

Teaching guide: Area of study 3 (Traditional music)

Graceland – Paul Simon

Graceland is the seventh and most successful solo album by the American singer-songwriter, Paul Simon. In 1984 he became interested in the music of South African townships. He visited South Africa and made a number of recordings of local musicians. On returning to America, these recordings formed the basis of a collection of diverse and eclectic songs featuring a number of different styles including Rock, Pop, Country, Zydeco, a cappella, Isicathamiya and Mbaqanga. From a contextual point of view, this guide will look at the extent to which Simon fuses these styles within the music of his own cultural heritage, which, although originally folk-based, continued to evolve throughout his career.

Political controversy

Paul Simon was heavily criticized for breaking United Nations cultural anti-apartheid rules by visiting South Africa and recording black South African musicians. For a while he was banned from visiting the country again by the ANC (African National Congress) but this was revoked in 1987. A counter argument was that he was promoting the work of South African musicians and helping to make the genre more readily accessible across the western world.

Graceland

Instrumentation/personnel:

Guitar: Ray Chikapa Phiri

Bass: Bathiki Kumalo

Drums: Vusi Khumalo

Percussion: Makhaya Mahlangu

Pedal steel guitar: Demola Adepoju

Vocals: Paul Simon, Don Everly, Phil Everly

Background vocals: Paul Simon

Graceland, in Memphis, Tennessee was the home of the legendary Elvis Presley. He is buried there and fans regularly make the trip to pay homage to their idol. In the song, Simon talks about the trip, but it's also a song about the recent break-up of his second marriage. The initial idea of the Graceland title came from the fact that he thought the song had a flavour of Sun Records country sound from the 1950s and 60s and the early Elvis recordings had this sound. The very simple rhythm forms the basis of the song, it is a simple eight beat rhythm with alternating bass and snare drum.

It is important to realise that, on all of the songs on Graceland, much of the stylistic quality comes from the contributions made by the selected musicians. To an extent, this is true of all music recorded by solo artists where other musicians contribute and is the natural process of musical collaboration and composition in the recording studio, as opposed to a single musician composing alone. On the Graceland track,

the rhythm section was made up of three African musicians, drummer Isaac Mtshali, guitarist Ray Phiri and fretless bass player Bakithi Khumalo. Simon asked Phiri to play some chords over the basic drum beat on electric guitar and he came up with an equally quick and lively pattern based largely around an E major chord in second inversion, the home key of the song.

Bakithi then added a typical, repetitive African groove on fretless bass guitar. The opening makes typical use of the fretless bass. Notice the rising glissando from the fifth to the root.

This is followed by the groove based on a repeated dotted rhythm in octaves.

The result was a fusion between Phiri's interpretation of American country on guitar and Bakithi's African bass groove.

Several months later, Nigerian pedal Steel Guitarist Demola Adepoju was brought in to add this sparse, syncopated, sequential idea to the track. This further cemented the African/American fusion because the Pedal Steel guitar is popular in both West African music and American country music, and the timbre produced by the 'slide' technique compliments that produced by the fretless bass.

Another link between African music, American folk music and also blues is the reliance on a mainly three chord structure, I, IV and V but also use of chord VI. However, Simon's trademark stylistic approach to vocal melody on this album is very much apparent in this song. Much of the rhythm is quite free with frequent pauses and syncopation making it quite difficult to notate. In addition, there are significant rhythmic and melodic changes between the verses, and indeed, the choruses. This is not typical of standard pop song construction. For example, if we compare the opening of the first verse and the second verse, the first verse is made up of two consecutive falling phrases but in the opening to the second verse the rhythm of the opening bar is entirely different, with many more words in the text, the second bar is virtually empty and the subsequent phrase rises.

The first and second choruses are also distinctly different in melodic shape and rhythm, despite the similarity in the lyrics.

Structurally, the song is very simple and very much follows the tradition of a typical American pop song being largely strophic – intro, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, chorus, outro (fade). Notice the development of the additional vocal harmonies in the second and third choruses and additional falsetto 'oohs' sung by Don and Phil Everly of the Everly brothers.

Texturally, the song is quite sparse, open and essentially accompanied melody. The recording mix allows Simon's voice to come to the fore with the backing vocals very much in the background. Reverb is added to the vocals, which compliments the reverb added to the other timbres, notably the pedal steel guitar and electric guitar.

Diamonds on the soles of her shoes

Instrumentation/personnel:

Guitar: Ray Chikapa Phiri

Bass: Bathiki Kumalo

Drums: Isaac Mtshali

Percussion: Youssou N'Dour, Babacar Faye, Assane Thiam

Trumpet: Earl Gardner

Tenor saxophone: Lenny Pickett

Alto saxophone: Alex Foster

Vocals: Paul Simon, Ladysmith Black Mambazo

'Diamonds on the soles of her Shoes' is a song that comes in two parts. The opening introductory section is sung by the South African male a cappella group, Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Simon brought them back to the USA to complete the recording. It starts with a deep and rich homophonic texture of unaccompanied voices in E major, harmonically based typically on chords I, IV and V, at a tempo of crotchet = 124. These deep voices sing in harmony and are punctuated by higher pitched voices singing wordless vowel sounds to 'Awah, awah'. The style of singing here is Isicathamiya, a singing style that originates from South African Zulus. An approximate translation of the text is, 'It's not unusual but in our days we see those things happen. They are women, they can take care of themselves'. As this rich opening continues, the texture changes to accompanied melody when Simon enters, singing a new melody in English that has a much more western flavour, completing the fusion between African and American.

This easy melody idles along with a slight shuffle beat that compliments that of Ladysmith. Note that apart from the 6th leap at the start of the second half of the phrase, the vocal range is quite narrow in pitch range and mostly restricted between the root and third. Also note that one of the words 'Empty as a pocket', Ladysmith drop their Zulu lyric and join Simon in English, the texture returning to homophony. The whole of this passage is beautifully recorded with just enough delay and reverb to give it an ethereal quality, almost as if it were recorded in an echo chamber.

Stylistically, the second section is completely different to the introduction. Whilst there are still elements of South African culture, notably in the drumming, bass and guitar, this section seems to be more loosely based on folk rock, and even an element of funk/soul with the addition of the horn section in the bridge sections.

At the end of the introduction there is a slight pause, then immediately, a flurry of delicate descending notes appears from Phiri's electric guitar before settling into a four bar groove that becomes the basis for the verse. Again, harmonically the groove is simple and largely based on chords I, IV and V. The tempo has now increased considerably to minim = 106, the metre, now in an almost double tempo 2/2 feel. Once again, lots of delay and reverb is employed to maintain the luxurious feel in the texture.

This groove is accompanied by drums, added syncopated percussion fills from Djembe and one of Bathiki's typical fluid, fretless bass lines, frequently changing slightly with little improvisations and flurries of fills, but based loosely on the idea that it follows the guitar groove quite closely. The melodic qualities of Bathiki's ever-changing ideas, together with the guitar groove, sets up a lovely contrapuntal weave.

After 16 bars, Simon enters with the vocal melody. As with the other ideas, this is quite fluid rhythmically, but rather more adventurous in terms of range of pitch, particularly on the words 'And I could say ooh ohh ooh', sung in a delicate falsetto.

The bridge section that follows the first verse is based on another four bar repeated groove but with the I, IV, V chord progression diminished. The striking staccato, three part horn section of trumpet and tenor saxophone has been recorded twice and panned on each channel, but the left channel recording has a modified rhythm to give it extra punch. As with the other tracks, lots of delay and reverb is added to enrich the texture.

A lovely fluid, improvised fretless bass solo from Bathiki brings us into the second verse. In keeping with the general vocal style on the album, there are significant variations in the rhythmic and melodic construction of the second verse. The whole of the rest of the track is based on the repeated use of these ideas, with additional improvised sections, notably on bass and percussion. However, towards the end, Ladysmith are faded back into play, based on the Ta, na, na, na vocal refrain from the introduction. This forms an effective and satisfying structural link between the two sections and, after a long, slow fade, accompanied by some frantic percussion, the song comes to a close.

You can call me Al

Instrumentation/personnel:

Guitar: Ray Chikapa Phiri

Bass: Bathiki Kumalo

Drums: Isaac Mtshali

Percussion: Ralph Macdonald

Synthesizer: Rob Mounsey

Six string electric bass: Paul Simon

Guitar synthesizer: Adrian Belew

Bass and baritone saxophone: Ronald E. Cuber

Trumpets: Jon Faddis, Ronald E. Brecker, Lewis Michael Solaf, Alan Rubin

Trombones: David W. Bargeron, Kim Allan Cissel

Pennywhistle: Morris Goldberg

Lead and background vocal: Paul Simon

The title for this song came from an incident at a party that Simon attended with his first wife, Peggy Harper. Also present at the party was the French composer who inadvertently referred to Simon as 'Al' and Peggy as 'Betty'. The first part of the song appears to be describing a man going through a mid-life crisis and reflecting on his life – 'Why am I soft in the middle? Where's my wife and family? What if I die here? Who will be my role model?' As the song progresses, by the third verse the theme becomes more autobiographical, reflecting on Simon's travels to South Africa.

Unlike most of the songs on the album Graceland, 'You can call me Al' was recorded entirely at the Hit Factory and was the first and most successful single from the album. This is not surprising given the infectious nature of the song, upbeat tempo, major tonality and stylistic qualities of dance music, including an 8-piece horn section. The opening of the song introduces us to the main theme of the chorus, a

two bar homophonic riff initially played by synthesized horns and later joined by real horns to add weight and depth to the timbre towards the end of the song.

After the initial first two bars, the bass and drums enter, each with their own, repetitive groove, the drums consisting of a very simple four beat pattern on bass drum and snare drum, the snare on the fourth beat.

Typically, after the eight bar introduction, the synth horns drop out and Simon's voice in the first verse is complimented by an understated syncopated guitar riff.

Simon's vocal lines in this song are fast with many syllables to each bar. Again, these are sung quite freely in relation to rhythm and there are significant variations in melody and rhythm between each of the verses. Syncopation is used regularly in the construction of these vocal melodic phrases.

One interesting thing to note is that in this song, the vocal range in the verses is very restricted and falls entirely between the root and fifth of the home key, F major. This, together with the two part vocal harmonies sung to 'Ooh' provides one of the most obvious links to African vocal music in this song, which is probably the most completely western on the album.

From a technology perspective, there is quite a lot of tape delay on Simon's vocal track. His engineer, Roy Halee was having trouble making the rapid and intricate consonant sounds in the vocal track stand out and be audible.

The other significant contribution to the multi-cultural nature of the recording was provided by jazz musician Morris Goldberg in the 16 bar penny whistle solo after the second chorus. This bears little resemblance to jazz music and is much more folk-based in style. As with nearly all the tracks on the recording of the song, there is delay panned to both channels to broaden the effect. When the horns and synth return with the main groove after the solo, a huge amount of perfectly timed delay is used to fill the rests and give the song a real lift at this point.

Structurally, the song is very simple – intro – verse – chorus – verse – chorus – instrumental verse (with penny whistle solo) – middle 8 (based on intro with additional horns) – verse – chorus – verse (sung to na, na, na, two bar bass guitar break. The outro is based on the intro/verse with Simon's voice an octave lower with a call and response between this and his own falsetto vocals.

One of the most striking features of the song is Bathiki's monumental two bar slap bass solo just before the outro. At this point, all the other instruments drop out to leave the solo to cut through. This brief motif was in fact more or less a single bar of music, the first based on a largely descending semiquaver pattern. The second part was in fact studio engineered by Hallee. He simply copied it in reverse to create a kind of musical palindrome.

Finally, note the percussive use of the enormous tom toms that feature at the end of the introduction and each subsequent verse leading into the chorus. There are three of them, two rack mounted and one floor. This off-beat fill is panned across the stereo spread from right to left, the highest being on the right, the middle just left of centre and the floor tom right to the left. This provides a quite striking and dramatic effect and gives a real lift to the chorus each time.

Glossary of terms:

Zydeco – musical genre from Louisiana which blends, blues, rhythm and blues, Louisiana Creoles and Native American people of Louisiana

Isicathamiya – a singing style that originates from South African Zulus

A capella – music for voices without instrumental accompaniment

Fretless bass guitar – a bass guitar without frets which makes it easier to bend notes and play glissandi

Pedal steel guitar – a console type guitar played horizontally which often has pedals and is frequently played with a slide or bottleneck

Glissando – a continuous slide either rising or falling between two notes

Mbaqanga – South African music with rural Zulu roots

Syncopation – a rhythmic, melodic or harmonic idea played off the beat rather than on

Sequence – a melodic/harmonic motif repeated at a higher or lower pitch on the same instrument/voice

Falsetto – the upper register of the human voice and often applied to male singers singing in their upper 'false' voice, rather than chest voice

Sibilance - a literary device where strongly stressed consonants are created deliberately by producing air from vocal tracts through the use of lips and tongue. These consonants produce hissing sounds.

EMT 140 - a plate reverb used to create an echo / reverb effect. A large, stainless steel plate vibrates to produce the effect. The rate of reverb is controlled by a damper.

Slap bass - a style of **bass** playing where the performer '**slaps**' the strings with the right thumb and 'pops' the strings with the right hand fingers. This gives a percussive effect to the sound.

Homophonic – a texture where instruments and/or voices move together rhythmically, in harmony.