



How Theme Building Helps to Create Impactful Electronic Dance Music

Making EDM with a Story

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ABSTRACT

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The thesis was created in order to explore the idea of creating stories to coincide with music. The aim was to give the reader an understanding of the artistry of electronic dance music. The author thoroughly documented existing works of art in the form of an EP (Extended Play) and album from two separate artists. Interviews of Virtual Riot and Xilent were researched in order to present their ideas of theme building and storytelling within their respective works. The interviews provided the ability to view the work they created subjectively while referencing the artists objective viewpoint and intentions.

The project portion of the thesis is where the author demonstrated the usefulness of the findings by writing and producing their own EP. A collection of random songs written by the author was then put up against the newly made EP. The goal of this is to contrast how impactful the themed EP is in comparison to the randomly assembled EP.

The conclusive idea is that music is typically more impactful if it can convey any level of story. Deep down people want more than just hype. The job of the artists is complete if the listener can become immersed in the music's fabricated world. With EPs it is imperative to maintain a mood for the listener and storytelling is just the way to do it.

Key words: music production, edm, ep, theme, songwriting

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	7
2. CLASSIFYING RELEASES	9
2.1. Single	9
2.2. Extended Play	9
2.3. Album	10
3. BUILDING AN UNDERSTANDING	11
3.1. The Building Blocks of Arrangement	11
3.2. Theme Building in Music	13
3.3. Theme Building in EPs	17
3.3.1. Xilent – We Are Dust	17
3.3.2. Virtual Riot – Save Yourself	22
4. MAKING AN EP	27
4.1. EP – Adventure #347	27
4.2. Sound Design	28
4.3. Mix & Mastering	29
5. CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION	30
REFERENCES	31
APPENDICES	34
Appendix 1. Tokyo Machine – BUBBLES	34
Appendix 2. Tokyo Machine – EPIC	34
Appendix 3. Tokyo Machine – SAIKOU	34
Appendix 4. Tokyo Machine – SPOOKY	34
Appendix 5. Tokyo Machine – TURBO	34
Appendix 6. Xilent – We Are Dust [Album]	34
Appendix 7. Virtual Riot – Save Yourself [EP]	34
Appendix 8. Ethan Campbell – Adventure #347 [EP]	34
Appendix 9. Ethan Campbell – Random [EP]	34

GLOSSARY

Bounce	To render a processed signal as an audio file. e.g. You might bounce a MIDI synth track with lots of effects to audio, and then manipulate that single audio file. (Darling, n.d.)
Distortion	The deformation of an outputted audio signal compared to its input. It can be either desired (e.g. the harmonic distortion of electric guitars) or not (e.g. clipping in the mixer). (Darling, n.d.)
DJ	Disk Jockey
EP	Extended Play
EQ	The process of adjusting the balance between frequency components within an audio signal (i.e. bass, mid and treble) (Darling, n.d.)
Form	A granular sampler developed by Native Instruments (Virtual Riot, 2017).
Frequency	The number of cycles per second in an audio wave. Frequency is measured in Hertz (Hz) or Kilohertz (kHz). The human ear can generally hear between 20 Hz (very low bass) and 20,000 Hz (or 20kHz) (very high treble). It is also referred to as pitch. (Darling, n.d.)
Mix	The blended sum of all the audio tracks in a song (Darling, n.d.)
Massive	A subtractive wave table synth developed by Native Instruments (Virtual Riot, 2016).

Mastering	The final process in producing a song. Subtle effects are applied to the final mix, such as compression, EQ and limiting. Adds the final “polish” to a track and prepares it for distribution. Typically the volume is maximized at this stage. (Darling, n.d.)
OTT	Over the Top compression is a type of extreme upwards & downwards compression. It creates many artifacts desirable in sound design. OTT began from a preset configuration for Ableton Live’s Multi-band Compressor. (Virtual Riot, 2016.)
Phase Plant	A subtractive modular wavetable synth developed by Kilohearts AB. (Kilohearts, n.d.)
Plug-ins	An application that can be added to audio software to enable extra features such as effects processing, EQ, etc (Darling, n.d.)
Reaktor	A player device developed by Native Instruments. Used to host plug-ins/ensembles such as Form. (Native Instruments, n.d)
Saturation	Saturation is a subtle form of distortion that adds pleasant-sounding harmonics. The effect originates from the analog days when audio recordings ran through various pieces of hardware. (PQ, 2018.)
Serum	A Wavetable Synth made by Xfer Records (Virtual Riot, 2016).
Sonic Pallet	The characteristic range of tonal or instrumental colour in a particular musical piece or genre, or a particular composer's work; (also, and in earliest use) the range of

sounds which can be produced by a particular musical instrument (Lexico, n.d).

Sub

Sounds that are approximately below 100 Hz and extending downward to include the lowest frequency humans can hear, typically 20 Hz. Sub-bass is usually felt rather than heard. (Darling, n.d.)

Transient

A high amplitude, short-duration sound at the beginning of a waveform. Drums sounds usually have strong transients. (Darling, n.d.)

1. INTRODUCTION

While electronic dance music is typically known for its heavy hitting drums and basslines (Dictionary.com n.d), there is a component of storytelling. Despite this not being the common case in the industry today there are artists that continue to craft little stories into individual songs. (Virtual Riot 2019) This is being accomplished through theme building within the music. The artist will typically take some descriptive words or concepts and find ways to build the song with those factors in mind.

For example, take the word 'snacks' and start to think of what you associate with it. Reasonably, what would have come to mind is some sort of food that you can eat with minimal effort and is easy to keep stored. One such pop culture snack would be the potato chip. Now some planning is required to think of clever ways to incorporate the potato chip into the song and try to use it as a focal point. One less clever way to get this potato chip its moment in the spotlight is to use a recorded sample of a chip being crushed or eaten. We also have this option with a variety of other snack related sounds. Cereal being poured, the sound of cooking popcorn, or any other snack with distinct audio signatures.

However, not all the factors of this theme have been considered. If the theme is about snacks it will also be important to give the theme an emotional component to go with the chip crunch. When thinking of snacks, it is common to be happy or at the very least neutral. So now the song needs to also be upbeat with some happy energy. To get the happy or upbeat emotion, using a major scale is a good starting point. At the very least the song is going to need a major chord or interval to act as the tonic. Another way to get emotion into music is by the choice of instrumentation and sound design. For this song we will want bright synths and drums to push the happy theme. Now the song is upbeat and high energy with a chip crunch clearly some where in the arrangement. The song will be named 'Snacks' as to ensure there are no misunderstandings.

A solid concept for a song was just made. The listeners will no doubt be immersed in a land of good vibes and potato chips (or whatever snack they connect to the song). It may feel like the artist would be really holding the hand of the listener

by doing this but that is not necessarily bad. As an artist there is value in making your art accessible to everyone by giving away some hints. Keeping the example in mind, think bigger. Think how this same theme building can be used on a collection of songs such as an EP. By incorporating these concepts into an EP, a strong mood will be consistently presented to the listener. However, does this make the music better? Will an EP make more of an impact on the listener if the artists take the time to make a story?

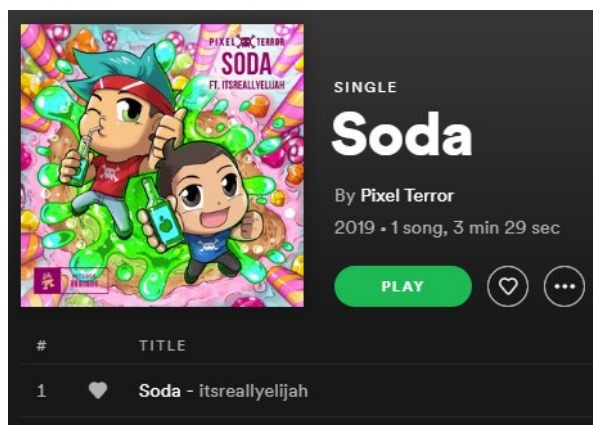
The rest of this thesis will breakdown three successful artists that utilize theme building in their music. The author will then give insight into the artists' creative process by looking through various interviews, YouTube videos, and live streams. After reviewing the starting material, the author will then create and document an EP of their own using the creative strategies covered. To conclude the thesis, the author will pit the themed EP against a random EP of which, will be a collection of songs made by the author with no common theme. This will complete the demonstration of why theme building in storytelling can make EPs more impactful.

2. CLASSIFYING RELEASES

The words EP, Album, and Single have been seen scattered throughout introduction. Let us review their meanings in the context of this thesis.

2.1. Single

“A CD that has only one song on it, not a number of songs, or a song which is sold in this way” (Longman n.d). From one point of view, this is a rather archaic definition of the word. A single is just a song that is released by itself as a standalone product.



PICTURE 1. Example of how a single release would look on a streaming platform such as Spotify (Campbell, 2020)

2.2. Extended Play (EP)

An EP is a collection of roughly three to eight songs. An EP can just be considered as a compilation of songs. They are usually comprised of three or more original, unreleased songs. (Virtual Riot 2019) The EP is going to be the focus of this thesis.

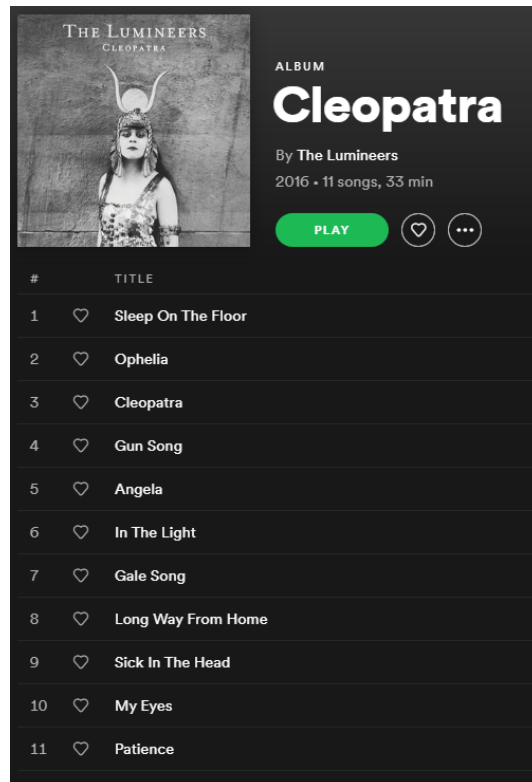
PICTURE 2. Example of how an EP release would look on a streaming platform such as Spotify (Campbell 2020)



2.3. Album

“A group of songs or pieces of music on a record, CD, download etc.” (Longman n.d). Albums are typically made by bands and the odd adventurous music producer. However, as music evolves albums are becoming far and few between. EPs are being favoured in place of the album as they tend to have a maximum of eight songs making them easier to digest and market to the average listener (Xilent 2017).

PICTURE 3. Example of how an album release would look on a streaming platform such as Spotify (Campbell 2020)



3. BUILDING AN UNDERSTANDING

In this section of the thesis the EDM song arrangement is going to be explained. This is going to serve as a helpful tool for breaking the songs up to individual pieces. With the songs broken up into their respective parts it will be simpler to discuss the songs and draw connections from one piece to the next. Breaking up the songs in this manner will also make it easier to look at potential theme building strategies.

3.1. The Building Blocks of Arrangement

Before diving into the research aspect of this thesis it is important to understand some arrangement theory, specifically in the context of this thesis. Almost every song in this thesis will be 128 or 150 beats per minute (BPM). The songs' arrangement will be mostly referred to in 8-16 bar sections. Using simple math, it can be found that a collective 8 bars (with a time signature of 4/4) are the equivalent of about 12.8 seconds when the tempo is 150 BPM and 15 seconds when the tempo is 128 BPM (TOOLSTUD.IO n.d). There are six things this author identifies as important when referring to arrangement: intro, verse, build, drop, breakdown, and special.

Intro will be the term for the song's introduction. As examined through Virtual Riot (2019), intros are typically 8 bars long and prepare the listener for the verse or even a build. The intro can also be re-used after the first drop or as an outro (Virtual Riot 2019). 'DJ Intro' is a term that will be used occasionally throughout this thesis. It is noticeably different from a regular intro due to it typically having a repetitive looping quality to it. If a song starts with drums it is most likely a DJ Intro (Xilent 2016).

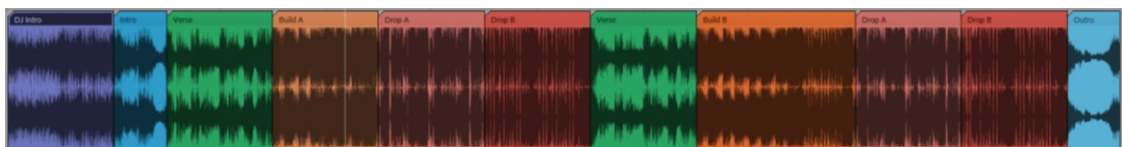
Verse is where the song will introduce one of the main melodies, rhythms or ideas (Xilent, 2016). The verse will always be repeated at least twice (except in rare cases) with the second verse usually being a variation from the first. Verses always lead straight into build and are commonly 8-16 bars long (Virtual Riot, 2017).

The highest feeling of hype you will get from a song will generally be from the build. The build typically starts slow and then speeds up until the last few beats then presents a fill before throwing the listener into the drop. Builds are roughly 8 bars long and can be separate ideas from the verse by having more of the vibes from the drop being focused. A build can also be identical to the verse with more energy being built up over time. (Virtual Riot 2017.)

Drops are the most important section of any song in the electronic dance music industry. Drop is basically just a synonym for a chorus but because this is EDM the term drop is almost exclusively used in this musical culture. As observed by Will Darling (n.d), Drops will usually contain the songs most interesting and high energy rhythms and sound design. The sonic spectrum of the song will be at its highest limits during the drop. Drops virtually always come after builds and can even be used to end a song. Drops have a reputation for being a minimum of 16 bars and will even go up to 32 bars with the second 16 bars being referred to as, 'Drop B'. (Darling n.d.)

Around the middle of a song (most likely after a drop) you might hear 8-16 bars where the song will re-introduce the melody and/or rhythm (Darling n.d). In this context that will be called a breakdown. Breakdowns can sometimes feel like a varied play on the intro. The breakdown could lead into either a verse, build b, or drop c.

The final category is tagged special because it encompasses unique bits of arrangement that are not miscellaneous but could be tedious to break up and name. Therefore, they are pinned as one collective arrangement concept.



PICTURE 4. Displaying a typical EDM song arrangement using colour coding. Bluer colours are for intros and outros. Green is for verses and sometimes breakdowns. Builds are signified by the orange colours and red for the drops (Campbell 2020)

3.2. Theme Building in Music

The earlier example in the introduction about building a snack theme in a song was loosely based off the author's personal analysis of an artist called Tokyo Machine. Tokyo Machine is an artist that has always managed to achieve a highly effective level of theme building throughout all his singles (Monstercat 2020). Before touching on theming an entire collection of songs such as an EP, it is important to fully understand the concept of theming just one song. Three of Tokyo Machine's songs: 'EPIC', 'SPOOKY', and 'TURBO' have been selected for this process. The first minute of each song will contain almost all the theme building strategies so that is what this chapter will focus on.

PICTURE 5. Tokyo Machine's profile picture as of 2020 (Monstercat 2020)



Tokyo machine is an artist that had appeared on Monstercat in 2016. His real identity and his personal info seem to be completely hidden as evident by all attempts to locate any sort of bio or information online. In all of Tokyo Machine's live shows, interviews, or meet and greets he is seen always with his infamous hair, glasses, and facemask (Monstercat 2020.) All his cover art for his singles include his cartoon character with similar qualities to the real-life Tokyo Machine. Tokyo Machine's cover art also contains little creatures coined as 'Tokimon' as discovered due to the author and Tokyo Machine having a mutual visual artist.

The time for adventure is nigh in 'EPIC'. Based on the cover art, Tokyo Machine and his crew look to be taking to the seas on an adventure to who knows what. All the little 'Tokimon' are quite ecstatic looking including even the boats sail (Picture 7.)



PICTURE 6. EPIC's
cover art
(Monstercat 2020)

This track begins with an adventurous sounding arpeggiator playing a happy major chord backed up with a steady kick to get the listener's mood ready for a journey. A pre-verse introduces a vast field of immersion. A stringed instrument can be heard playing out some chords. The sound of seagulls and waves on a beach fill the background and a lead begins to bring in the verse. These are no doubts the sounds of the shoreline as they head off to the high seas. (PICTURE 7) With some group chanting, marching drums, trumpets, and an epic lead, Tokyo Machine sets the whole stage for his epic adventure. The build ends to the sound of a sword being drawn reminding the listener back to the cover art where Tokyo Machine is perched on the bow of his ship, sword drawn (PICTURE 7).

The next song is Tokyo Machine's SPOOKY. This song is very interesting because Tokyo Machine typically has upbeat and happy energy to his songs. In spooky, Tokyo Machine demonstrates his ability to build any kind of theme. In the cover art, Tokyo Machine is seen hugging a ghost. Behind them there is big house, presumably as haunted mansion. The entrance of the building appears to be a graveyard with ghosts floating around (PICTURE 9.)



PICTURE 7. SPOOKY'S
cover art
(Monstercat 2020)

The intro starts off with a big minor chord stab with some trumpets. Following that there is spooky sounding lead, most likely a Theremin or an imitation of it. The verse expands on the earlier idea from the intro, continuing with the big minor stabs and introducing a fuller and more complex lead. At the end of the build there is a vocal line that says “Spooky” (Tokyo Machine, 2017). The drop has some qualities similar to the trap genre, it is a very good choice for this song. It allows Tokyo Machine to use a lot of sub bass sounds with not much high frequency content. Because of this, a variation of the early lead can be used on top of the bassline to keep pushing the spooky theme throughout the drop. This song is another example of very simple theme building as it only uses sound design and basic music theory to get most of its point across. What is important is that he has an extremely strong theme created through the title of the song and what is in the song. The artwork perfectly reflects the theme creating a very powerful image for the listener.

TURBO is another one of Tokyo Machines song that uses a lot of material to build the theme. Looking at this artwork it can be established that Tokyo Machine and his Tokimon are racing. This track is most likely going to have some Mario-cart vibes to it or some other similar themes (PICTURE 10.)



PICTURE 8. TURBO's
cover art
(Monstercat 2020)

In the intro we right away have verbal information. A voice sings, “T, U, R, B, O, right into the flow, this is how we go.” (Tokyo Machine, 2019). This is then followed by, “T, U, R, B, O, let me take control, this is how we roll” (Tokyo Machine, 2019). There is also the sound of a car engine turning over in between the two voice lines. The verse gets the listeners energy up as this theme’s complimentary emotion is going to be hype and energy. The verse compliments the catchy lead with a major chord progression. The build feels like an epic scene of a race where the countdown is going, and everyone is exploding with excitement ready for the race to begin. There is even a car horn beeping at the start of the build that is in tune with track. The end of the build has a voice saying “We gotta go turbo” (Tokyo Machine, 2019). The drop itself is perfect for the theme with its bassline. The bassline rises in pitch while playing a complimentary rhythm to the kick. Because of the bassline rising it sounds like cars speeding up and you are inside of the race.

Tokyo Machine’s three songs were all powerful realizations of clearly pre outlined ideas. By using vocals, music theory, titles, ambience, Foley, artwork and sound design Tokyo machine is able to immerse his listeners into whatever he wants. It is no wonder he is one of Monstercat’s most successful artists.

3.3. Theme Building in EPs

To further understand the concept of theme building, two artists with relevant works have been chosen for analyzing. This portion of the thesis is intended to find strategies that will provide useful for building your very own themes. These strategies will also be used in the creation of this author's EP.

3.3.1. Xilent – We Are Dust

To keep within the theme concept, the artists as well as their works should be expressed in order to get an idea of what they are about. Here is a little piece of Xilent's bio from his website, "With a few years of experience and a few million streams under his belt, Xilent moved to put out his genre-bending debut album *We Are Virtual* in May 2015, which was met with critical acclaim (noted as 'delicate synergism,' 'a breath of fresh air' and 'exceptionally vibrant' by EDM blogs)" (Xilent n.d).

In addition, "*We Are Virtual* was a project far ahead of its time, earning him a Best Album nomination at BMA 2015, while intuitively blending Xilent's unique dubstep style with elements of trance, electro and drum & bass, and giving listeners a coherent journey through the sonics of bass music in a manner that was practically unparalleled at the time." (Xilent n.d). While throwing around some titles of release can be meaningless to someone who does not know Xilent, you can trust that he is a powerhouse in the industry.



PICTURE 9. A more recent headshot of Xilent (Phil Scilippa 2019)

Xilent is known for his ability to encapsulate his listeners in dystopic or apocalyptic worlds. After his first album he made a follow up album in 2019 called 'We Are Dust'. The internet had this to say, "To say that Xilent's We Are Dust is completely fascinating in regard to both the production and the storytelling would be a gross understatement. This album has perfectly followed up We Are Virtual and showcased Xilent's uncanny ability to provide lofty and gorgeous melodies that make way for massive bass lines and crushing rhythmic sections. We Are Dust is a delight for listeners, producers, sound engineers, and fans of great storytelling alike" (Phil Scilippa 2019). Perfectly summarizing the album as a piece with a story to tell.

PICTURE 10. The album cover of Xilent's 'We Are Dust' (Monstercat 2019)



With all the introductions out of the way it is time to dive into the music. 'We Are Dust' has eleven songs. In order the songs are: 'From Dust', 'You Rise', 'Blue Shadows', 'The Darkness', 'Code Blood', 'Interlude', 'Human Error', 'Discarded', 'Only Now', 'To Dust', 'Particles'. This section will explain more story-based aspects while the 'Save Yourself' EP analysis will discuss more sound design choices. However, both of these will make or break an EP's theme.

'From Dust' is not your traditional EDM track. The entire song is just one big cinematic intro and contains information instead of drops. The song begins with a voice asking, "Do you remember how it started?" (Xilent 2019). This is then followed by someone fumbling with a tape recorder, "The corporation calls it quantum mechanic simulation or something. That basically says we are just particles.

We're floating out there." (Xilent 2019). The voice goes on to explain particle collision physics and the concept of reality. This explains the EP title, 'We Are Dust'. The track also sets the sound design pallet for the rest of the EP with glitchy sounds and apocalyptic vibes.

Xilent hits hard with his signature sound design in the beginning of 'You Rise'. But if you listen closely there is a voice repeating, "start over" (Xilent 2019). This has monumental pretense for the story. With the intro sounding like this epic beginning to an EP the voice in the background could be suggesting that the simulation has broken and needs to start over. Perhaps a human has escaped into the true reality and out of his mental imprisonment of virtual reality. This is their new begging in life as they rise from the lies of their test tube life. Afterall, the album cover depicts some tubes with brains in them (PICTURE 12). They must have come from somewhere. At 50 seconds, the end of the build going into the drop, you can hear "You... Rise" (Xilent 2019) almost like it is a command. The free human or rogue machine could be the people trapped in virtual realities.

The first piece of intel we get from 'Blue Shadows' is the vocal line, "Come out of the shadows" (Xilent 2019), heard at 12 seconds in the beginning of the verse. This could be the human in charge encouraging his newly awoken friends to leave their test tubes and see the world they have woken up in. To help back this up the music at this specific time is very mysterious and ominous sounding. The humans are scared, confused, and they are overwhelmed. The title 'Blue Shadows' also feels to be a play on the electric screen. The blue shadows are all the screens and monitoring equipment in the room where the humans woke up.

'The Darkness' is the beacon of hope for the humans. At 51 seconds female vocal lines from the verse can really provide some further evidence in support of the theory so far, "lost all of your dreams the night is heartless" (Xilent 2019). The humans that have awoken have lost their entire world. From the human's perspective the world is fake and anything they have ever achieved or loved up until now is a lie. Everything that was their reality was just a dream. The build plays a lush array of synths that build up with a huge feeling of hope thanks to the earlier prep talk.

There is clearly something about to go down in 'Code Blood'. The whole rhythm of the song feels like one giant march. A voice at 25 seconds seems to be instructing someone or something in preparation. 51 seconds is where the drop presents the listener with the height of energy. Maybe this is a fight between the humans and their captors? 3 minutes 12 seconds concludes the fight and based on the outcome it sounds like the humans lost. There are no vibrant synths just the sounds of a little digital drum beat. This could signify that the human's overlords are machines and they have won the battle to once again suppress humans.

The album's second story telling track has come in the form of 'Interlude'. Once more, there is a voice with the message, "This world has grown colder", "Is this who we are" (Xilent 2019). Who is speaking here? Did the humans discover their origins or why they were in a simulation? Maybe the surviving humans are distraught after seeing the power and lack of mercy the robot overlords possess. Either way something big was revealed in the previous song's battle.

The humans are not safe yet as in 'Human Error' something is clearly coming to finish them off. At 22 seconds two robots are heard trying to identify something they have found. 35 seconds in they have discovered it is a human and seem to dislike that fact. Finally, at 49 seconds the robot tells the human it has made a mistake (most likely by opposing them) (Xilent 2019). 3 minutes 26 seconds is where again the robots are discussing with each other. The robots have discarded of the human trash and are going to go back to sleep until there is a disturbance again. But, just 11 seconds later we hear something rummaging through the rubble. "I'm still here" (Xilent 2019) a surviving human whispers into the darkness.

Clearly upset about being 'Discarded' the human starts his own little song. "Shed my skin, find your target, eat my dust, get discarded" (Xilent 2019), can be heard immediately into the song. Perhaps the human has decided to throw his humanity out the window in order to compete against the machine. Maybe the human is very literally shedding his skin as the humans were forced to be reborn into robots. The album cover shows brains in tubes (PICTURE 12). It could be that all the remaining humans are brains that managed to get downloaded onto robots and were then awoken. Or this human could be turning himself into a literal robot

by downloading his consciousness into a machine (presumably the machine is important) such as the one in the cover art. 38 seconds in there is a drop which could sound like another fight scene. The human is possibly enacting his revenge against the machine. 1 minute 16 seconds you can hear the human screaming, “breakdown” (Xilent 2019). Does he yell this as he smashes all the robots who destroyed his friends?

Out of these last three songs ‘Particles’ offers by far the most information and it concludes the EP. 12 seconds in there will be lyrics coming from presumably the human from ‘Discarded’. The human is asking either himself or possibly the robot he has downloaded himself into, “Are we alive without you? Am I just a simple creature? Or just an amalgam of machines?” (Xilent 2019). Followed by, “We say that you made us, of just bits and pieces. Or of the dust of what’s before us. Just tell me the truth” (Xilent 2019). It is difficult to truly figure out what the full story is here but, in this song, it sounds as if something is questioning its existence. Assuming it is the human now merged with a machine, he could be contemplating his entire existence. What am I and how am I made? Machines and humans are made from the same particles so are we not all just the same? Does anything really matter?

Whatever the story may be, the core ideas seem to be clear. All life and materials are made from particles or dust. Something was happening where human consciousness’ were trapped in virtual realities and had become free. Whether it was internal conflict of existence or physical conflict with their suppressors, the ending is still has the initial party confused and they are no closer to the truth than before. This could be a teaser to a planned future album from Xilent where he finally answers the question once and for all to their existence. This album not only provides the listener with high quality sound design, composition, and theme building, but also with lots to think about. It executes many of the ideas of this thesis almost perfectly.

3.3.2. Virtual Riot – Save Yourself

Next up on the roster is Virtual Riot. He does not have an autobiography anywhere online so here is fan's biography, "Christian Valentin Brunn, better known by his stage name Virtual Riot, is a German DJ and electronic music producer. At the age of 21, he has released several albums and EPs, most notably his 2013 album, "There Goes Your Money." He was signed to the independent music label Disciple Recordings in 2014. He has had numerous Beatport chart hits including "One For All, All For One " with Razihel and "Cali Born" with Helicopter Showdown. Other electronic music outlets, such as YourEDM, have called his music "non-traditional" and "edgy," comparing him to artists like Savant." (Bass Music 2020).

"Virtual Riot has amassed over 302,000 followers on SoundCloud and is increasing rapidly, where he has released over 150 tracks, beginning with a "rock-pop" piece entitled "Wake Me Up", and most recently with his EP 'Save Yourself'. He also has exceeded 356,000 subscribers on YouTube where he uploads songs, monologues and tutorials on music production." (Bass Music 2020). Any producer starting off in EDM especially dubstep, is going to know this artist.

PICTURE 11. Virtual Riot modeling for disciple merch (Homies 2019)



Recently Virtual Riot had released an EP titled 'Save Yourself'. It is the author's opinion that this is an EP that really shows a good balance of song writing and top-notch sound design. A review from 'RelentlessBeats.com' stated, "In this

eight-track masterclass, nothing is off-limits. With an arsenal of carefully crafted sounds at his disposal, Virtual Riot tackles several genres, tempos, grooves, and more. Perhaps even more impressive, Virtual Riot maintains his signature style throughout the EP, as he demonstrates his impeccable sound design, masterful mixing, and uninhibited versatility. As a matter of fact, practically every track on *Save Yourself* is a beautiful blend of familiar and fresh.” (Novotny 2020).

Furthermore, “Sure, you may already know some of these sounds, but there are dozens—if not hundreds—of new ones! And in many cases, the sounds that we already know, and love have been re-imagined, repurposed, and ultimately taken to the next level. After all, one can’t raise the bar without developing, editing, and perfecting their product in the process.” (Novotny 2020). ‘*Save Yourself*’ is an EP with a subtle and more interpretable theme. It does not hold the listeners hand so to speak. However, the EP consistently demonstrates a dark vibe with the choice of sound design and song writing.



PICTURE 12. Virtual Riot’s EP cover (Genius 2019)

At some point during a live stream Virtual Riot had said he wanted the listener to feel a sense of impending doom at the back of their mind while listening (Virtual Riot 2019). The EP can put out those vibes with ease. Once or twice throughout the EP there are some songs that will bring the listener into a euphoric state of mind. It will not take long though until your back in the intense battlefield of drums

and bass. This EP is an example of theme building more than story telling. Xilent's Album is a step further, introducing the entire storytelling component to immerse the listener even more.

Time to get to business. Virtual Riot's EP is going to have eight songs. The songs are titled: 'Save Yourself', 'Wallmonger', 'Hysteria', 'Iteration (Interlude)', 'Self Checkout', 'GOAT', 'The Recall', and 'Insides'. The individual songs of the EP will now be briefly summarized. Any significant theme building elements will be timestamped and referred to by location in the arrangement.

'Save Yourself' kicks off with some ambient strings in the intro playing some creepy minor sounding notes. At 34 seconds towards the first half of the intro there is a huge distorted synth coming into a reverse. At 59 seconds a cinematic section is introduced offering some big epic stabs with reverb and delay. 1 minute and 11 seconds has the build where an interesting bassline is giving off some doomsday vibes. The rest of the song is a drop with the intro flipped around as an outro while it merges into the following songs intro for a fluid transition. Worth mentioning is the vocal line in the build saying, "and I'm back from the dead" (Virtual Riot 2019).

In 'Wallmonger' the intro kicks off with some distorted guitar which instantly gives the dark tone for the verse. For the most part we have one of those instances where the intro is used straight through to the verse and even the build. The drop is where the next big change is, offering up huge wall of sounds that do not sound like they're having a fun time. Many rhythm switches and minor notes later, 3 minutes 37 seconds introduces the outro with a familiar bassline but new set of overlying synths. Transitioning into the follow up song's vibe, 'Wallmonger' comes to a close. Again, during the song at 20 seconds it is spoken, "Huston, make sure they're all dead before you leave." (Virtual Riot 2019).

Lush synths and euphoric melodies introduce us to 'Hysteria' the third song of the EP. The build at 25 seconds slaps the euphoria out of your head as it drops a siren and lays down a rhythm change. 3 minutes 24 seconds brings back the good vibes of the intro as it fades out ending the song.

'Iteration (Interlude)' acts as an interlude for the EP. It serves as rest for the listener especially at a live show. It is more of a garage styled track than a dub-step track. However, at 1 minute 16 seconds, as you thought the song was ending the feeling of impending doom starts to cut back through.

One of the most hyped songs for the EP 'Self Checkout' was inspired by the sound of the self checkout machine you typically find at your local grocery store. (Virtual Riot 2019). Other than its main gimmick the song is maintaining the doom with the choice of sound design and musical theory. 'GOAT' is a similar song in the way it keeps in theme. Purely through sound design and minor scale intervals the song strives to suck away all your feelings of hope. One important thing to note here is the semi-consistent use of the word 'die'. At 30 seconds vocals say, "this is when you die". (Virtual Riot 2019).

What really stands out in 'The Recall' is the female voice line saying, "can you hear me" (Virtual Riot 2019), as it really proposes that there could be whole story hidden in the EP. Perhaps after the main character is presented with so many references of death he has been defeated and one of his comrades has come to save him instead of saving herself as the title suggests. The title of the song could also a reference to the earlier mention of the middle person (most likely this main character is Virtual Riot) in the EP cover being an outsider (PICTURE 14). The outsider and his people are attacked by what looks to be less evolved humanoids. The attackers wear primitive armour while the main character clearly has some sort of power suit. It could also be that the main character is the actual invader and after sustaining damage his partner collects him and issues 'The Recall' as a retreat to where they came from. The earlier songs would then be a depiction of the outsiders laying waste to the primitive humanoids.

'Insides' is overall another chill track. Acting as the outro for the whole EP the song still has a dark drop while retaining euphoric qualities. If the storytelling were to continue into this song it would likely be the end of the invasion. Whatever side had been the defenders they are now able to enjoy peace.

Remembering, that was a brief explanation of the songs or else the thesis would never end. Temporarily ignoring the possible story that was discussed, this EP

powerfully demonstrates how much sound design and composition can do in building a themed EP. Without any story telling component or references to the theme (like the earlier potato chip crunch concept), the EP was extremely impactful. Even with considerably less storytelling components than Xilent's album there was an easily accessible story through a little bit of detective work.

4. MAKING AN EP

The project component of this thesis is an EP made by the author. The EP will consist of three songs and they are made keeping in mind some of the basic concepts discussed and discovered in previous chapters. For the EP the theme was adventure. This fits the authors alias Northern Born very well as Northern Born's brand has a lumberjack character as a mascot. The idea here is that the lumberjack and his beaver friend tell the stories of one of their many adventures, specifically 'Adventure #347'.



PICTURE 13. Northern Born's Main Logo (Campbell 2020).

4.1. EP – Adventure #347

There will not really be any story telling in the sense of Xilent's album and due to a lack of vocals shouts like in Virtual Riot's EP there will more left on the imagination. The goal is to have three songs: 'Heavy', 'Trials', and 'The Sound'. These three songs will attempt to convey a theme of adventure through song writing alone.

'Heavy' is going to be a song about heavy things. The drop at 44 seconds has a steady kick and all kinds of super distorted sounds to help push its theme. After the drop the tempo cleverly shifts at 1 minute 14 seconds from 128-150BPM which technically changes the genre mid song. At 2 minutes 18 seconds the song ends with a big kick and snare as the outro plays an arpeggiated synth, once

again reinforcing this heavy concept. This song is meant to signify the initial hype of going on an adventure or doing something new.

The next track of the EP is 'Trials' which will be bump in the road for the adventurers. The song itself starts off precariously, giving off some serious tones. The build at 37 seconds will give the sense of a threat being posed. In the drop that follows it will take the listener down a threatening path until the breakdown at 1 minute 28 seconds where those earlier precarious sounds decide to give hope through a melody that is introduced. The second build at 1 minute 54 seconds is now changed. The hope is being used to drive our heroes forward and overcome the challenge.

It was a minor adventure sure but, it still needs a resolution. 'The Sound' will be the heroes victory song. It starts with a DJ intro that will get everyone pumped as if they are winners. 22 seconds introduces a huge lush space where it slides into a melody. The melody serves as a little speech from the heroes but at 52 seconds it is interrupted; why? A new threat has appeared! The sound of victory is just the sound of another adventure waiting to be started for these heroes! The song continues until it fades out into reverb.

4.2. Sound Design

For sound design, some unusual approaches and happy accidents took place to get to a final result. Of which mainly encompasses the bass sounds for the drops and builds. Synth sounds were created inside of synths like Serum, Massive, or Phase Plant. The bass sounds were accidentally made from a Reaktor ensemble called 'Form'. The DJ intro you hear now in 'The Sound' was bounced and imported into form. Form, being a granular sampler, allows one to manually select grains from the audio file in real time. Just automating the scan location allow for someone to come across many very interesting sounds. Afterwards these sounds had additional power given to them by running them through various saturation and distortion plug-ins and OTT compression. They were all bounced to audio and made into a bass sample pack to be used for this entire EP. By doing this it would help ensure that the EP could have a consistent sonic pallet throughout all tracks.

The drums were also made specifically for this EP during the creation of 'The Sound'.

4.3. Mix & Mastering

To further ensure consistency, all the songs in the EP were mixed and mastered as similarly as possible. For the mix itself the sounds/instruments were grouped up by their spectral features. These groups consisted of: Drums, Sub, Bass, Synths, and Effects. The basses got a bus with a little bit of treatment to cut away the sub and to remove tiny amounts of stereo from higher frequencies. The drums got a bus to limit any stray transients. Finally, the master typically consisted of: some OTT compression, EQ, multiband stereo imaging, EQ, and finally a maximizer.

5. CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSION

After thorough research of the subject it seems that the initial hunch was indeed correct. When listening to the final themed EP Adventure #347 a sense of adventure was present. Through consistent sound design, mixing, and mastering all three songs from the EP sound as if they are one connected idea. Additionally, from using some story building concepts during the song writing process, it was possible to give the songs a sense of progression rather than be three separate tracks.

When comparing Adventure #347 to the random collection of songs it was clear that the selection's only theme was that it is indeed random. Unlike Adventure #347 it is much less feasible for a listener to be able to immerse themselves. Considering that it presents no consistent sound design, mixing, mastering, the EP fails to feel like a sound idea. The songs sound as if they belong from other EPs or even as singles.

Just by building themes and trying to tell even the simplest story, it can capture the audience more effectively. Not only is this a good way to attract listeners seeking out a mood but its also a good way to make sure your listeners do not just switch off your EP after the first song. This will make your EPs much more impactful as an artistic statement.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Tokyo Machine – BUBBLES

<https://soundcloud.com/tokyomachine/bubbles>

Appendix 2. Tokyo Machine – EPIC

<https://soundcloud.com/tokyomachine/epic>

Appendix 3. Tokyo Machine – SAIKOU

<https://soundcloud.com/tokyomachine/saikou>

Appendix 4. Tokyo Machine – SPOOKY

<https://soundcloud.com/tokyomachine/spooky>

Appendix 5. Tokyo Machine – TURBO

<https://soundcloud.com/tokyomachine/turbo>

Appendix 6. Xilent – We Are Dust [Album]

<https://soundcloud.com/monstercat/sets/xilent-we-are-dust>

Appendix 7. Virtual Riot – Save Yourself [EP]

<https://soundcloud.com/virtual-riot/sets/save-yourself-ep>

Appendix 8. Ethan Campbell – Adventure #347 [EP]

<https://soundcloud.com/user-734350261/sets/thesis-ep-themed/s-PEDfxZScDpz>

Appendix 9. Ethan Campbell – Random [EP]

<https://soundcloud.com/user-734350261/sets/thesis-ep-no-theme/s-xdWTOpR7mIO>