

Nick Drake's "Pink Moon"

EIM Assignment 1

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1.0. Introduction

After failing to achieve commercial success with his previous albums, Nick Drake's mental health had taken a turn for the worse. Drake spent two days in the studio recording his last album and then, without much ceremony, placed the album's master tapes on a secretary's desk at Island Records. In February of 1972, English folk musician Nick Drake's final album, entitled "Pink Moon" was released. This album would be deemed Drake's finest work and one of the most important albums in the folk music genre, inspiring countless hopeful musicians.

2.0. Contextualisation

At the time of "Pink Moon's" release, the 'Laurel Canyon' era of music was ending. This period saw the commercial success of folk artists and singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell, Carole King, and Jackson Browne. The hippie 'free love' movement of the late 1960's drove the success of folk music that generally consisted of vocals and limited instrumentation (usually an acoustic guitar). However, as the cultural climate became increasingly turbulent as the world welcomed in the 1970's, there was also a shift in what people wanted to listen to.

In the early 1970's there was widespread mistrust in political establishments as protests broke out all over the world. The controversial war in Vietnam was still ongoing and in 1970, four college students were shot by the National Guard in an anti-war protest in Ohio. In the years following that, the New York Times published the infamous Pentagon Papers, and the Washington Post began reporting on the Watergate scandal. (Samples, 2021).

As political tension began to rise, new music genres were coming into popularity. This saw the shift from solo singer-songwriters to fast-paced and politically charged rock and punk bands. The 1970's saw the rise of bands such as Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd and the Ramones who were moving away from simple acoustic instrumentation. Nick Drake's "Pink Moon" is a fitting example of the type of music that people were growing tired of at this time. Joe Boyd, who produced all of Drake's studio albums except "Pink Moon" was quoted expressing his initial dislike of the album, saying that "He's done this very stark, very simple record at a time when it was the opposite of what everybody was doing," (Baltin, 2013). Drake's "Pink Moon" was the last of a dying breed of stripped back music centered around acoustic instruments and storytelling.

3.0. Folk

Staying true to his classification as a folk musician, Nick Drake's "Pink Moon" is widely considered to be a contemporary folk album. Like many of his early influences such as Joni Mitchell and Bert Jansch, Drake's album consists mainly of vocals and acoustic guitar. (Robbins, 2021). Typical of contemporary folk music, the songs on this album were centred around stories told by Drake's own lyrics. Acoustic instruments are often preferred in folk music, and this can be seen throughout this album as the acoustic guitar is the only instrument accompanying Drake's vocal on the entire album except for "Pink Moon" which has a brief piano passage overdubbed by Drake. Like one of his influences and contemporaries, Joni Mitchell, Drake uses alternate tunings to create unusual harmonies that can sound dissonant but adds to the song's musical character. In "Place To Be" and "Pink Moon" we can hear "the gorgeously unusual and ambiguous chord voicings," (Palmer, 2022) which is a key element of much of contemporary folk music.

4.0. Baroque

While Nick Drake's "Pink Moon" is often thought of as a contemporary folk album, there are also some characteristics of the Baroque period of music that can be seen throughout the album. The album does not sound like a typical Baroque piece of the likes of Bach or Handel, yet Baroque music's influence on Drake during the making of this album cannot be ignored. An example of this is the ornamentation in Drake's lead vocal melodies. During the Baroque period ornamentation was used frequently and musicians were often expected to improvise. In tracks like "Road" and "Parasite," melodic decorations can be heard in Drake's vocal lines. In "Things Behind the Sun" Drake's Baroque influences can be heard in the contrast between what the vocal and the guitar are playing. At points in the song, Drake's guitar playing seems to be providing a counterpoint melody to his vocal melody. This gives the impression of the song having a polyphonic texture, which is another important element of many Baroque pieces. (Bearden, no date).

By using alternate tunings in his guitar, Drake incorporated several Baroque music characteristics into this album. These tunings allowed him to play the bass lines, melodies and harmonies of the songs all at the same time without overdubs. Basso Continuo, which provided the harmonic foundations for much of Baroque music, can be heard all throughout the album. In tracks such as "From The Morning" Drake can be heard playing the continuous bass line with his thumb on the lowest string of the guitar. This bass line determines the harmonic content of the song and as in Baroque music, it has very few rests and provides movement to the songs. While "Pink Moon" is not reminiscent of typical Baroque music, it is clear to see that Drake has incorporated many elements of that era of music into his own unique style of composition, which gives him his idiosyncratic style. (Bearden, no date).

5.0. Guitar

On each track on “Pink Moon,” Drake displays his undeniable guitar virtuosity. From his use of complex guitar playing techniques to the physical elements of his guitar, Drake clearly carves out his idiosyncratic guitar sound on this album. One of the noteworthy elements of the guitar on “Pink Moon” is the fact that eight alternate tunings were used. Having played piano from an early age and not picking the guitar up until he was older, it could be assumed that his familiarity with piano may have been one of the reasons why Drake chose so often to use alternate guitar tunings and unique chord voicings. While these may sound strange on a guitar to the listener, it is possible that Drake was trying to recreate the sounds of the piano that he had heard growing up and to be able to play certain chord voicings that are common on piano, he had to change the tuning on his guitar. (Bailey, 2020).

While many of Drake’s guitar chords were played with only one or two fingers fretted, this simplicity is juxtaposed with the fingerpicking of his right hand. Guitarist Josh Turner who researched Drake’s guitar playing, believes that Drake never used a guitar plectrum and instead plucked the strings with his fingernails and struck the lowest strings of the guitar with his thumb. He also believes that Drake played on very “dead” sounding strings which would have resulted from not changing them. It is also assumed that Drake recorded the album using a small-body acoustic guitar (Turner, 2017). All these elements of Drake’s guitar playing combine to give the guitar sound on this album that feels both basic and intricate.

6.0. Vocals

One of the things that makes Nick Drake’s music so unique and gives “Pink Moon” its signature sound is Drake’s haunting vocals. While not as technically proficient as some of his folk contemporaries such as Sandy Denny and Joni Mitchell, Drake’s vocal performance on this album perfectly suits the tone of the songs on it. Having written and recorded these songs during a period of depression, Drake’s imperfect, and detached style of singing aids in portraying the depth of his emotions evident in “Pink Moon’s” lyrics. With poor enunciation and often abandoning notes at the end of lines early, Drake’s vocal performance on “Pink Moon” gives the impression that these songs were only being recorded as rough demos. However, as we notice Drake slurring syllables into each other and the odd timings in his vocal delivery, we can hear that the vocals for each track were carefully sculpted and that each and every note was intentional. Singing a melody while at the same time playing a contrasting rhythm on the acoustic guitar, “Pink Moon” clearly exhibits Drake’s skill as a musician. While Drake’s vocals on this album are full of imperfections, these songs could not have been sung by anyone else or in any other way. (Robbins, 2021).

7.0. Structure

There is no clear layout to Nick Drake's "Pink Moon" as each track's form is different to the next. While the album has eleven songs, which is more than enough to constitute an album, in total, "Pink Moon's" running time is a mere twenty-eight minutes and five seconds. During this time, track lengths vary, from the shortest song being the instrumental track "Horn" at one minute and twenty-one seconds, to "Things Behind The Sun" at three minutes and fifty-four seconds. It is difficult to pin a strict structure to any of the tracks on this album, especially the titular track "Pink Moon" which struggles to discern between a chorus and a verse and instead gives the impression of stanzas in a poem. However, there are more typically structured tracks on the album such as "Parasite" and "Free Ride" that follow a 'Verse, Chorus' structure and "Things Behind the Sun" that follows what appears to be a 'Verse, Verse, Chorus' structure. While there are no explicit transitions or interludes in "Pink Moon," brief songs such as "Horn" and "Harvest Breed" act as musical interludes to the 'main' parts of the album and give "Pink Moon" a narrative element. (MacQueen, 2005).

8.0. Recording and Production

In the span of two overnight studio sessions, "Pink Moon" was recorded simply, to facilitate the stripped-back atmosphere that Drake desired for his album. Joe Boyd, who had produced all other Nick Drake albums, was in the United States with another client, when Drake wanted to record "Pink Moon". Drake enlisted John Wood, who engineered his two previous albums, to produce and engineer the record. Drake, who had been struggling with his mental health, was insistent on Wood reserving some studio time to record the album as soon as possible as he was not sure how long that his motivation to make an album would last. (Robbins, 2021)

Wood booked two nighttime studio sessions as, at such short notice, all other times were booked up. Wood stated how when Drake showed up to the studio to record, he barely spoke at all to him the entire time as he was suffering from a depressive episode. Wood claims that he simply sat Drake down with his guitar in front of a microphone, let him play his songs and recorded him. Despite Wood's questioning, Drake insisted on the minimal nature of the album and that his vocals and guitar be the main components of the album. Vocals and guitar were both recorded at the same time for all tracks and the only overdub on the entire album was a small piano passage played also by Drake on the titular track. At the beginning of the two sessions, Wood thought that Drake intended for these recordings to be used as demos. As they progressed, he realised that these bare-boned recordings were exactly how Drake wanted the album to sound. Once Drake had written the songs for "Pink Moon," all creativity was discarded, and he wished for his songs to be recorded as basically and efficiently as possible. The entire eleven-track album was recorded in those two days in Sound Techniques studio in London. (Robbins, 2021).

9.0. Comparison

The same year that Nick Drake's "Pink Moon" was released, another folk artist called Neil Young released an album called "Harvest." This album, which like "Pink Moon," could also be classified as a folk album, had many differences to Drake's album. As Drake was going for a more 'stripped-back' sound on his album with him being the sole musician on the album, Young was going in the opposite direction. On "Harvest" there were many other musicians involved. Backing vocals were provided by Linda Ronstadt, James Taylor, and the other members of 'Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young.' As Drake was moving away from the orchestration seen in his previous album "Bryter Layter," Young was embracing this sound as his album featured the London Symphony Orchestra. (Newsdesk, T.H.P. no date)

A folk album that was more in line with "Pink Moon" was Joni Mitchell's 1971 album "Blue." This album, like "Pink Moon" placed a focus on vocals, acoustic guitar and storytelling. Mitchell, like Drake, was very skilled at playing the acoustic guitar and there are complex guitar lines in both albums. Both Mitchell and Drake also had complete creative control over their albums, as both artists acted as producers for their albums. (Times, T.N.Y. 2021)

10.0.Conclusion

The success that Drake longed for would unfortunately not come to fruition until after his time. Drake had suffered with his mental health for a long time, with many believing that his lack of recognition was one of the main contributing factors. Nick Drake died of an overdose of antidepressants two years after "Pink Moon's" release at the age of twenty-six and would never experience the posthumous acclaim of his final work.

11.0. Discography

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