

Singing The Resistance: January 2017's Anti-Trump Music Videos

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Abstract

SO! Amplifies. . .a highly-curated, rolling mini-post series by which we editors hip you to cultural makers and organizations doing work we really really dig. You're welcome! — The US presidential campaigns in 2016 were escorted by a number of songs regarding the person who was recently inaugurated as president.

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SO! Amplifies. . .a highly-curated, rolling mini-post series by which we editors hip you to cultural makers and organizations doing work we really really dig. You're welcome!

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The US presidential campaigns in 2016 were escorted by a number of songs regarding the person who was recently inaugurated as president. These songs served mostly as a kind of dystopic, fear-indulging, angsty “comedy music”—to reference Frank Zappa’s 1971 “Dental Hygiene Dilemma”—with a perverted thrill, or functioned in the retro manner of balladesque storytelling in songform. Performance art band Pussy Riot’s rather blunt “Make America Great Again” falls in the former category, while many examples from the brave and radiating [30 Days, 30 Songs](#) project fall in the latter, summoning indie-rock icons as Death Cab For Cutie, R.E.M., Bob Mould, EL VY, Jimmy Eat World and Franz Ferdinand.

Lesser known tracks like “Trump,” produced by German DJ and producer WestBam, used a collage with sampled footage organized on a 4/4-beat to uncover Trump’s lies and remodel them into articulations of the vocal intentions of this subject: “We need drugs. We need crime.” However, as horrific and uncanny as this video seems, this subject as head of government then figured only in an unthinkable, impossible world.

<https://youtu.be/VqHBYtU9NCo>

In June 2016, Los Angeles rappers YG and Nipsey Hussle apparently sensed the horrible threat so creepily approaching the Oval Office, releasing “Fuck Donald Trump,” which produced a long string of versions, extensions, and new parts in the months afterward: “Don’t let Donald Trump win, that nigga cancer / He too rich, he ain’t got the answers / He can’t make decisions for this country, he gon’ crash us / No, we can’t be a slave for him.” In this song, before the votes were cast, the rappers and the Angelenos in the video address the urgency of a pending openly white supremacist government and the need to publicly resist it. For very good reasons, these musicians did not put the subject now in power into the box of a neglectable funny weirdo candidate. They recognized the threat as being as serious and imminent as it really was. “Fuck Donald Trump / Fuck Donald Trump / Yeah, nigga, fuck Donald Trump/ Yeah, yeah, fuck Donald Trump.”



<https://youtu.be/WkZ5e94QnWk>

In the week before the inauguration, artists released a string of music videos that struck very different tones from 2016. A comedy? No more. A gruesome, colorful story to tell? Too vague, too meek. “Hallelujah Money,” sings Benjamin Clementine in the song by the ever-so dystopic anime-band Gorillaz. The new song—the band’s first release in almost 7 years—is a freaked out lament, engendering bewilderment and prayer, taking on a sonic persona that cries out to The One & Only God Of Mammon – the lyrical subject is here the governing subject: “And I thought the best way to perfect our tree / Is by building walls / Walls like unicorns / In full glory / And galore.” In the video, the KKK marches along, the pigs in George Orwell’s animal farm blare, a lone and deathstruck cowboy meditates on the horizon behind Clementine, swinging in distorted rhythms and harmonies. In the end, Clementine burns his hair in a gigantic megaton-explosion while praying for money, praying for the last credible authority: “Hallelujah money (Past the chemtrails) / Hallelujah money (Hallelujah money).”



https://youtu.be/CDUrpVU1_4

An angered, revolutionary will also stokes the song “Smoke ‘em Out,” released on January 17th, 2017 by a feminist trio consisting of sisters Sierra Casady & Bianca Casady (known as CocoRosie) and transgender singer Anohni (also known as the lead singer for Antony and the Johnsons). The song matches solid beats with serene pizzicatos, creating a surprisingly catchy melody of intriguing courage and uplifting collective resistance: “Burning down the house / The dead girl shouts / Smoke em out!”



<https://youtu.be/XMb4TGFEVYw>

Rhythmically demanding and just as sonically unforgiving comes “I Give You Power” by the Arcade Fire featuring Mavis Staples, an amalgamation of anger and the will to move ahead, to transcend current limitations of micro politics into a desired and imagined near future. The song opens with a flat electronic beat that builds up to a fat bulldozing bass sequence with added effects over which Mavis Staples’s multiplied voices lament and demand and call out in grief and angry bewilderment. The song merges disco, soul and funk with traditions of protest chanting, topped off with church organ chords. The music video reveals nothing beyond an older analog mixing desk operated now and then with calm sensitivity and deep knowledge of how this production tosses and turns: bright and glaring lights flicker over the image of the desk.



<https://youtu.be/f6jma9VQELs>

The Brooklyn-based Sateen, in contrast, perform “Love Makes The World” in a lavish scenery replete with luxurious flashing red gowns of large ruffles. They sing in the woods and in a brick underpass, while joined and complemented by a series of queer singers, dancers & personae presenting themselves, their love and their resistance in public and in private situations. Angelic voices sing over the cycling and motorized club beats, providing electronic sounds of hope whose joyful alien flavors are often in tension with the song’s lyrics: “How can we progress: / When we’re ruled by racists?”



<https://youtu.be/qlZW0aHjO1M>

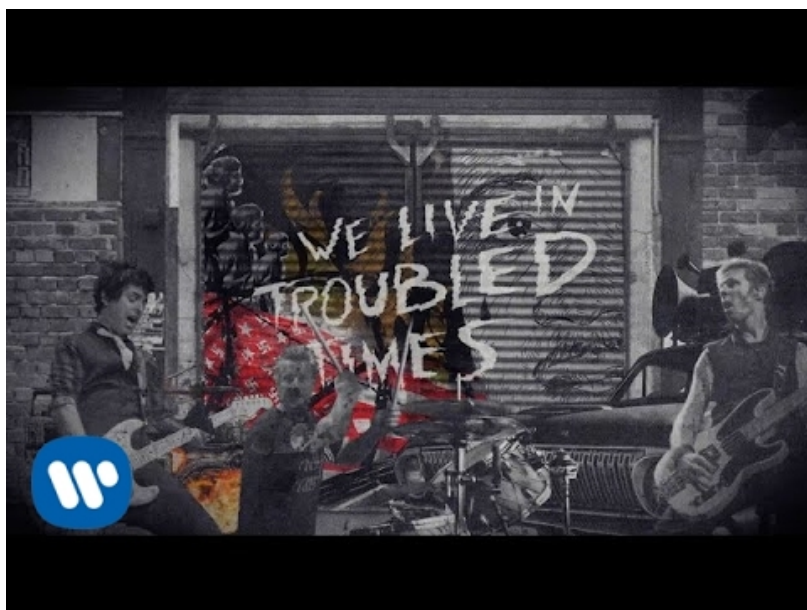
The first music video, however, that drew my attention to this prolific phenomenon of songs against the US’s new governing subject was a cover of Morrissey’s “Interesting Drug” (1989), released by the notorious OK Go:



<https://youtu.be/WXEBjCjDm0>

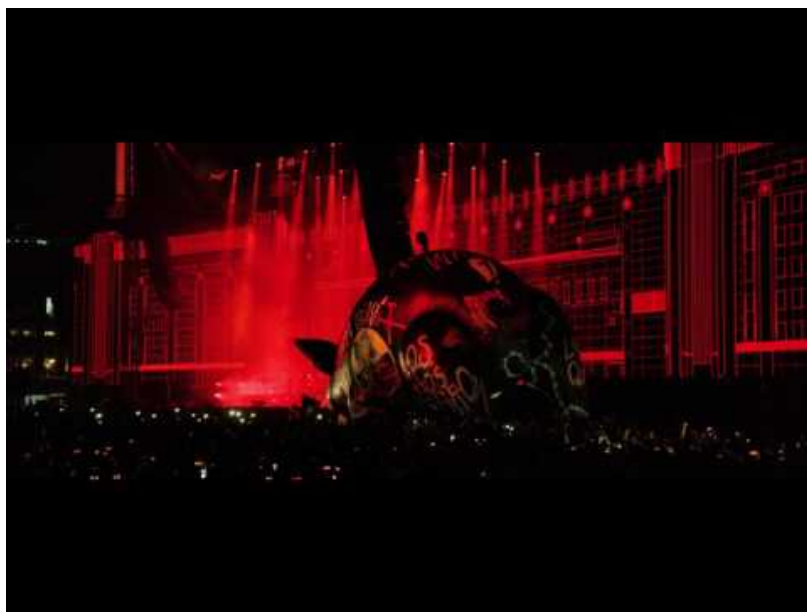
This time OK Go does not flatter us with their usual acrobatic and meticulously choreographed video performance, but rather present plain white-on-black-text between brief seconds of footage and screenshots of “the bad people on the rise” now in charge of the US, images ready to become the memes and gifs of a resistance movement. The music video ends with an explicit call to action–“It’s a difficult time but fear and anger aren’t the answer. Work to make a better world” followed by a list of five civil rights organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union, the Immigrant Defense Project and Planned Parenthood, headed by an unmistakable imperative: “Volunteer and donate.”

Discovering this song and video, I soon stumbled across yet another song that struck me first of all as a very clever and all too obvious marketing move, Green Day’s “Troubled Times,” which of course resonates with the band’s hit record “American Idiot” about the George W. Bush presidency.



<https://youtu.be/9cVJr3eQfXc>

“What good is love and peace on earth / When it’s exclusive.” In the visual style of traditional black and white newspaper collages—with splashes of red that summon *Schindler’s List*—the band animates the contemporary pandemonium of hatred, racism, sexism and plutocratic sadism to stage yet another traditional Green Day pop punk song, though one with a rather less disruptive, and much more forlorn note. I have to note a certain awkwardness here, as the business model of lining up with this protest movement seems rather obvious, and many sections of these lyrics and the video’s imagery seems more cliché than genuine. Are these times really only structurally and anonymously “troubled? Are there no actual wrongdoers, criminals and hatemongers to be named, accused, and condemned? Roger Waters truly unexpected—and much more direct—recent live performance of “Pigs” in Mexico City in October 2016 comes to mind, with its massive projection of KKK & TRUMP-imagery as icons of hate – reinvigorating the political urgency present in a song from 1977.



<https://youtu.be/QWLBtMz5OuY>

Still, the song by Green Day might get airplay on nationwide rock radio unlike many of other songs of resistance, and by this it could actually succeed in its overstated mission.

The most aggressive and decidedly agitprop-productions come from Moby and Fiona Apple. Collaborating with Michael Wahlen, Apple recorded a chant for the massive Women’s March on Washington (and the many simultaneous marches occurring across the US and the world) the day after the inauguration:

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With lines like “We don’t want your tiny pants / Anywhere near our underpants” Wahlen and Apple revive the protest chant traditions of the 1960s with its mean, challenging, and unforgiving humor.

Late last year Apple already released a [joyful yet sadistic little piece in the style of a sentimental Christmas carol](#) that keeps “Trump’s nuts roasting on an open fire (...) Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas: Donald Trump, fuck you.”

In contrast, Moby merges his 1990s rave skittishness with an unrepentant love for precisely-targeted guitar punk riffs in “Erupt & Matter.” Original footage of demonstrations, resistance gatherings, and a selection of the absurd and terrifying authoritarian and nationalist figures of our time – first Erdoğan, Farage, Assad, then Duterte, Trump, Wilders, Le Pen, Petry, Hofer and many more – alternate with classic performance shots of Moby and his band *The Void Pacific Choir*, generating a sentiment of accelerating urgency: “WE DON’T TRUST YOU ANYMORE. WE DON’T TRUST YOU ANYMORE.”



<https://youtu.be/9wOZNGias5I>

But the anger against sclerotic oligarchies and a condescending establishment is ironically mimicked by exactly the most unsettling and authoritarian protagonists of various nationalist parties worldwide. Even as Moby’s aggressive protest chant becomes an infectious and intriguing earworm, does he render such a revolutionary impetus dubious? Pondering this reminded me of the Atari Teenage Riot line from 1995: “Riot sounds produce riots.” (Atari Teenage Riot 1995)

In the first few weeks of January alone, several consortiums have launched protest song campaigns to ensure that songs like these will just keep coming. On inauguration day, the platform “[Our First 100 Days](#)” was launched. Here, one new protest song will be released on every day for the first one hundred days of the current president’s administration, with all profits raised from the sales of songs by groups such as PWRBTTM going, as their website states, “directly to organizations working on the front lines of climate, women’s rights, immigration and fairness.”

Paste Magazine expanded its “30 Days, 30 Songs” campaign for the long haul, offering up to [1000 Songs in 1000 Days](#)— one song a day for every weekday of [Donald Trump](#)’s term.

However, as I write these last lines, the global public is remixing the resistance in its own lightning-fast ways. The recent public sucker-punch of white supremacist neo-Nazi Richard Spencer has already become a legendary object of meme culture. Folks have synched this clip to multiple—and diverse—soundtracks that invite repeated viewings, from Celine Dion’s “[My Heart Will Go On](#),” Bruce Springsteen’s “[Born In The USA](#),” Queen’s “[We Will Rock You](#),” Gwen Stefani’s

[“Hollaback Girl,” Pharrell Williams’s “Happy,”](#) The Notorious B.I.G.’s “Hypnotize” to Frank Zappa’s “Black Page #2”. . .and the list continues.

Singing the resistance in the 21st century poses a truly complex task. Artists must sonically navigate a wide array of musical aesthetics—some geared toward more immediate public appeal, while others evoke more erratic and dissonant affects—and keep an eye toward combining sound with impactful media events and artifacts, while never forgetting to consider the critical question “How Does it Feel?”

<https://youtu.be/BCZ19LLMRsU>

This blogpost has its own playlist: click [here](#)

Holger Schulze is full professor in musicology at the University of Copenhagen and principal investigator at the Sound Studies Lab. His research focuses on the cultural history of the senses, sound in popular culture and the anthropology of media. Recent book publications are: *American Progress* (2015), *Sound as Popular Culture* (2016, ed.) and *Krieg Singen: Singing The War* (2017, ed.).



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