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Pop, Politics and Presidents: Teaching Campaign Rhetoric through Popular Music

Summary and Rationale for Assignment

While it remains an under-researched facet of popular music, the interaction between popular music and campaign politics remains a compelling object of critical inquiry, particularly with recent examples of overtly political musicians and their use of touring to promote a particular political party, ideology, or candidate. Additionally, this year's presidential campaign provides pedagogical moments to look at the role of popular music, particularly in campaigns and as endorsements/endorsers. In approaching this object of study, I ask students to consider two questions. The first: how can/do political musicians use their music to achieve political ends (and vice versa)? This question considers both past musical forays into politics as well as the ways in which audiences can use popular music for their own political ends. Secondly, while several genres of music have been employed for political means in the history of popular music, what is it about rock and roll that distinguishes rock musicians' involvement in presidential campaigns from other genres of popular music? I outline several activities for students to undertake, incorporating principles of critical pedagogy, to broaden their understanding of the role of popular music during the campaign season.

Scenario and Application:

I divide the class into two groups, one in which students are asked to imagine their favorite musical act advocating a political candidate/political orientation the participants *support and agree*, and the second group who are asked to imagine their favorite musical act advocating a political candidate/orientation the students *do not support or agree with*. Students are asked to assume the role of campaign manager and address the possibility of this musical act endorsing their candidate. Without revealing their group's position, each group must construct a proposal indicating their acceptance or rejection of a particular musical act endorsing their candidate at campaign events, building upon the readings for this week and their own experience with political music.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the themes rock/pop musicians bring to mind that you would want to invoke in convention scenarios?
2. Where are these themes coming from? Lyrics? Music Video? Melody?
3. Are those themes found throughout the musical genre or cut across genres?
4. If you could only play the melody of a song, with no lyrics, would you still play it in a convention atmosphere? Why? Advantages/Disadvantages?

Reflections:

Interestingly, I noticed that there seemed to be a bit of election fatigue amongst the students, even though the objective of this activity was to look at a specific facet of presidential campaigns. In hindsight, it would be useful to attempt this assignment a) during a non-election year or b) earlier in the presidential campaign to see if this fatigue persists. Further, some students expressed (albeit covertly) their personal political orientation when discussing recent examples of campaign music/musical endorsement. What surprised me was that instead of musicians and campaigns falling on both sides of the political spectrum, students who identified themselves as right-of-center expressed a level of cynicism and contempt for political musicians without equivalent parallels among students who identified as left-of-center.

Readings:

Grossberg, Lawrence. "The Framing of Rock: Rock and the New Conservatism." *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*. Ed. Tony Bennett, Simon Frith, Lawrence Grossberg, John Shepherd, and Graeme Turner. New York: Routledge, 1993. 193–209.

Garofalo, Reebee. "Who is the World? Reflections on Music and Politics Twenty Years After Live Aid," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 17 (2005): 324-344.

Pedelty, Mark and Linda Keefe. "Political Pop, Political Fans? A Content Analysis of Music Fan Blogs" *Music & Politics* 4 (1): (Winter 2010).

Weinstein, Deena. "Rock Protest Songs: So Many and So Few." *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*. Ed. Ian Peddie. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. 3–16.

Notes on Contributor

Kristine Weglarz is an Assistant Professor of Telecommunications and Film at the University of West Florida. Her dissertation and research focused on the political economy of live rock performance, constructions of authenticity, protest rock, mediaphemes, and "liveness" as cultural constructions. She teaches courses on multi-camera electronic video production, popular music and media studies, introduction to mass media, and the political economy of media. She received her PhD and MA in Communication Studies from the University of Minnesota and her BA in Political Science from the University of Toronto. Her edited collection with co-editor Mark Pedelty of the University of Minnesota, entitled *Political Rock*, will be out in early 2013 from Ashgate Press.