

A Dip Into Frank Ocean's Music and Marketing

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Introduction

Famed musician Frank Ocean is known worldwide for his individualistic approach to music and enigmatic persona. His music has gained critical acclaim and success over the past ten years, winning two Grammys as well as countless other awards. By avoiding the traps faced by mainstream artists, Frank Ocean has resisted allowing others to control his art and creative process.

Frank Ocean released various projects throughout his career that assisted in the growth and exposure of himself as an artist. His works include two studio albums, eight music videos, a visual album, and eighteen singles. Many of his original songs have charted countless times on the *Billboard Hot 100*, both on his own and in collaboration with others. Eight of his solo efforts have reached that standing, including “Novacane,” “Thinkin Bout You,” “Chanel,” “Nikes,” “Ivy,” “Pink + White,” “Solo,” and “Nights.” All of his compositions include an emotional narrative as well as a beautifully composed musical structure.

Ocean’s compelling music, sharp marketing tactics, and the risks he took during his career make him a significant artist and played a major role in the charting of his music on the *Billboard Hot 100* chart. I have focused on Ocean’s top charted works, examining their composition, structure, and text. I have also studied Ocean’s purpose in constructing these pieces in relation to the time period of their creation. The marketing tactics Ocean used when releasing his works positively impacted the popularity of his music and himself as an artist. All of these factors assisted in the placement of Ocean’s music on the *Billboard Hot 100*.

Chapter 1: The Becoming of Frank Ocean

Frank Ocean, originally named Christopher Lonny Breaux, grew up in a diverse music scene. He also overcame many unfortunate events before launching his music career. He was born on October 28, 1987, in Long Beach, California. At the age of five, Ocean and his family moved to New Orleans, where he spent the majority of his youth. He was exposed to the jazz scene there, and also listened to his mother's music, such as Céline Dion, Anita Baker, and *The Phantom of the Opera* soundtrack.¹ His father left the family when Ocean was six years old, leaving Ocean to grow up with his two siblings and mother. He has had no relationship with his father since he left. When Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, it destroyed his hometown of New Orleans, including the studio in which he spent most of his time.² This event caused Ocean to relocate to Los Angeles.

Ocean's move from New Orleans to Los Angeles helped his networking abilities, which jump-started his endeavors in the music industry. During his stay in Southern California, he quickly made many relationships in the music industry. In 2009, he joined the Los Angeles-based hip-hop collective OFWGKTA (Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All) where he met many of his collaborators, including Tyler, The Creator ("Golden Girl" from *channel Orange*). Ocean is still a member of this group.³ Through his network, he was introduced to producer Christopher Stewart (Tricky Stewart) in 2009, who helped him sign a contract with Def

¹ Amy Wallace, "Frank Ocean: On Channel Orange, Meeting Odd Future, and His Tumblr Letter," *GQ*, November 20, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2ocqd1j>.

² Ernest Baker, "Who Is Frank Ocean?" *Complex*, March 18, 2011, <https://bit.ly/2R9kMMf>.

³ Wallace, "Frank Ocean: On Channel Orange, Meeting Odd Future, and His Tumblr Letter," <https://bit.ly/2ocqd1j>.

Jam Recordings, a subsidiary of Universal Music Group.⁴ Frank Ocean began as a songwriter for record producers, which many call a “ghostwriter.”⁵ He wrote songs such as “Quickly” for John Legend, “Bigger” for Justin Bieber, “I Miss You” for Beyoncé, and “One Thing” for Alicia Keys. Ocean also composed for artists such as Damienn Jones, Brandy Norwood, and James Blake.⁶

Christopher Breaux underwent major personal changes en route to becoming “Frank Ocean,” including the modification of his name to Christopher Francis William Ocean in 2010. In an interview with *Complex*, Ocean said, “I changed my name on my birthday last year. It was the most empowering thing I did in 2010.”⁷ In 2012, he published a letter on his Tumblr blog recounting unrequited feelings he had for another man that many refer to as “The Open Letter.”⁸ By making this public statement, Ocean offered younger fans another powerfully vulnerable idol to emulate and admire. He also reminded us of the importance of proudly declaring individual identity. This coming-out was not only a huge step for Ocean, but also for the hip-hop community. This niche of music-making has been known to include homophobic and insensitive lyrics in their music. One example of homophobia in lyricism is “Georgie Porgie” by A Tribe Called Quest: “Now George swung with gays, just the way he sways. Even fooled around with his mom’s lingerie . . . you fucking faggot. Couldn’t wait for gay parade so you can drag it.”⁹ By

⁴ Matthew Strauss, “Tricky Stewart, Who Signed Frank Ocean to Def Jam, Slams Label for Mistreatment of Frank,” *Pitchfork*, August 26, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2AFdRVO>.

⁵ Elias Leight, “9 Great Songs You Didn’t Know Frank Ocean Wrote,” *Rolling Stone*, August 22, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2T3Qvjx>.

⁶ Leight, “9 Great Songs,” <https://bit.ly/2T3Qvjx>.

⁷ Baker, “Who Is Frank Ocean?” <https://bit.ly/2R9kMMf>.

⁸ Ann Powers, “A Close Look At Frank Ocean’s Coming Out Letter,” *NPR*, July 5, 2012, <https://n.pr/2HhFeLf>.

⁹ Ryan Kristobak, “Has a Tribe Called Quest Progressed Past Writing Hip Hop’s Most Homophobic Song?,” *Culture Trip*, November 11, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2eJRDnC>.

writing this letter, Ocean was one of the first to demonstrate an accepting mindset for the homosexual community.

After overcoming these personal changes, Ocean released music that helped him achieve recognition as an artist and not simply a ghostwriter. Ocean's first release was a mixtape titled *nostalgia, Ultra*. This project not only increased his popularity in the music industry, but also set the bar high as to what to expect from him. The project was released with no promotion on February 16, 2011, through Ocean's Tumblr account. Still, the mixtape was popular; one of the tracks in the album, "Swim Good," peaked at position seventy on *Billboard's* R&B/Hip-Hop Song chart.¹⁰ On June 8, 2012, Ocean released his first studio album, *channel Orange* which became even more popular than his previous release.¹¹ This project was distributed by Def Jam Recordings and was his first album with traction and a fan base. The album reached position number two on the *Billboard* 200 chart and was nominated for multiple Grammys.¹²

Unfortunately, Ocean's relationship with his record company, Def Jam, restricted him in many different ways; he calls this experience "the seven-year chess game."¹³ Many major record labels typically sign artists into a seven-album deal structure, meaning the artist is required to release seven albums under the record's label.¹⁴ Feeling trapped in his relationship with Def Jam, Ocean released a visual album, *Endless*, on August 19, 2016, hoping to fulfill his contract. Due

¹⁰ Denise Warner, "Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs," *Billboard*, October 1, 2011, <https://bit.ly/2T71VTY>.

¹¹ Jon Caramanica, "Frank Ocean is Finally Free, Mystery Intact," *The New York Times*, November 15, 2016, <https://nyti.ms/2wdXzPB>.

¹² Denise Warner, "Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs," *Billboard*, July 28, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2FCGmr5>, and Neil Portnow, "Grammy Award Results For Frank Ocean," *Grammy*, August 15, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2W6pzli>.

¹³ Jack Shepherd, "Frank Ocean Actually Gave an Interview: 17 Things We Learned," *Independent*, November 16, 2016, <https://ind.pn/2U0IHik>.

¹⁴ Dan Rys, "Frank Ocean's Album Is The Straw That Broke Universal Music's Back (And It May Get Him Sued)," *Billboard*, August 24, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2REiARh>.

to the album being visual and released as a whole project, *Endless* was not eligible for the *Billboard* charts. Ocean quietly worked with Apple Music to create a streaming exclusive deal for his next album, *Blond*.¹⁵ This album was set to release on his independent label just twenty-four hours after *Endless*. After the release of *Blond*, Ocean increased his potential profit share from fourteen to seventy percent of total revenues from *Blond*. Def Jam, which was recovering from the back-to-back release of *Endless* and *Blond*, had claimed Ocean used up to \$2 million on recording costs for *Blond*. Due to Ocean's new relationship with Apple, the company was believed to be a factor in settling the \$2 million debt and buying back Ocean's recordings.¹⁶

Ocean's second studio album, *Blond*, became very successful after its release. It was the third largest debut of 2016 and reached position number one on the *Billboard 200* chart.¹⁷ Although Ocean was able to maneuver his way out of his contract and *Blond* had seen strong sales, Tricky Stewart regrets introducing Ocean to Def Jam: "It was probably, in hindsight, a huge mistake on my part. The label wasn't motivated by the signing. They didn't give him the respect that I thought he deserved."¹⁸

Not everything resulting from the Def Jam years was sour. Ocean submitted his music for the Grammys in 2012, and won two, including "Best Urban Contemporary Album" for *channel Orange* and "Best Rap/Sung Collaboration."¹⁹ Despite the 2012 Grammy success, Ocean chose not to participate after that point. Ocean's uninvolvedness in the Grammys after the year of 2012

¹⁵ Erin M Jacobson, "Checkmate: Frank Ocean Goes Independent," *Forbes*, November 18, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2ARBpqD>.

¹⁶ Rys, "Frank Ocean's Album is the Straw," <https://bit.ly/2REiARh>.

¹⁷ Keith Caulfield, "Frank Ocean's 'Blonde' Bows at No. 1 on Billboard 200 with Third-Largest Debut of 2016," *Billboard*, August 28, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2CiQGjM>.

¹⁸ Strauss, "Tricky Stewart, Who Signed Frank Ocean," <https://bit.ly/2AFdRVO>.

¹⁹ Neil Portnow, "Grammy Award Results For Frank Ocean," *Grammy*, August 15, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2W6pzli>.

reflected his disenchantment with the system: “That institution (Grammys) certainly has nostalgic importance. It just doesn’t seem to be representing very well for people who come from where I come from ... I think the infrastructure of the awarding system and the nomination system and screening system is dated. I’d rather this be my Colin Kaepernick moment for the Grammys than sit there in the audience.”²⁰

Thanks to his compelling music, the risks that Ocean took with his personal life, Def Jam, and the Grammys paid off. Moreover, they make him a significant artist because he followed the “road less traveled” for major-label musicians. Known for his individualistic approach to contemporary music, his compositions embody a great deal of emotional appeal while blurring the boundaries between soul, hip-hop, electronica, and indie rock.

²⁰ Michelle Geslani, “Frank Ocean Talks Def Jam Label Drama, Why He Chose to Skip Out on The Grammys in New Interview,” *Consequence of Sound*, November 15, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2FvRHsl>.

Chapter 2: Ocean's Solos and Singles

The music and messages Ocean crafts within “Thinkin Bout You,” “Novacane,” and “Chanel” assist in their relevance and popularity. “Thinkin Bout You” describes an unrequited love experience with musical elements that help display this overall message. Formerly written for pop and R&B artist, Bridget Kelly, “Thinkin Bout You” describes an unrequited love experience.²¹ The track contains varying musical elements that help display this overall message and the simple production and instrumentation highlight the lyricism and symbolic imagery in the text.²²

By using fragments of his conversation with his lover, Ocean makes the unfamiliar seem incredibly personal. Oddly enough, the magnetism of this song is harvested from the lack of details about his relationship. Although we begin to understand that this relationship is unrequited, Ocean reveals insecurity about his feelings by including sarcastic lies that correlate to his false emotions. Some examples include “A tornado flew around my room” and “Got a beach house I can sell you in Idaho.”²³ It isn't until the bridge of the verse-chorus plus bridge form that we understand Ocean's honest feelings and his acceptance of unrequited love.

Although many of the gender references within this song are neutral, Ocean includes wordplay in the first verse. This is seen in the lines, “My eyes don't shed tears, but boy, they pour when I'm thinkin bout you,” which demonstrates the double meaning Ocean assigns to “boy.”²⁴

²¹ Julia Simon, “Thinking About You,” *Rolling Stone*, June 13, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2QXQwDZ>.

²² Cole Cuchna, “Thinking About You by Frank Ocean,” *Dissect*, May 21, 2018, <https://spoti.fi/2DkjE19>.

²³ Romo Ezzi, “Thinkin Bout You,” *Genius*, April, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2U0NMHI>.

²⁴ Ezzi, “Thinkin Bout You,” <https://bit.ly/2U0NMHI>.

The media used in the production of this track assist in the melancholic and dramatic effect. These instruments include a drum loop, keyboard, strings, guitar, cello, and vocals. Although there are many instruments, they aren't all played at the same time. They are each spotlighted at different times throughout the work.²⁵ The repeated drum loop in a simple quadruple meter offers a steady support to the track, which creates a foundation for instrument-layering. The echo-effects on the drum loop are placed on the second and fourth beats of the loop.



The melodic structure creates a contrast within each section to demonstrate the different feelings of the song. Ocean's differing vocal elements within the portions of the work build the variations within each section. The verse of the song contain descending vocal lines with more lyrics as well as vocal fluidity. These expressive lines are supported by a chordal accompaniment and include the text containing sarcastic lies. The chorus features an octave jump in the voice, making it one of the most memorable aspects of the piece. This section contains Ocean's explanation of his true feelings.²⁶



²⁵ Ezzi, "Thinkin Bout You," <https://bit.ly/2U0NMHI>.

²⁶ Chris Breaux and Shea Taylor, *Thinkin Bout You*, ed. Chris Breaux (Berlin: BMG Rights Management, 2012, p 2-5).

The special devices engineered in the production process aid in creating an extraordinary sound. The beginning four-note ostinato switches between instruments and returns constantly to the tonic key, illustrating a sense of longing. While the ostinato is rather simple, the alternation of instrumentation adds variety to the work. Echo-effects are added to this drum that make the ostinato sound more complex.



Although the lyrics of “Novacane” contain many underlying themes that may be hard to pick up at first, the overall appeal can be found within the memorable refrain of the verse-refrain form, as well as other assisting musical elements. Formerly released as a debut single for his mixtape *nostalgia, Ultra*, the track “Novacane” is one of Ocean’s leading works.²⁷

“Novacane” expresses a feeling of numbness that can be relevant to many people experiencing an unrequited relationship or one that has failed.²⁸ Ocean falls into a rabbit hole of temptation by a woman whom he met at a music festival. She introduces him to drugs and he finds himself with overwhelming feelings for her and the medication that he is abusing. The song follows Ocean as he chases the feeling that he once had, only to end up in a numb state of mind. Many people consider this desensitized feeling to relate to his sexual orientation, for the song was released before he officially came out as a bisexual.²⁹ The verses tell the storyline with a

²⁷ Teresa Fardella, “Novacane,” *Genius*, June 2011, <https://bit.ly/2ROpyDp>.

²⁸ Cole Cuchna, “Frank Ocean: A Man of Mystery and Art,” *Dissect*, May 16, 2018, <https://spoti.fi/2HjBed9>.

²⁹ Fardella, “Novacane,” <https://bit.ly/2ROpyDp>.

syllabic text setting, whereas the repetitious neumatic text in the refrain describes the feeling of “numbness.”

The light harmonic structure, in a verse-refrain form with a coda, strengthens the foundation of the work, allowing the contrasting sections to become more apparent. Ocean employs a chordal accompaniment, using a “i-v” harmonic structure in the key of E-flat minor. This accompaniment offers a simple and consistent foundation for the song. The verse sections contain shorter phrasing that may be a device to convey the anxiety Ocean is feeling from the drugs he discusses. The refrain sections contain a repetitive neumatic text setting that contrasts nicely to the previous portions of the song.

Similar to “Thinkin Bout You,” the consistent drum loop in “Novacane” provides a sense of structure to the work. Along with this loop, the instruments in this piece include a keyboard and vocals.³⁰ The loop, in a simple quadruple meter, is slightly faster and contains a darker homophonic texture than “Thinkin Bout You.” The minimal use of instruments permits greater focus on the voice.



The special devices included in the production process assist in the dramatic appeal of the song. In the coda, Ocean adjusts the volume between the right and left speaker to switch off singing “feel her.” In this section, he also includes a richer bass, layered vocals, and keyboard chimes to create a dramatic effect.

³⁰ Fardella, “Novacane,” <https://bit.ly/2ROpyDp>.

ending of the song more dramatic in a higher register of the voice. The A section is the stable section of the piece, due to its repetitive lyrics. Ocean includes layered vocals in the central B section to contrast the surrounding A portions. The coda differs from the other sections in that it does not contain the thematic descending vocal lines. It consists of more long lyrical phrases, as well as spoken text.

The musical ideas Ocean includes in “Thinkin Bout You,” “Novacane,” and “Chanel” enhance their relevance and popularity. The clever wordplay within each of the works, as well as the emotional narrative, provide an engaging sentiment. The varying musical elements seen within these works, such as descending vocal runs, chordal accompaniment, and a simple harmonic structure, help to make each work stand apart from each other, while maintaining Ocean’s musical voice.

Chapter 3: A Handful of *blond*

The music and messages Ocean crafts within “Nikes,” “Ivy,” “Solo,” and “Nights” assist in the success and popularity of *Blond* as an album. Although each of these works are well-known on their own, they assist in the creation of *Blond* as a whole project.

While “Nikes” touches largely on sexuality, spirituality, and materialism, it also presents political controversies – particularly the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin. The many issues addressed in the text of “Nikes” heighten the relevance of the work. Ocean acknowledges instances of injustice that African Americans faced by referencing those who have died from controversial events, including Martin, Pimp C, and A\$AP Yams.³⁵ The song also touches on materialism and love.

The shifting musical elements in the programming of the music adds to the storytelling and time periods. The instrumentation of a mellotron, drum programming, and vocals are altered differently in each section to add contrast.³⁶ “Nikes” is structured in a binary form with a coda. Section A contains Ocean’s voice modified in a higher register, which could be interpreted as a way to portray a younger time period. The vocals are accompanied by held whole-note chords with a steady quarter-note pulse. The drum programming grows more complex with added echo-effects as the section progresses.

There is an obvious shift in mood when transitioning to section B. The mellotron feeds an arpeggiation of an acoustic guitar sound and chords with a lighter texture. This section has lost the quarter-note drum pulse. Ocean’s voice is no longer pitched up, and it contains more

³⁵ Nikita Richardson, “Here’s How the R&B Artist Stood Up for Black Lives Matter in His New Video and Beyond,” *The Fader*, August 20, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Sbs32M>.

³⁶ Romo Ezzi, “Nikes,” *Genius*, August 2016, <https://genius.com/Frank-ocean-nikes-lyrics>.

spoken-word singing. This vocal change could be seen as an interpretation of the present time period.

The coda combines musical ideas from both halves of the song, such as Ocean's regular and modified voice, which creates a unified sound. This portion of the work is the most dramatic of the piece because of its doubled vocals and culmination of all musical elements seen within the piece, such as higher and lower registers of the voice and arpeggiated chords. The first part of the coda does not contain the drum pulse, but the second part of it does.

Ocean suggests that he used the pitch modification as a way to capture a different time. He hints at the use of this element in an interview with *The New York Times*: "Sometimes I felt you weren't hearing enough versions of me in a song."³⁷ Ocean's voice is modulated five semitones higher in section A than section C. This higher register helps convey a younger version of Ocean, where as the regular vocal range heard in section C represents a matured version of Ocean.

The minimal harmonic structure creates a sense of continuity between the two contrasting sections. The harmonic progression in the key of A \flat major is built upon four chords played on a mellotron. Using the harmonic structure of V - vii^o - iii - iii⁷, the bass is heard doubling the root, except on the mediant, where a second (d \flat) is played. The d \flat creates dissonance and harmonic tension to provide a more complex sound.

Many of the special devices are made within the programming of the track. These additions make the simple foundation of "Nikes" sound more interesting. A programmed echo "hey" is included sporadically throughout the piece, which create a dramatic tone. The

³⁷ Caramanica, "Frank Ocean Is Finally Free, Mystery Intact," <https://nyti.ms/2wdXzPB>.

programmed drum/bass ostinato in a simple quadruple meter, has an echo-effect on the first and third beat of each measure. The second and third beats are created with a hi-hat percussion.

The image shows a musical score for Drums and Double Bass in 4/4 time. The Drums part is on a single staff with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. It features a pattern of quarter notes on the first and third beats, with a hi-hat pattern on the second and third beats. The Double Bass part is on a single staff with a bass clef and a 4/4 time signature. It features a simple bass line with quarter notes on the first and third beats, and a half note on the second and fourth beats.

While many of Ocean's works touch on the theme of unrequited love, the musical elements included in "Ivy" assist in delivering the message of acceptance. "Ivy" follows the theme of the feeling of unreturned love. Instead of lingering in the pain of an unreturned feeling, the song explores a path of forgiveness. The long and lyrical phrasing of "Ivy" contains a sentimental ode to a failed relationship. When faced with the permanency of art, Ocean chose compassion instead of resentment. After time and reflection, he was able to accept the outcome of the relationship. The message within this song follows the theme of forgiveness and displays the emotions that can occur during this type of experience.³⁸ The text-setting is syllabic with occasional melismas, allowing an emphasis on important words within the poetry. Some examples of melismatic runs include: "I ain't a **kid no more**, we'll never be those **kids again**," "Ooo, I could hate you now," and "I've been **dreaming**."³⁹

The structure and added elements in "Ivy" aid in its dramatic tone. Ocean adds instruments and alternates his higher and lower register as the song progresses to build tension. The instruments used in this piece are a lead guitar, muted bass guitar, a third guitar, and voice. The song uses the harmonic structure of III - vii^o - I - VI in A minor. "Ivy" is built in an alternation form with bridge and coda, which assists in creating the dramatic tone by bringing

³⁸ Cole Cuchna, "Ivy by Frank Ocean," *Dissect*, July 13, 2018, <https://spoti.fi/2RrzuOE>.

³⁹ Ezzi, "Nikes," <https://genius.com/Frank-ocean-nikes-lyrics>.

back memorable material throughout the track. Ocean employs his falsetto in most of the work, whereas the bridge consists of Ocean's lower register. The final chorus starts off softer than the others because it lacks the bass until halfway through. The climax builds throughout the song until the coda, and ends with a dramatic abnormal approach. As Ocean sings his last line, "I've been dreaming," his singing turns into a scream.⁴⁰ Still, there is voice modification added to this portion to create a less harsh sound.

Ocean differentiates this piece from the others in *Blond* by including an experimental section in the coda and other added elements throughout the song. The coda is the climax of the work because of the tension built by Ocean's falsetto and all of the instruments being played at once. The coda section concludes with the sound of someone smashing a guitar. The ending to "Ivy" is ironic because the song revolves around acceptance and forgiveness, although the act of destroying instruments portrays the idea of anger and frustration. This portion can be interpreted as the aggravation and rage against a failed relationship. The work is engineered to have certain instruments panned to specific speakers. The bass is panned to the right speaker, and the lead guitar is panned to the left.⁴¹

Unlike the other tracks discussed from *Blond*, Ocean orchestrates many inventive musical elements in "Pink + White" that help convey a sense of nostalgia and memories. The syllabic text setting and long lyrical phrases of "Pink + White" are filled with philosophical nuances to create an introspective message of love. Ocean uses the memories he has had to illustrate the lessons he has learned and how they shaped his approach to life. Despite the hardships that he has been through, he can reflect back and appreciate all that he has learned. The lyrics are

⁴⁰ Romo Ezzi, "Ivy," *Genius*, August 2016, <https://genius.com/Frank-ocean-ivy-lyrics>.

⁴¹ Cuchna, "Ivy by Frank Ocean," <https://spoti.fi/2RrzuOE>.

constructed in a hazy and vivid composite of images to portray the way that we remember our memories. By using a descending vocal line, Ocean includes word painting on the phrase “All downhill from here.”

In a verse-refrain form with a coda, Ocean creates a memorable sound by building ostinatos for each instrument under melismatic vocal lines. The return of these sounds throughout the work are similar to reflecting on our memories. The instruments used are cello, viola, violin, bass, drum programming, keyboard and voice.⁴² Unlike many contemporary songs, “Pink + White” is in a compound-duple meter. The eighth-note triplets in the electric bass line guide the work in the refrain sections. This rhythm in the bass provides a swinging sing-song quality. In the key of A-major, a simple harmonic structure of III7 - ii7 - I7 - I7 is used to provide a foundation for the many ostinatos.

There is a large musical shift in the second verse, due to the replacement of instruments. An acoustic guitar replaces keyboard, and a stand-up bass replaces electric bass. The keyboard and bass are instruments that ground the song and provide stability. When the medium changes, the mood of that section shifts, making it seem like a completely different portion even though the notes being played and the vocals being sung remain the same.

As the song progresses, vocals are added to produce a dramatic ending. The coda is a point of musical interest because there are added female vocals provided by Beyoncé.⁴³ Female vocals are a rarity in Ocean’s music, which makes “Pink + White” that much more memorable. Ocean employs a speech-sung approach in this section with his vocals.

⁴² Romo Ezzi, “Pink + White,” *Genius*, August 2016, <https://genius.com/Frank-ocean-pink-white-lyrics>.

⁴³ Ezzi, “Pink + White,” <https://genius.com/Frank-ocean-pink-white-lyrics>.

Inventive special devices are included to help express the idea of nostalgia. Ocean includes the sound of birds chirping throughout the song, which is especially noticeable at the end. These birds could represent the time of year that Ocean is remembering in this piece. The beginning chord is the only part of the track that makes use of the string section. The strings play a trilled crescendo between E and F. Similar to many of his works, Ocean includes echo-effects to create a reverberating sound.

While many of the songs in *Blond* follow the theme of loving someone else, “Solo” encapsulates the idea of regaining independence and the stubbornness of adolescence. Ocean illustrates these ideas with instrumentation and text by creating an uplifting tone. Right before “Solo,” there is an interlude track titled “Be Yourself” that consists of a voicemail by a woman named Rosie Watson, who is the mother of Ocean’s friend.⁴⁴ This message contains advice about being one’s self and discouraging the use of drugs and alcohol. The theme of including a track of Rosie speaking is also heard in *channel Orange*. Played just before “Super Rich Kids,” which touches on recklessly spending money, Rosie discusses the importance of saving. Similarly, in *Blond*, Rosie discourages drug use and warns the listener of its repercussions. Following that work, “Solo” includes references to substances such as acid and marijuana. This remark is a juxtaposition between Rosie, who portrays a maternal voice of adulthood and maturity, and Ocean, who represents adolescence and rebellion.

The verse-refrain form of “Solo” allows the extensive description of drug use, its repercussions, and Ocean’s state of mind to be understood. The melismatic refrains provide a contrast against the syllabic text-setting in the verses. This format makes Ocean’s voice the

⁴⁴ Cole Cuchna, “Solo by Frank Ocean,” *Dissect*, July 27, 2018, <https://spoti.fi/2CRKQpX>.

highlight of the work. In the key of E \flat major, “Solo” contains a different harmonic structure for each section, including I - IV - ii - iv and I - VII - vi - I - ii. Although both are quite simple, their variety differentiates the portions. The instrumentation of “Solo” is voice and keyboard with an organ sample.⁴⁵ The chordal accompaniment is in a simple quadruple meter. The accompaniment maintains the rhythm of the song while Ocean’s voice explores vocal lines that mimic a recitative technique in the verses and melismatic runs in the refrain.

Similar to “Novacane,” Ocean sings the title “Solo” in a repetitive fashion in the refrain to emphasize its meaning. Using his falsetto, Ocean’s constant repetition of “Solo” could be interpreted as “So low,” considering the drug context of the song. Ocean includes word-play in the chorus when he repeats, “inhale, in hell there’s heaven.” This phrase is referring to smoking marijuana. It also carries the concept that even in the worst situations, good can be seen. Ocean includes background vocals with a reverb effect in the chorus and coda to create an exhilarating feeling.

Unlike the other works discussed, “Nights” excels in relevance by exploring the growth of adolescence to adulthood with various musical elements such as form and an experimental division of the song. Although in a verse-refrain form, the idea of “Nights” is split into two global halves to contrast adolescence and adulthood. The repetition of lyrics in the refrain maintains a sense of familiarity with differing musical elements in instrumentation. This reappearance of text can represent the foundation that many may have as they age, with additional aspects such as maturity or growth. Some differing musical elements between the refrain sections are voice modification by two semitones, differences in the simple quadruple

⁴⁵ Romo Ezzi, “Solo,” *Genius*, August 2016, <https://genius.com/Frank-ocean-solo-lyrics>.

drum programming, and the change of guitar to keyboard in the second refrain. The first drum loop features more dotted eighth notes and sixteenth notes, whereas the second drum loop is much simpler with a triplet sixteenth note on the second beat. Ocean's vocal line explores his falsetto and contains shorter phrasing. Similar to "Nikes," voice modification is used to portray a younger time period in Ocean's life. The portion before the transition is adolescence and the section after is adulthood.

The transition that divides the two sections represents the uncomfortable feeling that some may have when experiencing growth and change. A cacophony of a glitching sound is heard before the next drum ostinato. Audio clips of guitar samples are repeated to provide a stuttering effect. The unappealing sound makes the next section feel that much more euphoric. This isn't the first time that a musician has used chaos as a way to demonstrate transition. This tactic is used in Paul McCartney's "A Day In A Life."⁴⁶

Unlike Ocean's other works, "Nights" contains a harmonic structure with more variety. The harmonic structure assists in dividing the sections to emphasize the two portions of adolescence and adulthood. Ocean includes a key change of A \flat major to E major. The keys do not have similar key signatures, making the transition that much more dramatic.

The image displays the harmonic structure of the song "Nights" in bass clef, 4/4 time. It is divided into three sections: Verse 1, Verse 2, and Chorus. Roman numerals are placed below the notes to indicate the chords used in each section.

Verse 1: I II V II vii^o vi ii vii^o vi II vii^o

Verse 2: vii^o VII II iii VII I VI I iii I V ii

Chorus: (The notation for the chorus is partially obscured by the Verse 2 line, but the Roman numerals above it are: vi II vii^o)

⁴⁶ Cole Cuchna, "Nights," *Dissect*, August 11, 2018, <https://spoti.fi/2HFsyxM>.

The special devices included in “Nights” assist in not only the division of the song but also the structure and overall idea of *Blond*. The split within “Nights” separates the musical intentions and structure of the work, as well as the entirety of *Blond*. This transition marks the halfway mark of the album, providing perfect symmetry.

The musical ideas explored in each of the tracks discussed aid in their relevance to and support of *Blond* as a whole. Although they each contain differing musical elements that set them apart, they also embody themes — such as common use of ostinato, voice modification, and simple harmonic structures — that bring them together. These elements assist in the overall popularity and success of *Blond*.

Chapter 4: Frank Ocean's Musical Themes

Ocean's music contains both musical and poetic themes that help create a distinct sound throughout his works. A major aspect that tie these works together is a similar narrative that interlaces subjects of love and youth. His album *Blond* can be considered as a concept album because of the many themes that he weaves within each song.

Ocean develops recognizable patterns within his works by using various melodic and harmonic musical elements. Most of Frank Ocean's compositions contain a simple harmonic structure that repeats for the entirety of the work. This recurrence assists in providing a straightforward accompaniment that allows the vocal line to be spotlighted. The harmonic structures that Ocean uses move mainly in a mediant, dominant, or stepwise motion, and contain roughly four chords in the progression. This progression is seen in the songs "Novacane," "Nikes," "Chanel," "Ivy," "Pink + White," and "Solo."

"Nikes"	A b M	V - vii ^o - iii - iii7
"Ivy"	Am	III - vii ^o - I - VI
"Pink + White"	AM	III7 - ii7 - I7 - I7

All of Ocean's music contains ostinatos and repetitive material that are seen consistently as the songs progress. These themes are often seen within multiple instruments, and are layered on top of one another to create a memorable sound. The ostinatos are simple melodic lines that

help listeners to focus on the poetry and message of the work. Although different rhythmically, both of these examples explore a close relationship to the tonic note:

“Thinkin Bout You”:



“Nikes”:



Perhaps one of the most consistent themes in Ocean’s work is his use of a drum and bass loop. In most of his works, these loops are in a simple quadruple meter and contain similar rhythmic elements. They are constructed with non-complex rhythmic qualities so as to maintain a cleaner sound:

“Nikes”:

A musical score for two parts: Drums and Double Bass. The Drums part is on a single staff with a drumhead symbol and a 4/4 time signature. It shows a rhythmic pattern of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5 in the first measure; D5, E5, F5, G5 in the second; A5, B5, C6, D6 in the third; and E6, F6, G6, A6 in the fourth. The Double Bass part is on a bass clef staff with a 4/4 time signature and a key signature of three flats. It shows a descending scale of half notes: G2, F2, E2, D2 across the four measures.

“Thinkin Bout You”:

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Drums' and features a 4/4 time signature with a drum set icon. It contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes: a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note, repeated four times in each measure. The bottom staff is labeled 'Double Bass' and also has a 4/4 time signature. It contains a simple harmonic accompaniment of quarter notes: G2, B1, D2, and G2, repeated in each measure.

All of Ocean’s pieces contain similar media, with a lead vocal line and simple accompaniment. This correspondence assists in establishing a theme within his music. Ocean uses chordal or arpeggiated accompaniment to highlight the vocal line. Arpeggiated accompaniment is used in “Nikes,” “Chanel,” and “Pink + White” to create a more intricate sound, while “Nights,” “Novacane,” “Thinkin Bout You,” and “Solo” make use of a chordal accompaniment. Over this structure, the voice often contains patterns of descending lines. These vocal runs are seen in the tracks “Thinkin Bout You,” “Chanel,” “Nights,” “Pink + White,” “Novacane,” and “Solo.”

“Thinkin Bout You”:

The image shows a single staff of musical notation in treble clef. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes with a descending contour: G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3. Below the staff, the lyrics are written with a blank line under the first word: "___ the mess it made It us - 'lly does-n't rain _ in".

“Chanel”:



Ocean uses echo-effects on his vocals to create a reverberation that ultimately generates a dramatic sound. Within the production process, he also distorts the voice to capture different time periods of his life by creating a younger and older sound. Distorted vocals are used in “Ivy” (pitched up one semitone), “Nikes” (pitched up five semitones), and “Nights” (pitched up two semitones).

The poetic and universal themes used in Ocean’s work help illustrate his messages and stories. He finds the narrative within his music to be the most important aspect: “I focus on both sonics and story, but music sometimes, just music itself, can turn into more of a math problem . . . But storytelling is a different thing. Like I said, it's the more interesting part about making music for me, or making albums and songs.”⁴⁷

The songs analyzed from *Blond* contain themes that assist in the overall symmetry of the album. The first half of the project contains songs that portray a younger time period through the use of voice distortion. This element creates a brighter and warmer sound that can represent childhood. Ocean also makes many summer references in the first half of the album, which can refer to having little responsibility. The second half of the album, which begins at the halfway

⁴⁷ Sheldon Pierce, “Frank Ocean’s *Boys Don’t Cry*: The Complete Timeline,” *Pitchfork*, August 2, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2HIYznD>.

mark of “Nights,” contains no summer references and no distorted vocals. This segment also contains a darker tone, with instances of self-revelation. All songs within this analysis are drawn from part one, excluding the second half of “Nights.” These works represent a brighter, youthful, and innocent time, which could be one reason why they charted on *Billboard*.

Ocean frequently uses themes of duality and word-play in his music to assist in the relevance of his works. The title of his album *Blond* is written both as “*Blond*” and “*Blonde*.” This difference in spelling can represent the disintegration of the arbitrary borders between masculinity and femininity. As English nouns, a “blond” is a fair-haired male, and a “blonde” is a fair-haired female. By using two versions of the title of the album, Ocean delivers a message that challenges socially constructed gender roles and norms. Similarly, one example of word-play is seen in “Thinkin Bout You”: “My eyes don’t shed tears, but boy, they pour when I’m thinkin bout you.” Ocean uses phrases such as these to apply a double meaning to “boy.”

Ocean’s music often follows an unrequited love encounter. This theme also assists in the relevance and applicability of the messages within his works. He illustrates these experiences through poetic juxtapositions. The most apparent one is seen in “Thinkin Bout You,” when he sings obvious lies and his nonexistent feelings for his lover. “Ivy” follows the theme of love in a more mature light. The track explores an unrequited love incident and delivers a message of acceptance and forgiveness. In “Pink + White,” Ocean illustrates his memories about his amorous experience and the lessons he learned.

Through both poetic and musical themes, Ocean’s music contains a similar sound and structure. This coherent relationship between his tracks allows his music to be understood and

analyzed. The songs within *Blond* demonstrate similar form and content, which assists in comprehending them as a whole.

Chapter 5: Non-Traditional Marketing

The music advertising and marketing industry can oftentimes provide an overwhelming amount of information during the release of new music. Building excitement for an artist is a difficult task because the current music market is overflowing with talented musicians yearning to get their music heard. Frank Ocean delivered an authentic, non-traditional marketing approach for his music, which assisted in the success of his works and himself as an artist.

It is extremely common for artists and their teams to use social media platforms and paid advertisements to promote their music. The relatively new approach of using social media marketing is organic, authentic, and direct, according to brand strategist Tammy Brook.⁴⁸ The use of social media offers an immediate connection from the artist to his or her fans in a more personal manner. One repercussion to this marketing tactic is the creation of an extremely cluttered music market.⁴⁹ Frank Ocean took a non-traditional route when promoting his music by *not* participating in the major social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook. Ocean delivered only infrequent pieces of information throughout the four years between *channel Orange* and *Blond*. He released this information on his Tumblr account, which included short clips of music or cryptic clues. This approach elevated the importance of the few messages he delivered. By not partaking in social media, Ocean took the risk of missing out on effortless and free digital marketing. He relied solely on the impact of his music and the devotion of his fanbase.

⁴⁸ Andy Gensler, "With 'Blonde,' Frank Ocean's Real Revolution Was in His Business Moves," *Billboard*, September 3, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2WYj6cI>.

⁴⁹ Kirsty Fairclough, "Frank Ocean is Driving His Fans Crazy – And He's a Genius for Doing So," *The Conversation*, August 8, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2aUjWR2>.

The messages that Ocean provided to his fans included vague information, rumors, and even misleading lies, which toyed with the expectations for his newest release. Ocean created one of the most successful and interesting marketing campaigns for a music release that assisted in the success of his music. One example of a misleading message occurred when Ocean was asked when he would release new music, to which he replied on Tumblr in 2013, “When summer comes round again.”⁵⁰ Another example appeared when Ocean announced the release of a new album in 2015. Ocean’s fanbase did not see the album until a full year later.⁵¹ Ocean again promised the release of a new album in 2016, although no specific date was announced. He delivered this information through the posting of a library due date card on his website. The card had a series of dates stamped on it to demonstrate that the “due date” of his album had been pushed back many times.⁵²

⁵⁰ Pierce, “Frank Ocean’s *Boys Don’t Cry*: The Complete Timeline,” <https://bit.ly/2HIYznD>.

⁵¹ Molly Beauchemin, “Frank Ocean Announces New Record,” *Pitchfork*, April 6, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2GKQPRh>.

⁵² Lauren Nostro, “What Do the Dates on Frank Ocean’s Cryptic Library Card Mean?” *Genius*, July 6, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2tkwXwk>.

DATE DUE		
JUL 04 2015		
AUG 07 2015		
SEP 11 2015		
OCT 09 2015	OCT 23 2015	
NOV 13 2015		
NOV 13 2016		
DEC 11 2015		
JAN 08 2016		
FEB 12 2016	FEB 19 2016	
MAR 25 2016		
APR 05 2016		
APR 22 2016		
MAY 06 2016		
JUN 03 2016		
JUL 04 2016		

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Ocean also teamed up with Apple Music and delivered a sponsored live stream that appeared on his website on August 1, 2016. The video was directed by Francisco Soriano that featured looped footage of Ocean building a spiral staircase.⁵⁴

By curating mysterious, vague, and cryptic marketing campaigns, Ocean generated attention to his music and himself as an artist. According to *Forbes*, after the release of the live-stream video, Ocean's music on YouTube and Vevo saw a doubling of visits. His YouTube hits raised from 50,000 views to 102,852, and his Vevo streams increased from 75,000 visitors to 128,666.⁵⁵ The visits to his Wikipedia site rose by more than 300%. The number of mentions of him on Facebook tripled, with an increase of 1,394 discussions that included his name. He was

⁵³ Nostro, "What Do the Dates on Frank Ocean's Cryptic Library Card Mean?" <https://bit.ly/2tkwXwk>.

⁵⁴ Luke Morgan Britton, "Watch Frank Ocean Doing DIY in Mysterious Live Stream Video," *NME*, August 1, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2SMrODg>.

⁵⁵ John Simpson, "Frank Ocean's Masterclass in Teaser Marketing," *The Content Marketer*, September 5, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2thEoUV>.

also a top-trending search on Google during that time period, with more than a half million hits.⁵⁶ Two weeks after this campaign, in August 2016, Ocean released his second studio album, *Blond*. The album sold over 276,000 copies in the first week and appeared on the *Billboard 200* chart.⁵⁷ Instead of utilizing mainstream marketing techniques such as paid advertisements and social media, Ocean relied solely on the impact of his music to determine its popularity and relevance.

The marketing techniques that Ocean used throughout his career not only helped his music to reach high positions on the *Billboard Hot 100*, but also defined his principles as an artist. His approach to delivering his music helped expose it to the world without the draining and overwhelming marketing tactics that many artists use today.

⁵⁶ Liv Buli, “Are Fans So Mad at Frank Ocean They Won’t Listen to His New Album? Probably Not,” *Forbes*, August 5, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2thEoUV>.

⁵⁷ Caulfield, “Frank Ocean's 'Blonde' Bows At No. 1 On Billboard” <https://bit.ly/2CiQGjM>.

Conclusion

The combination of Ocean's concealed persona, compelling and relevant music, and his risky business endeavors, made the perfect recipe for his music to chart the *Billboard Hot 100*. The musical elements included throughout Ocean's music, such as harmonic, melodic, and poetic structures, are the underlying core of the emotional connection that many people experience when listening to his music. Along with the musical elements included in his works, the marketing strategies that Ocean used played a large role in the placement of his works on the *Billboard Hot 100* chart.

Ocean's background assisted him in becoming the artist that he is today in many different ways. From his childhood in New Orleans growing up in the jazz scene, to his name change and "coming-out," all of these factors assisted in creating his music and shaping his persona. Ocean's private lifestyle allows a full range of interpretation of his music. This decision as an artist demonstrates the respect he has for music, so as to not distract from his art.

The musical elements within each of the tracks analyzed created a distinct sound for Ocean as an artist and played a large role in the songs' relevance and popularity. The common musical themes that developed this recognizable tone include a simple harmonic structure, ostinatos, and arpeggiated accompaniment. Other musical elements, such as similar media, a leading vocal line, and creative production effects, helped establish a sound that set his music apart from others. The tone that Ocean orchestrates within his music resembles a longing for the past and assists in creating a compelling sentiment.

The poetic themes within Ocean's works, such as project symmetry, word-play, duality, and similar messages regarding love and the past, assist in establishing an emotional narrative

throughout his music. This recognizable theme and narrative of nostalgia and longing for love helped create Frank Ocean as an artist. The combination of these elements increased the popularity and success of his music and himself as a musician.

The various marketing tactics that Frank Ocean used supported the major success of his music. The long delay in delivering *Blond* left his fans on a hiatus and created the perfect situation for a “come-back.” The postponement of his releases furthered the desire for his music, which not only was another component in the charting of his latest album *Blond*, but also demonstrated the large following Ocean was able to maintain through this period of silence. Through vague and cryptic marketing campaigns, Ocean created a sense of wonder within his fanbase. His mysterious messages and marketing tactics gave his fans something to chew on while he undertook his long delay in delivering music. The marketing strategies that Ocean pursued aren’t common, which is why they became so enticing to his fans, and helped his music to chart on the *Billboard Hot 100*.

Although Frank Ocean’s music is widely known, he isn’t considered as a mainstream artist. Ocean demonstrates how he has stayed true to his art and himself throughout his career by not giving into the pressure from labels, his fans, and social norms. Through the use of various musical elements and thematic material, Ocean creates compelling music that resonates with many people. These musical elements, combined with the unique marketing tactics Ocean used, assisted in the charting of his eight songs that have appeared on the *Billboard Hot 100*.

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