

The article “The Power of Popular Music during the 2020 Presidential Campaign” appeared on Oct. 31 in the latest issue of *Atlantisch Perspectief*: <https://www.atlcom.nl/atlantisch-perspectief/2020-nr-5/>. The publication of following excerpt by the Radboud University was approved by *Atlantisch Perspectief*.

One of the songs that Trump repeatedly used during the 2016 Republican primaries and the presidential election was a staple in the Rolling Stones’ catalogue of more than 400 compositions: “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” from the 1969 album *Let it Bleed*. Turning to one of the most successful acts in rock music history, the Trump team enrolled the Stones in the effort to “make America great again” recognizing that the band in a sense became “Americanized” when they were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at the end of the Reagan presidency. The audience was exposed to the song after the end of Trump’s speech at the June 20, 2020 rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma as a kind of sonic exclamation mark to this speech. The song played a crucial role in Trump’s first election campaign and is supposed to do similar cultural work in 2020.

You Can’t Always Get What You Want, but ...

As with other playlists for presidential campaign rallies, the songs are selected for their “bite value.” In addition, they need to have the potential to emotionally touch a large group of people in a positive fashion. Third, they should transmit a subliminal message about the target voters, which will shape the future of the new presidency. How do these categories relate to “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”?

The song has been a staple in the Stones’ live set list for fifty years and was named the 100th greatest song of all time by *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2004. The song’s multi-generational appeal allows it to subliminally engage audiences before the appearance of the presidential candidate. In addition, the song features a catchy sing-along chorus. It thus can unfold its potential for audiences to actively participate in a fantasy of unity on a sonic level. While the song has been described by Jagger as referring to the drug-infused scene in Chelsea in the late 1960s, the inclusion of “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” is designed to activate a different response during the political campaign rally.

While the lyrics of the first part of the chorus claim that “you can't always get what you want,” the final conclusion after invoking the parental warning three times, is more self-assertive: “But if you try sometimes well you might find/ You get what you need.” Beyond the participatory effect of the composition, the affirmative rhetoric implies for the audience in the campaign rally that Trump will ultimately “get what he needs” to realize his campaign slogan to “make America great again” – including “building a wall and making the Mexicans pay for it,” creating jobs in an unprecedented fashion, and reversing political decrees of the Obama administration.

Depending on the socio-political framework, music may embody political values and experiences. It may organize our response to society as political thought and action, both serving as a vehicle of political expression and being that expression. Hence, music’s relation to politics can to a certain degree be both complicit and function as a free-floating signifier. If musical style is

often more important than content, and therefore the style is the content, then music at the Trump rallies should be analyzed beyond the lyrical level. What about the sonic dimension? “You can’t Always get what you want” starts with a children’s choir suggesting a return to a simpler time of childhood. Rather than presenting the song as an offspring of the African American blues and gospel tradition, the Rolling Stones added a sense of irony: The London Bach Choir was chosen over a more obvious African American Baptist choir. Rather than emphasizing African American elements of the musical DNA of the Stones, the choir offers a racial counterpoint, which subliminally served Trump’s target group of white Republican voters. In the words of Stones guitarist Keith Richards, the Stones decided to include a “straight chorus. In other words, let’s try to reach the people up there as well. It was a dare, kind of... And then, what if we got one of the best choirs in England, all these white, lovely singers, and do it that way? [...] It was a beautiful juxtaposition.”¹ This seven-and-a-half-minute finale to *Let It Bleed* has been described as a sonic stage offering a binary juxtaposition of the present and the past, England vs. America, African American versus “white” music productions, the “black” versus the “white” church. Sonically, Trump’s campaign builds on a white-washed version of African/American blues and rock ‘n’ roll.

Undermining Political Agendas via Music and Social Media

In the time of social media and ever-present cameras of citizens in public/work spaces, music can also be used as a means to counterbalance the hegemonic narrative of, for example, a promotional visit to showcase the president’s dedication to his fellow-citizens’ health and safety. When Trump visited a N95 mask manufacturing plant in Phoenix, Arizona on May 6, 2020 and all cameras were on Trump, a worker decided to activate the plant’s loudspeaker system to play a well-known rock song which offered a critical sonic frame for the visual narrative of the clip. In line with his efforts to downplay the effects of the coronavirus, Trump did not wear a mask in the plant while the plant workers covered their noses and mouths. The unexpected soundtrack featured the following lines from the Guns N’ Roses cover of the title song of the James Bond film *Live and Let Die* (1973) composed by Paul McCartney: “If this ever-changin’ world/ In which we live in/ Makes you give in and cry/ Say live and let die ...” While at the time of the plant visit, Trump’s dismissal of the potential threat of the pandemic to his fellow citizens had been the cause of 70,000 deaths in the US (almost a quarter of the global amount at the time), the playing of the song over what was supposed to be a promotional clip to showcase the strength of the president turned the situation around, exposing Trump as a self-acclaimed leader who is willing to sacrifice lives for his own political survival. While this clip went viral with four million views within a short time, Trump, in turn, tweeted an alternative version of the video in which he added a patriotic, cinematic soundtrack of classical music with fanfares to celebrate his allegedly remarkable work to “make America great again.” In the original clip, music functioned as a means of negation, protest and dissent. The sheer unlimited access of

¹ Quoted in Bill Janovitz, “Guitar Slingers and Hired Guns: Musicians of the Stones.” *The Cambridge Companion to the Rolling Stones*. Victor Coelho and John Rudolph Covach (eds.) Cambridge, UK and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019. (18-39), 35.

citizens to audio-visual content on streaming devices at any given time leads not only to furthering the processes of democratization in the sphere of culture production and distribution but also increases the power of music to frame any given event as a political performance.

Democratic Responses during Times of Corona

In contrast to Donald Trump, his Democratic competitor Joe Biden has refrained from large-scale rallies due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the potential dangers for the attendees. Hence, the traditional format of campaign videos is all the more important as a tool to attract voters. One of the strategies in using music as a sonic frame for political messages deploys American singer, songwriter, actor, and record producer Justin Timberlake's 2002 Grammy-award hit "Cry Me a River" to breathe new life into Biden's campaign. The video, posted on the former vice-president's social accounts, plays the song over video footage of President Trump from his Fox News town hall at the D.C. Lincoln Memorial. Between his self-pitying comments about being treated in a particularly bad fashion – a tactic that refers to a by now well-known catalogue of institutions and people from the so-called "fake media" to the IRS – the song is heard playing. The caption on the video reads, "Over 1 million cases of COVID-19. Almost 70,000 dead. What is upsetting President Trump? Tough questions from the press. Cry me a river, Mr. President." The aesthetic strategy of the clip is reminiscent of the famous American director Frank Capra who used similar tactics in World War II propaganda films to rally support for the American war effort. What then was called the "celluloid war" has become the "war of images" in the age of instant global digital media distribution. Among other sources, Capra used film material from the German ministry of propaganda to turn the National Socialist propaganda around by adding a different soundtrack. The alleged justification of the Nazi claim to rule the world now became a rallying cry for American soldiers to fight for freedom and democracy, which were under threat.

Adding the sounds and lyrics of Timberlake's hit-song to the footage of Trump inverts Trump's original message in order to make a counterargument. The repeated complaints about being treated worse than Abraham Lincoln are ridiculed by the famous song whose central hook line – "cry me a river" – is recontextualized to unfold its subversive sonic power in the media arena of presidential campaign ads. Towards the end of the clip, the camera zooms from a low angle to reveal in the proud, stern, far-seeing face of Lincoln, seated in his Memorial. While Trump is sonically framed like a petulant boy crying, Biden's name is projected in capital letters over the celebrated unifier: BIDEN PRESIDENT.

Conclusion:

Popular music can be molded to do ideological work via its immediate affective potential to produce state fantasies – whether they are post-racial or white supremacist. During the months of Covid-19, music at public rallies has played a less significant role than in preceding campaigns. The worker at the mask factory who "hijacked" the facility's sound system during Trump's visit found a means to use the digital access to popular songs in order to suggest an alternative

narrative to the official agenda of a leader who seems to care little about his citizens' health. The sonic framework suggested a hidden agenda behind Trump's propaganda to save the American economy no matter the costs of human lives and thereby assure his re-election: to live and let die.