sultry number one tune 'Try Again' featured a Roland TB-303 bass-synthesizer, an instrument usually associated with acid house music (Frehsee, 2011). He has also taken inspiration from world instruments such as the Indian tabla and the Middle Eastern sitar which can be heard in Missy Elliot's single *Get Ur Freak On*⁶ (Missy Elliot, 2001). Of late, he has also experimented with incorporating rock elements into his production as demonstrated in his collaborations with Fall Out Boy and One Republic for his self-produced 2007 album *Timbaland Presents Shock Value* (Sanneh, 2007).

These unconventional traits coupled with his natural talents for beat making, has made Timbaland one of the more sought out and in-demand producers in the past couple of decades. His transition into pop have meant that he has reached a wide variety of audience with his sounds and have influenced many genres along the way. His artistic sensibilities always permeate his work and as Touré (as cited in Sanchez, 2002) points out, Timbaland is "among the few modern sound makers who have a signature sound". A sound that "enforce[s] a new kind of dancing, convulsive yet geometrically precise" (Reynolds, 2011).

IN COMPARISON

Both producers have striking similarities in the way they seek alternative avenues to arrive at an otherwise familiar destination. Recalling his initial meetings with Godrich for the album *The Information* (2006), Beck recalls his initial shock when Godrich stated "that he'd always thought about doing a hip-hop record" to which Beck replied, "I'd thought he was more into the sort of singer-songwriter, Joni Mitchell/Nick Drake school, but it turns out he loves breakbeats" (Murphy, 2006). Similarly, Timbaland ventures out into sonic territories that would normally challenge even the most seasoned producer as evident in his collaboration with Soundgarden's former front man Chris Cornell on their 2009 collaboration *Scream* and his collaboration with Björk on her 2007 album *Volta*.

Both Godrich and Timbaland also tend to adopt an 'open' approach to most of their collaborations - a necessary frame of mind if they were to stimulate a creative environment where they can discover new processes and fresh methodologies in music production. Beck, once again in recalling the pre-production stages for *The Information* comments:

"Nigel and I got together again and just decided to throw out whatever system or conventions we had in working with each other and to just start over and do something totally new. We wanted to do what we'd always talked about, which was to not be constrained by time or prewritten songs and to really experiment and see what happens." (Murphy, 2006).

Similarly Timbaland had an open process with Justin Timberlake for their 2006 collaboration *FutureSex/LoveSounds*. In an interview with MTV, Timberlake recalls:

"There was no real formula to how we were doing it except that it was free-flowing,...[Timbaland] sits behind the keyboard, and some of the guitar parts I would just put in or piano parts. Timbaland would just mess around with the studio modules, looking like a mad man, a mad scientist and he starts messing around with beats, and then I'll say, 'Oh, I like that one.' (Vineyard, 2007)

⁶ Track 06 - *Get Ur Freak On* (Missy Elliot, 2001)

Godrich's unconventional production techniques such as the slowed audio tracks for *Ok Computer*, his famed 'open mics' for *The Information* and his habit of resampling previously tracked material for inclusion in the final mix, can be compared to Timbaland's unprecedented integration of hip-hop beats, non-pitched sound effects and world sounds into an already established R&B genre. These demonstrate a similarity in approach - the employment of left-field methodologies and tactics to reinvent the current soundscape of their respective genres.

However, these alternate and unusual processes also present us with their most glaring dissimilarity. Godrich would usually begin with analogue sounds, captured from a direct performance from the artist or recorded directly from the environment. Only when he has the raw materials in hand would he then begin considering the options for processing and manipulation. This is best exemplified in the 2007 collaboration with Sir Paul McCartney on the album *Chaos and Creation in the Backyard*, where Godrich insisted that McCartney play all of the instrument on the record. McCartney recounts this experience with Molenda (2005) for an interview in *Guitar Player*:

So Nigel asked me if I could just go in and make something up. I agreed to the challenge, and I got on the piano and tried to thrash something out that might be an opener. As I was going out to the studio, he said, "seeing as how you're going to make up one thing, why don't you make two pieces?" To which I thought, "Well, maybe I'll do three!"

Timbaland, however, would immediately begin work on his samplers, synthesisers and beat machines to create an initial rhythmic foundation for the rest of the song to be build upon. Instead of allowing the artist to "...sound more like themselves, [Timabland] prides himself on challenging his clients. They have to find a way to work around his weird beats" (Sanneh, 2007). He is constantly surrounded by a team of engineers and 'beatSmiths' who he rules "with the ruthlessness of James Brown; Tim is the conductor, directing them to a sound that's in his head alone" (Brown, 2007).

Indeed, it is the amount of performance involvement that provide us with their main point of difference. Godrich tend to act more of a facilitator for a predetermined process, working in close collaboration with the artist to find the appropriate sonic flavour for each project. In his view, Godrich sees producers as being able "to understand the creative process and [being] able to work with people, to have a vision of what a band is capable of doing as well as the expertise to put it in practice" (Tilney, 2001). On the other hand, Timbaland, who is in his own right a successful recording artist, have much more of a performance involvement with each record he's involved in; "He often uses his own, deep voice, rapping subtly behind tracks, and injects whimsical sounds, like a cooing baby or whinnying horse" (Sanchez, 2002) and every mix is dominated by his "menacing syncopations and strobed synthesisers" (Sanneh, 2007).

CONCLUSION

There are a few techniques noted during the writing of this essay which would be interesting to explore further and possibly implement for future collaborative projects. The first of which is the use of the vocal guides as the vocal cut for the final mix. In truth, singers tend to perform better when they believe that the current take isn't what's going to be considered for the final mix. Laying down vocal guides tend to sound much more natural and contain much more energy. These tracking dates can be arranged so that the vocalist is led to believe that the session is merely to record a scratch vocal guide. However the appropriate room, mics and gear will be setup to capture a performance that may be used for the final mix. This approach may just provide the right level of vocal authenticity and performance for a particular track or song. As Godrich himself points out "Ultimately in a studio...what you're essentially trying to do is trick somebody into performing well, whatever that takes. So if it means that you have to massage them or starve them..." (Tilney, 2001).

The second technique to consider is the open mic approach which Godrich used to capture atmospheric sounds in Beck's album *The Information*. This method may be appropriate for some projects where there is a need for natural sounding backdrop. Using this technique appropriately may lead to interesting results. As Beck recalls, "We just had all the microphones open and got a bunch of people in there making sounds. We'd go down to the pawnshop and grab a flute, and someone else would grab a cello, and somebody else would be screaming...whatever we needed" (Murphy, 2006)

The third technique to note is Timbaland's use of non-conventional sounds and non-western instruments as an integrated part of a beat. Using pre-recorded loops and samples can sometimes sound overly clinical and artificial. Recording original sounds and resampling them back into the mix may yield far better results in terms of a warmer and more natural sounding tone that can serve as the foundation for the beat elements within the composition.

Their unconventional methodologies and their envelope-pushing collaborations set Godrich and Timbaland as two distinct talents from the rest of their contemporaries. Their unique techniques and approaches help to constantly redefine the role of the contemporary music producer. They have subsequently become leaders and innovators in their respective musical genres and continue to be a significant source of inspiration for the recording industry.

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