

Protest Music in the Age of Trump

By Ron Eyerman

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The presidential election campaign and the unexpected election of Donald Trump was cause for immediate reaction from the music world in the United States and beyond. This chapter will offer a sample of that reaction. Before that however, some general thoughts about music and politics are necessary to introduce the broader frame in which this occurred. Music has always contained a political dimension and has traditionally played a role in American politics. One can look far back in history, to Plato's *Republic* and Homer's *Odyssey* to find discussion and description of the subversive potential of music and of course those who make it. As portrayed in the Ancient discussion, music can lure and seduce causing individuals and groups to act in ways that they normally would not, as Homer illustrates through the Sirens' song and the attempts by Odysseys to avoid their call. This seductive aspect stems in part from an inherent, subconscious power that affords music an ability to impact human emotions in a way that other art forms may not. Music tends to invite and unite, an aspect that has found many political uses, in both traditional and protest politics. Traditionally, music has been used to gather and solidify groups during political campaigns, serving as a rallying cry and recruiting tool. This function of music works for political protests as well. It is hard to imagine a protest rally or social movement that does not use music for that purpose. Collective singing helps transform a loose collection of individuals into a more cohesive group, one that is better prepared to act collectively. Collective song also affords strength and courage during trying situations, such as confrontation with the authorities, or violent clashes with opponents. In addition to this emotional power of the musical, there is also a more cognitive and communicative aspect to consider, namely the informational context of an accompanying text. Music used in political protest often contains an explicit message, a text that explains exactly what is being protested and why. This is part of the uniqueness of music

as a form of protest; it can move people emotionally through its sound, while at the same time informing them about what is wrong and why.

Toward this end, protesting groups have made use of popular musical forms and have transformed well-known melodies to make a political point. In the United States, for example, protest movements have re-written popular songs to fit a new political message. The best known examples are from the labor movement of the early 20th century which infused well known Christian hymns with a political message and the Civil Rights movement later in the century which did the same. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s/60s also made use of tunes by popular musicians like Ray Charles and other celebrities to gather support and create collective solidarity. Anti-Trump music includes reworked pop classics by Carole King (“One Small Voice”) and American folk music from Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs, for example “The Times Are Changing Back” by Billy Bragg which reworks the Dylan classic for a new age and audience. The title actually comes from a song written and sung by the actor/activist Tim Robbins in his 1992 film *Bob Roberts*. The Englishman Bragg also offers an example of the international interest in Trump in the music world. Another is the British rock band Franz Ferdinand and their song “Demagogue”. As in earlier protest movements, there is no lack of celebrity musicians, international or otherwise, performing their music at Anti-Trump protest events or less well-known musicians mobilizing long-standing musical traditions in creating new protest music.

All these aspects and several others I will identify have been at work in the musical protest against Donald Trump. I will trace the eruption of musical protest in reaction to Donald Trump and make a distinction between celebrity protest and that more directly connected to mass protest and movements. Several genres have been turned into vehicles of musical protest, with rap being one of the most prevalent. Trump’s immigration policies have been catalyst in a genre that is dominated by minority groups, particularly African Americans and Latinos, like Chicano Batman to be discussed below. The white rapper Eminem was one of the first celebrities to produce an anti-Trump music video, but there are many others in this and other established musical genres.

The First Protests: The Women’s Cause and Immigration

Let’s begin with a time-line of Anti-Trump protest and some of the related music. Anti-Trump manifestations began with an increased sense of urgency after Trump won the primaries and the nomination of the Republican Party in 2016. An early focus of these protests concerned Trump’s immigration policies and these demonstrations attracted many Latino demonstrators. This would continue during Trump’s campaign and produced some notable musical performances including a bi-lingual music video by the hip-hop artist

Chicano Batman of the Woody Guthrie classic “This Land Is Your Land”. This bilingual version is a response to Trump’s campaign promise to build a wall along the Mexican border to keep out “rapists and murderers”. Latino-based protest against Trump has continued through his presidency, which has meant that Latin musicians, primarily of Mexican and Porto Rican descent, have added their musical talents and traditions to the Anti-Trump musical repertoire. An example is Taina Asili Y La Banda Rebelde’s “No Es Mi Presidente” (“Not My President”), which, as a video, connects many issues and groups under an anti-Trump banner as the Spanish language song is performed. Another example is the composer, actor and singer Lin-Manuel Miranda. Miranda was part of the protest directed at Vice President Mike Pence at a performance of popular musical *Hamilton*, which Pence and his family attended soon after the Inauguration. *Hamilton*, named after one of the Founding Fathers of the United States is a long-running Broadway play that offers a rap version of early American history. Miranda composed the music and wrote the lyrics. Together with Ben Platt he has also performed at other events protesting Trump’s immigration policies and at the March for Our Lives protest event and Trump-supported gun policy. He has also lent his voice and his money in support of Porto Rican victims of Hurricane Maria in 2017 and offers a good example of how celebrities can engage in political activism even when their art is not in itself necessarily political. Muslim musicians, such as the California-based female hip-hop group Hijabi Collective have also been an active presence in the United States and elsewhere. Others include the DesiHipHop compilation.

Women have also been very active in the protests against Donald Trump. The internationally coordinated Women’s Marches that occurred on January 25, 2017 were estimated to have mobilized between 3.3 to 4.6 million people in the United States alone, making this the largest protest event in the nation’s history. The unofficial anthem of these marches was the song “Tiny Hands” recorded by Fiona Apple and released for the occasion. Its text became a chant during the Women’s march that day: “We don’t want your tiny hands anywhere near our underpants”. This song is included at the top of Time magazine’s list of the ‘best’ Anti-Trump songs. The women’s marches employed a range of songs and genres as they mobilized all the existing musical protest traditions from around the globe. One of the most unusual was an A Capella version of the song Quiet performed by a flash mob at the Washington, D. C. demonstration. What was also unusual or at least very contemporary is the way the performance was originally rehearsed, over Skype and the internet rather than face to face. The use of digital media to organize contemporary protests events is now recognized as an important turning point in political protests and this example reveals how this also has impacted protest music and its performance. Celebrities were also very present at these marches and one musical icon, Madonna, made a fiery performance as a speaker rather than musician and the touring Bruce Springsteen and Beyonce sent messages of support.

Rap, Hip-Hop and African-Americans

African Americans have been central to the protests against Trump, with rap and hip-hop performers at the musical center. One example, which is also included on *Time's* list of best protest songs is "FDT" ("Fuck Donald Trump") a rap video by YG and Nipsey Hustle produced during the election campaign. Despite its vulgar title and repeated phrasing "Fuck Donald Trump" begins with a relatively long and sober textual introduction about why one should oppose the then candidate Trump. One of the flash points of the video is a short clip of Trump endorsing the building of boarder wall followed by images of Latinos protesting Trump's proposal, thus signaling a link between African Americans and Latino interests against Trump. It was not only African Americans or even Americans who used the phrase "Fuck" in their musical reference to Trump the politician. The Canadian punk band DOA sang "Fucked Up Donald" and other bands around the world made similar usage. Trump's proposed wall is also the focus of Rocky Mountain Mike's cover of the Bob Dylan classic "Mr. Tambourine Man", where he sings "Hey Mr. Tangerine Man, build a wall for me, I'm not bright and don't know that you're not going to, Hey Mr. Tangerine Man, keep Muslims away from me, With my jingoistic worldview, I'll come following you." Tangerine of course refers to the color of Trump's hair, which has been the source of much satirical comment. The song has also been performed by others including Wesley Stace.

Musical parodies, as well as covers of well-known songs altered to reference Trump abound. One such parody is the more than thirty minute long *Trumped Music* (2017) collection of eight well-known songs performed by Christopher John as Trump. A song and musical video that falls somewhere between nightmare and parody is by the American Folk singer/songwriter Loudon Wainwright III. The title "I Had A Dream" might reference Martin Luther King's famous phrase but the lyrics and accompanying images are very different from King's uplifting text. Within an easily recognizable folk melody the opening lines are "I had a dream, I don't know what it meant, But I dreamed we had elected Donald Trump as our president" and continues with comically nightmarish images of Trump's cabinet and policies. This song is listed as a favorite Anti-Trump song by the magazine *Rolling Stone*.

There are many such collections of Anti-Trump protest songs. One is entitled *Our First One Hundred Days*. It is a journalistic tradition in the United States to critically assess a presidency after the first 100 days in office. This tradition is the source of this collection of songs compiled to support the protest against the new president. There is one song for each day and the 100 cover the range of musical genres mentioned above. The first song, "Fly on Your wall" performed dirge-like by Angel Olsen is perhaps intended to express the feeling of shock and dread many felt after Trump's election. This sorrow-filled and emotionally expressive feeling is repeated in the wordless tones of Tilman Robinson and Luke Howard's "Requiem for 2016", number 7 in the collection. Many of the songs collected here are contemporary renditions of classical protest songs revamped for the Trump age, such as the

civil rights classic “I Wish I Knew how it Would Feel to Be Free”, performed by Courtney Marie Andrews and Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy. Trevor Sensor’s “These Dark Days” is a powerfully rendered protest song in the style of the early Bob Dylan and Jackson Browne. A few of the songs collected are written to speak to very contemporary issues, such as “Dreamers in America” by Adam Torres. “Dreamers” refers to the children of illegal immigrants born in the United States and now threatened with deportation under the immigration policies of Donald Trump. They are called dreamers because they are said by their supporters to dream of making a new life in the United States. Their fate is still being fought out in the American Congress. Contrasted to this are songs, such as “Love Hurts” by Mountain Man, which have no political content at all but are meant to be contributions by well-known groups to a collection whose profits will go to Anti Trump causes. This too is a popular tradition in the United States, where celebrities offer their performances free of charge to benefit a political cause. “Love Hurts” is a classic rock and roll song from 1961 made popular by the Everly Brothers and here performed by three young women. One of the most original performances is “Not Gonna Say Your Name” performed A Cappella by Entrance. This is another contemporary song written to address Trump directly. Speaking to Trump’s domination of the mass media, the lyrics include “I may see your name in the (*New York*) *Times* everyday, but I’m not gonna say your name... We’re not going away, we’re gonna stay right here and we’re not gonna say your name”. The subtle transition from “I” to “We” is a classic move in protest music, where individual and collective voice meld together in the collective singing at mass demonstrations. The final song is a rather straight forward rendition of the previously mentioned “This Land is Your Land” by Phosphorescent and the accompanying notes explain that the song was played at many Bernie Sanders rallies, with thousands singing along. This collective singing is contrasted with images from Trump rallies from that time with “people punching, spitting, yelling. So much hate and anger, so much ugliness”. Guthrie’s song was originally composed and performed at union rallies in the 1930’s and has continued to be performed at protest demonstrations ever since. It’s most poignant phase is “This land belongs to you and me”, giving voice to the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty, or “power to the people” as it was phrased in the 1960s. This was mentioned earlier with reference to the bilingual performance by Chicano Batman. A version of the song “Power to the People” rendered in the classic R&B style appears in this collection performed by Durand Jones and The Indicators.

In addition to compellations like this one, individual artists have recorded original songs and music-videos, as well as entire CDs, expressing their discontent and disgust at the new president. Following the topical song tradition in American folk music, Judy Klass released “Protest Songs in An Age of Trump” (2016). In fact this singer-songwriter who moved from New York City to Nashville to teach and write country songs, released two versions of this CD, unplugged and full band. All the songs are ‘topical’ in the sense of the 1960s American folk music, taking their textual content from contemporary newspaper headlines and reportage. There are songs called “Trump University” and “Nasty Woman” for example. The latter phrase was made infamous when Donald Trump referred to Elizabeth

Warren, one of his strongest critics in the American Congress, as a “Nasty Women”. It has now become a rallying cry for women against Trump. Some of the most well-known Anti-Trump musical expressions are those of celebrity artists like the aforementioned Eminem. Besides his being white, the rapper’s ‘difference’ was also stressed by New York Times staff-writer Bari Weiss in an article in that newspaper. What makes Eminem’s protest different according to Weiss is that it reaches a fan base that might actually be supportive of Trump in some measure and he speaks directly to this conservative fan base at the very end of his rap “The Storm”: “The rest of America stand up/We love our military, and we love our country” but we “hate Trump.” In making her comparison, Weiss points to two other anti-Trump rappers, Kendrick Lamar and Amine, citing their lyrics, who speak to a different audience. While early research revealed the main consumers of American hip-hop to be young white middle-class males, the audience has broadened a great deal. Returning to Eminem, his now famous “The Storm” was first performed on live television at the Black Entertainment Awards (BET) ceremony and then posted on YouTube and other distributive sources. BET reaches a predominantly African American audience and YouTube is of course global, with some regional restrictions. We can say a word or two more generally about the audience of listeners for anti-Trump music. As indicated, the main audience is largely an already convinced and committed group of Anti-Trump political activists and supporters of that cause. However, given that much of the music directly connected to political protest events, such as marches and demonstrations, is recorded and distributed through mass media the potential audience is much, much larger. There is really no exact way of measuring how many people have listened to or been influenced by Anti-Trump music. But given the visual and distributive power of YouTube and more personally-based social media, like Facebook, that audience is huge.

Rap is one of the most popular genres in which Anti-Trump music is performed. This should not be surprising as the genre emerged from African American roots and its lyrics generally have a critical edge. Given what many interpret as Trump’s general racism and outspoken negative views about African American life, rap has provided some of the most powerful Anti-Trump music, including FDT and several Eminem raps and videos. Other stars of the genre who have contributed Anti-Trump music are Lil Wayne and Kayne West. Both were out early, West’s “So Appalled” from 2010 contains the line “Balding Donald Trump taking dollars from y’all” and Wayne’s “Racks on Racks” from 2011 mentions getting money like Donald Trump. There is an ambiguity present in these early rap references to Trump, as they seem infatuated with his money and his bullying persona, especially with regard to women. Kayne West has since famous become a defender of Trump, a rarity in hip-hop world. With this exception, the ambiguity regarding Trump has largely slipped away as the reality of a Trump presidency became apparent and his views about minorities became more clearly stated in his policy proposals. By 2015, DJ Paul & Juicy J were saying “On that presidential skunk, that’s that Donald Trump” and Rick Ross in his Free Enterprises was rapping “Assassinate Trump like I’m Zimmerman, now accept these words as if they came from Eminem”, while an upside down American flag is visible in the background. There are

many significations here, Zimmerman is the white man who shot and killed an unarmed black teenager named Travon Martin in an infamous Florida murder, the American flag is flown upside down as a signal of distress, and Eminem is of course the white rapper that white America knows best. The call to political assassination has found its way into American political discourse in a more open fashion since the election of Donald Trump. I've already mentioned "FDT" as a powerful anti-Trump rap performance, it was followed by "FDT Pt. 2" in 2016 by the rapper G-Easy. It contains the line "A Trump rally sounds like Hitler in Berlin or KKK shit, now I'm goin' in". The same year also produced Eminem's Campaign Speech, "You say Trump don't kiss ass like a puppet, Cause he runs his campaign with his own cash for the funding, and that's what you wanted, a fucking loose cannon who's blunt with hand on the button, who doesn't have to answer to no one... great idea! "The soft rap of the Caribbean-American singer Nicki Minaj references Trump's immigration policies in her "Black Barbies" (2016), "Island girl, Donald Trump want to send me home".

Country Music and its Audiences

If rap and hip-hop are among the most popular Anti Trump musical genres, country music is among the least common. This too should not be surprising, given its history and link to conservative values and traditions, country music is often called "America's Music". There are Anti Trump protest songs to be found in the country genre however, the Dixie Chicks being the most obvious. But there is also the previously mentioned Judy Klass who performs what she calls Brooklyn country music and TomSongs, also a self-described country singer from New Jersey. As "America's Music" the country genre has moved far beyond the rural audience of the 1920s and though the cowboy hat and country twang can still be found the audience for country has widened considerably, wide enough a Jewish woman from Brooklyn in any case. TomSongs (Tom Chelston) besides being from New Jersey is also a military veteran turned antiwar activist whose anti Trump song Impeach has its roots in his earlier songs aimed at impeaching then President George Bush for his role in the Iraq War. The anti-Trump version contains the refrain "Impeach, seven little letters gonna set us straight, how much Trump we gonna take?" which could easily be turned into a march chant, with the name of person as equally replaceable. The Texas-based Dixie Chicks became well-known for their antiwar stance and have currently created another controversy amongst country music fans for unraveling a giant caricature of Trump on a recent world tour. Most stars and celebrities of the country music genre however have been silent on Trump, either because they support him or because of deference to their fans who probably do. The most notable exception is the country star Willie Nelson, who has recently added his voice to support Anti-Trump candidates.

Conclusion

The musical response protesting the Trump presidency continues, and it continues to have an impact. It has contributed in the traditional ways at mass rallies and demonstrations, inviting and uniting participants through its emotional and cognitive attributes. Through this, various established musical genres and traditions have been mobilized in a new cause. This will continue to be the case as the protests persist and expand as a new election cycle approaches. What is rather unique is the continuing level of protest, as President Trump appears to be unable to make a public appearance anywhere in the world without evoking some form of protest in response. Music and musicians will have a role in many of these. What is striking however is the increasingly important role played by late night cable television talk shows and their hosts, such as Steven Colbert, Trevor Noah, Conan O'Brien and Jimmy Kimmel. All of whom are expressively anti-Trump and all of whom offer a vehicle for protest music and musicians to reach an even wider audience than ever. Their programs reach millions and the potential to invite potential supporters is much greater than traditionally afforded music and musicians at rallies and campaigns. This adds a new dimension to the political potential and uses of music in anti-Trump protest. Rather than replacing the traditional functions of music to invite and unite, cable television has expanded the possibility as it has greatly expanded the audience. This has been aided by social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, all of which permit visual and oral data transmission. Musical performance at a protest rally is thus instantly available for a world-wide audience. The times are indeed changing.