

# Music and the Presidency: How Campaign Songs Sold the Image of Presidential Candidates

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MUSIC AND THE PRESIDENCY: HOW CAMPAIGN SONGS SOLD THE IMAGE OF  
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Music Performance  
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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I will discuss the importance of campaign songs and how they were used throughout three distinctly different U.S. presidential elections: the 1960 campaign of Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy against Vice President Richard Milhouse Nixon, the 1984 reelection campaign of President Ronald Wilson Reagan against Vice President Walter Frederick Mondale, and the 2008 campaign of Senator Barack Hussein Obama against Senator John Sidney McCain. In doing so, there will be an analysis of how music was used to sell the image of these presidential candidates through both its juxtaposition with other forms of mass media (television advertisements, radio, internet streaming platforms) and the content found in a song's lyrics. There will be an apparent shift in focus from candidates using original campaign songs written for the purpose of elections, toward a more prominent reliance on popular music of current and past eras. From original and politically direct works such as "I Like Ike" and "Click with Dick," to the campaign use of popular hits like Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." and Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop," I will demonstrate how presidential candidates and their teams found it beneficial to use notable music works in order to connect with a younger generation of voters. In conclusion, the reader will have gained enough understanding to realize how campaign music continues to play a role in the current political climate, demonstrating how far candidates have taken the use of music over the past sixty years.

## **Dedication**

To Henry Wellbank, may his intellect and humility live on well beyond my years.

## Acknowledgements

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## INTRODUCTION

By the end of the 2016 presidential campaign, Republican Candidate Donald Trump had amassed a substantial following since announcing his candidacy at the Trump Tower Hotel in New York City on June 16, 2015.<sup>1</sup> As someone who was already familiar to the American people as both a successful businessman and television personality, Trump had established himself as a bona-fide American celebrity. In a way, it seemed as if he had used his status as an icon of mass media to prepare for and establish the foundation for his presidential campaign in the years before his 2015 announcement. For someone who had, most likely, the least government or military experience of any prior presidential candidate, it is important to note that Trump appeared to have more widespread exposure to the large majority of the American electorate than any previous candidate. Republican rival Chris Christie recognized this in stating how the “celebrity factor” of Donald Trump should not be “discounted” when regarding the 2016 election.<sup>2</sup>

As Donald Trump gained traction throughout the election, it became standard for his campaign to use popular songs by classic rock artists as a way to ramp up the crowd before and after his rallies. It was particularly common for the song “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” by the Rolling Stones to serve a central role at these events, often as the official closing

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Trump Announces Presidential Campaign, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bx6V-e2DQW0>

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Gallagher, *The American Presidency and Entertainment Media: How Technology Affects Political Communication* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 1.



number when Trump finished addressing the crowd.<sup>3</sup> While it could be seen as a great opportunity for aging rock artists to have their works be associated with the campaigns of popular candidates, bringing their music to an even larger audience, the Rolling Stones were not keen on having their songs associated with Trump and his campaign. The candidate had amassed a substantial amount of media attention by way of his celebrity status, but this did not guarantee support from famous musicians regarding his presidential bid. This was not, however, the first time the Rolling Stones had asked political candidates to stop using their songs during campaign events. CDU candidate Angela Merkel of Germany used the song “Angie” during her run for office in 2005, with the band preventing her from playing the song at future events.<sup>4</sup> While the use of popular music in a presidential election has stirred controversy for almost fifty years, the use of campaign songs began to truly take form almost two hundred years ago.

Evidence suggests that campaign singing existed prior to the formation of the Republic. 1768 saw a pre-Revolutionary “song” written by politician John Dickinson, entitled “Liberty Song.” Serving as somewhat of an “omen” to the political works that would follow, it became one of the first songs to incorporate the popular concept of “Americanism.”<sup>5</sup> Its lyrics project this idea proudly, emphasizing a sense of patriotism that would be found in many future campaign works:

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Trump – You Can’t Always Get What You Want, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cH8-YIQespY>

<sup>4</sup> Lily Rothman, “The Rolling Stones vs. Donald Trump: How These Conflicts Got So Common,” *Time Magazine* (May 4, 2016), accessed March 20, 2019, <http://time.com/4318206/rolling-stones-donald-trump-campaign-song-history/>

<sup>5</sup> Irwin Silber, *Songs America Voted By: With the Words and Music that Won and Lost Elections and Influenced the Democratic Process* (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1971), 17.

“Come join hand in hand, brave Americans all,  
And rouse your bold hearts at fair Liberty’s call;  
No tyrannous acts shall suppress your just claim,  
Or stain with dishonor America’s name.”<sup>6</sup>

After seeing this song in Colonial newspapers, outraged Loyalists responded with their own songs that attacked the lyrics of Dickinson’s. This foreshadowed future purpose of many campaign songs, which was to act as attacks directed at one’s opponent:

“Come shake your dull noddles, ye pumpkins, and bawl,  
And own that you’re mad at fair Liberty’s call;  
No scandalous conduct can add to your shame,  
Condemn’d to dishonor, inherit the fame.”<sup>7</sup>

With the idea of attacks being established within the confines of campaign song, music began to play a more significant role in American politics.

During the 1840 Presidential Election, campaign music began to be viewed as less of a satire and more of a strategy to win votes for popular candidates. An editorial written in the *Baltimore Republican*, suggesting that presidential nominee William Henry Harrison will “sit the remainder of his days in a log cabin” after being “given a barrel of hard cider,” inspired Whigs to

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<sup>6</sup> Silber, *Songs America Voted By*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Silber, *Songs America Voted By*, 17.

take this rhetoric and transform it into phrases that served as “moral and natural virtue” to heighten Harrison’s presidential campaign.<sup>8</sup> Through this strategy, campaign music began to focus specifically on the image of candidates, a way of mythologizing an individual running for office in order to amass votes from the American people. The song “The Farmer of Tippecanoe” was just one of these types of songs, bolstering Harrison’s status to unforeseen heights:

“With an honest Old Farmer, a merry old song,  
And a mug of “hard cider,” we’ll sit the night long.  
Freedom despises all those who deride her,  
She trusts in the Whigs, and their mugs of hard cider.”<sup>9</sup>

To understand why a campaign would utilize popular songs without an artist’s permission during an election, it is important to indicate why presidential campaign songs play such an integral role in selling the image of a candidate. While the purpose of a campaign song should be to express the goals and agendas of the individual running for office, the use of music within a political context is capable of establishing an emotional connection with American voters, sometimes with little to no content pertaining to the election or the candidate’s past political experiences. As noted by political activist Irwin Silber, campaign music, at times, “transfixes” the listener with an “emotional reality” that extends “beyond the recitation of facts or analysis of

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<sup>8</sup> Silber, *Songs America Voted By*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Silber, *Songs America Voted By*, 35.

social forces.”<sup>10</sup> In essence, the songs used by candidates and their teams rely solely on musical content itself in order to establish a strong connection with their intended audience. Silber also notes how the “worth” of campaign music to the listeners derives from their intention to “reflect an age as to influence the course of events.”<sup>11</sup> This means that candidates will attempt to use campaign music that reflects the current cultural landscape, with the intention of connecting with voters by appearing more attuned to important issues and topics.

When looking back on the candidates prior to Donald Trump, it becomes readily apparent that music was used primarily as a tool that not only sold the image of the candidate, but also used the musical content such as rhythm and vocal performance to engage a mass audience and sell the message found in a song’s lyrics. It was with the onset of radio and television in the early-mid twentieth century that this idea came into full form, with many campaign songs being presented through the use of television advertisements that promoted the campaign of a presidential candidate. With this came the growing utilization of previously, or current, popular songs that were either lyrically reworked or kept in their original form to serve the purpose of selling the presidency. Frank Biocca makes note of this in *Television and Political Advertising Volume 2: Signs, Codes, and Images*, pointing out how audiences will understand and respond to advertisements if they are “familiar” with the “music, narrative, and the styles” presented on the screen. He goes on to say that “familiar music” adds greatly to the “effectiveness” of a candidate’s television spots.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Silber, *Songs America Voted By*, 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> Silber, *Songs America Voted By*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Biocca, *Television and Political Advertising Volume 2: Signs, Codes, and Images* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1991), 103.

This thesis will attempt to understand how and why presidential candidates have relied so heavily on music to promote their campaigns. In doing so, there will be a thorough investigation into both the use of original campaign music, and that which is borrowed from a previous source. While popular music was being used during presidential elections among the likes of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John Fitzgerald Kennedy, it was not until the 1980s that original campaign music began to be overtaken by works not pertaining to political campaigns. Whether it was “Born in the U.S.A.” during Ronald Regan’s 1984 reelection campaign, or Bill Clinton’s use of “Don’t Stop” by Fleetwood Mac as a campaign song in 1992, popular music greatly became the standard for many presidential elections of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To paint a comprehensive portrait of this timeline, three elections will be discussed in order to showcase not only how music was used to sell a candidate’s image, but to relate these past musical choices to the recent 2016 election:

1. **John Fitzgerald Kennedy:** As one of the first presidents of the modern television era, Kennedy took advantage of mass media platforms in order to promote his campaign songs to the American people. In placing emphasis on both his past military experiences and undeniable charisma throughout the songs’ lyrics, Kennedy became what many would refer to as one of the first “celebrity” presidential candidates.
2. **Ronald Wilson Reagan:** A candidate who associated himself with the Hollywood elite as a Democrat throughout the 1940s, Reagan switched political parties and became President of the United States in 1980. It was during his 1984 reelection bid, however, that his campaign misused musical works that unintentionally failed to align with the candidate’s patriotic values. The problem of using an artist’s musical work against his/her

wishes became a serious issue during this campaign, as indicated by Reagan's use of Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A."

3. **Barack Hussein Obama:** As a presidential candidate running at the dawn of the Millennial era, Obama became one of the first presidential candidates in years to use music written specifically for his campaign. While popular music continued to dominate, Obama and his rival John McCain brought original campaign music back to the forefront in an era of mass media consumption.

The role of music is integral for candidates hoping to connect with the American electorate. Not only do the campaign songs serve to promote the agendas of those running for president, but they simultaneously work to present candidates as celebrity figures who embody the hopes and dreams of millions of voters. However, the effectiveness of campaign songs' influence over election results is subject to debate. This thesis will seek to find an answer to this question while examining the ever-changing technological advances and cultural backdrop of the United States of America.

## JOHN F. KENNEDY, THE 1960 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, AND THE UTILIZATION OF MASS MEDIA

In November of 1960, John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States, winning by a slim margin over his Republican rival Richard M. Nixon. With this historic victory, Kennedy became the youngest President in American history, presenting a presidential image centered on his youthful energy, while also highlighting his charisma and immense popularity with a younger generation. This popularity was due in large part to his savvy presidential campaign, which involved utilizing mass media to project his message of “getting America moving again” to the people.<sup>13</sup> As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, radio and television began replacing “old-fashioned campaign rallies,” with the new “cool” media of the 1960s dominating the vote-getting process.<sup>14</sup> Using television, Kennedy’s campaign team made a series of advertisements that promoted his candidacy through the use of animated imagery and, most importantly, music. This music consisted of campaign songs written specifically for his candidacy, a strategy that had been utilized by previous candidates. In doing so, Kennedy and his team constructed a presidential image that not only captured the hearts and minds of the American people, but simultaneously redefined the president as something of a national celebrity in the context of American popular culture.

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<sup>13</sup> Kennedy Pledges to “Get America Moving Again” [1960], accessed March 21, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jt2efsDbYzY>

<sup>14</sup> Silber, *Songs America Voted By*, 281.

Before taking an in depth look at how the use of music by Kennedy's campaign further increased his celebrity status on the election circuit, it is important to examine various forms of mass media that had become synonymous at that time with selling principle objects and cultural figures to the American people. In the 1920s, radio became the most prominent vehicle for communicating with the electorate in promoting presidential campaigns. The aftermath of World War II, however, brought about the creation and evolution of television as the most prominent form for selling a candidate's image. It was in fact the 1952 presidential campaign that became the first election to prominently feature television ads that, while rudimentary when compared with today's campaign spots, made clear to the American public that the votes of everyone had to count in order for a candidate to win the presidency.<sup>15</sup>

The 1952 election was between two notable candidates: World War II general Dwight D. Eisenhower on the Republican ticket, and Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson II on the Democratic ticket. Both men had their own unique ways of selling their respective candidacies to a mass audience, with original campaign songs composed for both of their presidential bids. These musical works appeared in television advertisements that used the media of music and television to further their popularity with potential voters.

One advertisement for Stevenson's campaign was centered around the song "I Love the Gov," consisting of a single performer singing the song with an inflection that comes off as a poor attempt at utilizing a jazz vocal style. As this classily dressed, swaying female looks directly at the camera in front of her, the camera zooms slowly toward the unknown singer's face

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<sup>15</sup> Darrell M. West, *Air Waves: Television Advertising in Election Campaigns, 1952-2008-Fifth Edition* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2010), 2.



as she stands in an empty soundstage.<sup>16</sup> The aesthetically bland and outright awkward advertisement does little to bolster the candidate's image when compared to the campaign spots presented for today's television audiences. Lacking representation of party symbolism or American iconography, this advertisement came off as a rather dull and poorly performed lounge act, as opposed to a powerful political or patriotic statement made by the candidate and his campaign team. The song's lyrics do little to improve the advertisement's success, focusing more on unconditional love for the governor that manages to tie itself in with the idea of attacking his Republican rivals:

“I love the Gov’, the Governor of Illinois.  
He is the guy that brings the dove of peace and joy.  
When Illinois the GOP double-crossed,  
He is the one who told all the crooks, “Get lost.”  
Adlai, love you madly,  
And what you did for your own great state,  
You’re gonna do for the rest of the 48.”<sup>17</sup>

With poor internal rhyming mechanisms such as “double-crossed” paired with “get lost,” it becomes difficult for the listener to perceive any sort of repetitive hook or riff within the song's

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<sup>16</sup> US Democrats-Adlai Stevenson 1952, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUpeq1qQZHM>

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin S. Schoening and Eric T. Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About Music* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012), 126.

lyrics. The overall content of this work even comes off as perverted with the line “Adlai, love you madly,” giving this song more of an erotic tone that overshadows the song’s central message.

Unlike the aforementioned Stevenson television spot, one by Eisenhower found a way to depict joyous, pompously patriotic imagery that was relatable to American audiences. In “I Like Ike,” a series of cartoon figures gleefully march with signs displaying Eisenhower’s campaign slogan, with images of elephants & donkeys (the two most prominent icons of party symbolism) and working-class men and women evoking an overall patriotic vibe that is hard to forget (even after the first viewing).<sup>18</sup> The central difference between the Eisenhower advertisement and the one made by Stevenson’s team is its emphasis on musical elements to make the final product more effective: each cartoon character depicted in “I Like Ike” is marching in tight unison to the beat of the song, making rhythm a central element in engraining the repetitive lyrics of the song into the viewers’ heads. It is also apparent that the lyrics to “I Like Ike” are simple and repetitive, communicating a simple message that American television audiences used to overconsumption of mass media could easily memorize. Another review of both songs’ lyrical content reveals that “I Like Ike” also makes explicit reference to some of Eisenhower’s policies and ideas regarding issues such as foreign relations with the Soviet Union:

“Let’s like Ike,  
A man we all of us like,

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<sup>18</sup> 1952 Eisenhower Political Ad-I Like Ike-Presidential Campaign Ad, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmCDaXeDRI4>

Makes no deals,  
His favors can't be curried  
And Uncle Joe is worried 'cause "we like Ike."<sup>19</sup>

"Uncle Joe" is a direct reference to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin and Ike's disdain for him, indicating a president who would not make deals with any foreign dictators and who wants to share his international policies with American voters. With Stevenson's "I Love the Gov," the lyrics failed to highlight any of the governor's major issues he would plan to tackle while in office. In assessing previous lyrical examples, it seems that Stevenson was focused more on attacking the GOP than sharing his policies and political ideals with voters.

It was apparent that Eisenhower's campaign strategy, specifically the popularity of the "I Like Ike" song, worked in winning him the presidential election. Considering the fact that the Republican Party was lagging behind in public support at the time of Eisenhower's campaign, the large personal victory he won from the American people showcased a candidate who came to be identified and respected through his representation in the media, rather than simply through his political expertise and intellect.<sup>20</sup>

Even though the "I Like Ike" song proved to be a successful motivator in getting Americans to vote, it would still receive some criticism in the years to come. In a discussion between journalist Harlan Cleveland and Rosser Reeves (an advertising copywriter responsible for directing Eisenhower's "I Like Ike" television spot) after the 1952 presidential election,

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<sup>19</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About Music*, 125.

<sup>20</sup> Silber, *Songs America Voted By*, 287.

Cleveland was quoted as saying that he objected to the advertisements because he viewed their main objective as “selling the president like toothpaste.”<sup>21</sup> Why should this man, a possible president of the United States, be “sold” like some sort of brand when his ideas on American security and economic stability are far more important in the long run? To understand this, it is important to remember that radio was the primary source of mass media in which the American people were able to connect with the candidates. Television changed all of this in a very significant way. Being able to see a candidate speak on television, identifying his mannerisms such as facial expressions and body language, made viewers at home feel that they were being spoken to directly concerning their needs and aspirations pertaining to the future of America. It gave the electorate the illusion of a better understanding regarding the individuals running for office, and certainly helped in bolstering the popularity of Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Candidates running after the Eisenhower presidency now understood the idea of selling one’s presidential bid, just as a tight race between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon began to brew just prior to the 1960 presidential election. To understand this, let us take a look into both of these candidates’ campaign strategies, specifically how one in particular was influenced by the Eisenhower advertising technique and whose use of music through various media helped to create one of America’s most iconic presidential celebrities.

John F. Kennedy had already made a distinct impression on the American public by the time he ran for office at the dawn of the 1960s. His heroic actions in the Navy during World War II made him a war hero, and his 1956 book *Profiles in Courage* garnered him the Pulitzer Prize for Biography. It was the release of this book that led to his appearance on several late-night talk

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<sup>21</sup> Biocca, *Television and Political Advertising Volume 1*, 145.

shows such as *The Jack Paar Show* and Edward R. Murrow's *Person to Person*-programs that provided Kennedy opportune platforms for what Mary Ann Watson referred to as "personality projection."<sup>22</sup> By simultaneously showcasing both his intellectual capabilities and captivating charm, Kennedy began to be viewed as someone who the American people could relate. This idea of relatability was further amplified by his code of "campaign standard operating," which posited that "nonpolitical talk to the unconvinced is better than political talk to the already convinced."<sup>23</sup> It was ideas such as these that helped capture America's attention, reaffirming Kennedy's integrity, charisma, and intellect.

When Kennedy was declared the Democratic nominee for President, it was time for his campaign team to hunker down and devise a plan that would succeed in getting Kennedy elected to office. To do so, they would follow in the footsteps of Eisenhower's campaign team, and have original campaign songs composed for the purpose of airing on national television in a series of boisterous advertisements. Much like the way Eisenhower's team constructed a song that produced a simple, easy to learn slogan-entitled "We Like Ike"-Kennedy's campaign created a slogan that was pithy and redundant. The song was simply given the title of "Kennedy" due to the repeated use of his last name in the song's opening and closing moments, with the total number of repetitions coming to twenty-six (all within the span of a sixty-second song).<sup>24</sup> This, coupled with imagery depicting rallying supporters and shots of Kennedy himself, made for an

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<sup>22</sup> J. Richard Snyder, *John F. Kennedy: Person, Policy, Presidency* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1988), 46.

<sup>23</sup> Snyder, *John F. Kennedy*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About Music*, 128-129.

advertisement that captured America's attention while also managing to engrain itself into a viewer's subconscious with ease.<sup>25</sup>

In examining the mechanics of this song, particularly its lyrical content, it is important to note some of the ways Kennedy's campaign song differed from that of Eisenhower's from 1952 (considering the two candidates' similar means of self-promotion). With "I Like Ike," the actual name "Ike" is primarily sung by the background chorus, making it less prominent than the other lyrics of the song. With "Kennedy," there is an explicit effort by the songwriters in having the candidate's name expressed loudly and with much force. This made it nearly impossible for viewers at home to hear the advertisement being played on television and not know the candidate's name afterward. This steady lyrical repetition, coupled with a boisterous and repetitive melody, played an important role in making the American people aware of the candidate. The actual lyrical content, however, alludes to deeper aspects of Kennedy's personality that might interest seasoned voters. For example, the lyrics refer to him as someone who is "young enough" to "try something new," but then immediately follow with lyrics that labeled him as a "seasoned" candidate who was "old enough to know."<sup>26</sup> In doing so, this song demonstrated to the American people that Kennedy was a man with the experience to lead this country like his predecessors, but had the advantage of youthful enthusiasm not seen in the previous administrations.

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<sup>25</sup> JFK – Campaign Jingle 1960 Election Ad, accessed February 23, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLXTB\\_S193w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLXTB_S193w)

<sup>26</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About Music*, 129.

Boosting Kennedy's image even further was the support he would receive from some of Hollywood's most elite celebrities, with musicians such as musician Harry Belafonte appearing in a brief television advertisement in which he sat down with the Senator to speak about important political and social issues.<sup>27</sup> One of the most notable celebrities who supported Kennedy was American singer/actor Frank Sinatra. During the 1960 election, Sinatra held and performed at many campaign fundraisers for Kennedy, holding \$100-a-plate banquets where the singer would then provide the night's musical entertainment.<sup>28</sup> In addition to this, one of Frank Sinatra's most successful songs, the Oscar winning "High Hopes" from the 1959 film *A Hole in the Head*, contained reworked lyrics by songwriter Sammy Cahn and played at many of the Senator's campaign rallies, with the text emphasizing his presidency as one that would bring about a "new, more productive era":

“Everyone is voting for Jack.  
'Cause he's got what all the rest lack,  
Everyone wants to back–Jack,  
Jack is on the right track.  
'Cause he's got high hopes,  
He's got high hopes,  
1960's the year for high hopes,

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<sup>27</sup> Harry Belafonte for JFK – 1960 Election Ad, Accessed March 07, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0S8\\_04NHAs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0S8_04NHAs)

<sup>28</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About Music*, 131.

Come on and vote for Kennedy,  
Vote for Kennedy,  
And we'll come out on top.”<sup>29</sup>

By reworking a popular song of the day while simultaneously making a direct textual association with one of America's most popular presidential candidates (Jack is stated six times while Kennedy is stated or spelled eight times), it made for a campaign song that was both memorable and easy to learn for a large majority of Americans. It was also important that much of Sammy Cahn's original text for “High Hopes” remained unchanged with the reworked version, boosting its chances of being easily memorized by Kennedy's supporters.<sup>30</sup>

The use of “High Hopes” as one of Kennedy's campaign songs demonstrated a general shift in terms of how music was used within the context of a presidential election. As opposed to “Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy” or “I Like Ike” and their explicit statements of candidates' values and leadership goals, the use of a popular song such as “High Hopes” was a message to future campaign teams in that music could be more directed at a certain emotional essence or response as opposed to presenting issues or delineating the candidate's personality.<sup>31</sup> What this means is that campaign music began to play to appeal directly to the emotions of American voters simply through the music itself. Considering that millions of Americans had already formed an emotional attachment to “High Hopes” due to its consistent airplay and use in *Hole in*

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<sup>29</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About Music*, 130.

<sup>30</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About Music*, 130.

<sup>31</sup> Silber, *Songs America Voted By*, 294.



*the Head*, it was easy for many voters to grasp the work as more than just a campaign song; it was part of the current fabric of American popular culture.

Kennedy and his campaign team were intent on selling his image to the American people through the use of campaign songs in order to make him appear more relatable to a younger generation of Americans. The strategy seemed to be working in the lead-up to election day, but Kennedy's Republican rival Richard M. Nixon was an experienced politician, who had already served as Vice President during the Eisenhower administration. He had also shown American television audiences that he was more than capable of holding his ground on live television after his "Checkers" speech aired in 1952, a successful attempt in convincing Americans that he had not been involved in a fund founded by his supporters that would reimburse his political expenses used during his vice-presidential campaign.<sup>32</sup> Not only did this appearance seem to bolster Nixon's confidence, but it secured his place on the Republican ticket and showed that he was skilled as a television performer who could stand toe to toe with any other rising political candidate.<sup>33</sup>

Despite his political experience, Nixon lacked Kennedy's youth and charisma. Whereas Kennedy and his campaign team worked hard to use entertaining forms of media such as music and talk show appearances in selling his image through television, Nixon preferred more stately, stern presentations of himself that made him come off as the more intellectual and "proper" candidate for the presidency. This can be seen in his early television campaign advertisements,

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Nixon, "Checkers" Speech, accessed February 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9LcAJOsFGg>

<sup>33</sup> Snyder, *John F. Kennedy*, 46.

particularly the “Nixon/Lodge: They Understand What Peace Demands” campaign spot released in 1960.<sup>34</sup> Nixon begins this advertisement sitting on a desk, not moving from this spot during the entirety of his time on camera. His facial expression remains disgruntled, stern, and somewhat mundane when compared to the handsome, charismatic look present on Kennedy’s face in the photos presented in the “Kennedy” advertisement. Even as Nixon discusses the importance of leaders who “keep the peace without surrender for America and the world” while planning to “keep America the strongest nation in the world,” the setting of this advertisement does not present a stirring message pertaining to American patriotism and Nixon’s own campaign values. No American flags, visual references to the military, or depictions of the candidate’s own supporters are present throughout the entirety of this advertisement. This proves to be in sharp contrast with the aesthetic elements of the “Kennedy” advertisement, which include patterns of the American flag, images of rallying supporters, and even an image of Kennedy with his family.

Even if Nixon’s advertising team had attempted to use some of the visual aesthetics seen in the “Kennedy” television spot to sell his image to the American people, the lack of music throughout the Nixon advertisement would still be striking. Nixon’s decision not to use music appears to imply that he was not keen on the idea of selling himself as a product on television. Instead, he wanted to send a message to the American people about what direction he wanted to take when running this country. It should be noted, however, that there is more to a presidential candidate than just a “pretty face.” Through Nixon’s powerful yet stern delivery, one can

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<sup>34</sup> Nixon 1960 Campaign Ad, accessed February 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3cpQnVvXSS>

understand how presidential candidates can be referred to as a “set of sounds.” As mentioned in Frank Biocca’s *Television and Political Advertising Volume 2: Signs, Codes, and Images*, the qualities of the candidate’s voice are not completely controllable by a political consultant, but “carry information” that is then used by viewers to “project general attributes” onto him/her.<sup>35</sup> This was made even more apparent during the 1960 presidential debates between Nixon and Kennedy. Americans listening to the debates on the radio felt that former had won, while those watching on television felt that the latter had the upper hand. This was primarily because of how both candidates’ images were presented to the public through the medium of television, as made evident through their differing campaign advertisements.<sup>36</sup> From the sound of Nixon’s speech in the aforementioned television spot and the presidential debates, voters heard a man who was confident in his abilities, but lacking the charisma and youthfulness of Kennedy.

Music eventually came to play a role in the Nixon campaign, but its use would showcase to the American people that Nixon’s team was not as experienced in campaign advertising as Kennedy’s team was. Composers Olivia Hoffman, George Stork, and Clarence Fuhrman were asked to write an original campaign song for Nixon’s 1960 presidential bid, and were responsible for composing one of the most unintentionally explicit set of lyrics ever written for a presidential candidate’s campaign:

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<sup>35</sup> Frank Biocca, *Television and Political Advertising Volume 2: Signs, Codes, and Images* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1991), 35.

<sup>36</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About Music*, 128.

“Come on and click with Dick,  
The one that none can lick,  
He’s the man to lead the U.S.A.  
In Dick we have the one,  
Who truly gets things done,  
Ev’ry time he has his say.”<sup>37</sup>

The nickname Dick is one obvious reason to be skeptical of “Click with Dick” and its lyrical content, but another is in the fact that the name is used within questionable lyrical passages that can be misinterpreted as sexual metaphors. This is apparent in the use of the word “lick,” which is only further emphasized in the song’s next verse:

“He’s a man of peace and reason  
For the job in ev’ry season,  
And he knows how to fight,  
When he is in the right,  
So let’s all lick with Dick.”<sup>38</sup>

Little is relatively known about the songwriters behind this questionable song, but it can certainly be seen as a work that demonstrates a lack of careful consideration and planning on the part of

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<sup>37</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About Music*, 131.

<sup>38</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About Music*, 131.

Nixon's 1960 advertising campaign team. The song itself is nowhere to be found on YouTube or other popular video streaming sites, appearing to imply that the song has been suppressed due to its embarrassing textual content. While many of Nixon's detractors would love to hear the song in this day and age, it is likely that the work will remain unheard in the years to come.

In the end, John F. Kennedy won the presidency through what can only be viewed as one of the most successful marketing campaigns in the history of presidential elections. His charisma, advertising strategies, and all-American image made him a bona fide celebrity during his time in office, attracting the support of many famous Hollywood celebrities and cultural figures in the process. Notable American musical artists appeared at the White House during and after Kennedy's inauguration, including gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, who felt she was "part of this man's hopes" and that he "lifted her spirit" and made her feel "a part of the land she lived in."<sup>39</sup> Having an African American performer appear at Kennedy's inauguration showed just how many individuals Kennedy's "image" had reached out to, demonstrating a president whose youth, undeniable charm, and integrity were further exploited through the use of mass media during his campaign. Kennedy's presidency set out on a mission "to demonstrate that the White House could be an influence in encouraging public acceptance of the arts."<sup>40</sup> Of the performances held at the White House during Kennedy's presidency, some of the most prominent included the Metropolitan Opera Studio, the Jerome Robbins Ballet, the American Shakespeare Festival, the Paul Winter Jazz Sextet, and the Greater Boston Youth Symphony.<sup>41</sup> These artists not only represented a vast

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<sup>39</sup> Elise K. Kirk, *Music at the White House: A History of the American Spirit* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 285.

<sup>40</sup> Kirk, *Music at the White House*, 286.

<sup>41</sup> Kirk, *Music at the White House*, 287, 293.

array of American performers and genres, but also came to define a presidency remembered for its youthful exuberance, staunch artistic patronage, and embrace of popular culture.

While the Kennedys came to exemplify a period of artistic patronage and the youthful spirit of 1960s America, Kennedy was still appearing to sell his candidacy during his time in the White House. As one of the first presidents to place such a large emphasis on celebrity patronage during his campaign, it is likely that Kennedy felt that encouraging the utilization of music throughout his first term would keep him in the minds and hearts of both famous musical acts and American voters. Kennedy's presidential legacy has retrospectively been viewed by some as placing more emphasis on the superficial than the substantive, defined more by his image and personality than policies or political agendas. Many of the administration's major scandals were swept under the rug, such as the C.I.A. attempting to assassinate Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, F.B.I. head J. Edgar Hoover wiretapping civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., and, of course, the President's multiple infidelities.<sup>42</sup>

Kennedy's presidency came to a tragic end on November 22, 1963 with his untimely assassination. He is a man who will in many ways be remembered as one of the first celebrity presidents. As stated by Elise K. Kirk in his *Music at the White House: A History of the American Spirit*, John F. Kennedy brought "fresh images of youth and vitality" to the White House, appealing to "America's pride and sense of self-confidence."<sup>43</sup> While the aftermath of Kennedy's 1960 election brought about a rise in presidential candidates who utilized mass media to promote themselves through campaign music, including Richard Nixon and his "Nixon Now" campaign

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<sup>42</sup> Snyder, *John F. Kennedy*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Kirk, *Music at the White House*, 285.

advertisement from 1972,<sup>44</sup> Kennedy will always be remembered as the candidate who forever changed the face of music's ties to political advertising in America. Kennedy's use of popular music during the campaign would greatly influence a new legion of presidential candidates, which came to a head in the 1980s with the reelection campaign of Ronald Reagan.

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<sup>44</sup> Richard Nixon Campaign Song 1972; Nixon Now, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceocNS-toDk>

## RONALD REAGAN, THE 1984 REELECTION CAMPAIGN, AND THE MISAPPROPRIATED USE OF POPULAR MUSIC

In 1980, former California Governor Ronald Reagan won the presidency over then-sitting President Jimmy Carter. As a candidate who was known as both an actor and politician, he entered into the presidential race as a man already familiar to many American voters, a prominent celebrity figure. In the 1940s, Reagan found success at Warner Brothers as an actor, eventually expanding his profile by serving as president of the Screen Actors Guild. It was during his tenure as president of the guild that he began to develop his skills as a public speaker, learning to be at ease among crowds, cameras, celebrities, and, most importantly, politicians.<sup>45</sup> In mastering these skills, Reagan was able to use his stature as a Hollywood celebrity to bolster his image during the 1980 presidential campaign and prove victorious over Jimmy Carter. It was during his 1984 reelection campaign, however, that the role of music, particularly his direct use of American popular music, played an important role in Reagan's attempts at using his celebrity status to get reelected. Though his efforts won him a second term, his campaign at times did so at the expense of musical artists and their works.

To take a closer look into Reagan's use of popular song throughout his campaign, specifically during his 1984 reelection bid, it is important to understand just how often non-campaign music was used by presidential campaign teams prior to the 1984 election. While candidates such as John F. Kennedy had used popular songs with reworked lyrics to express a

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<sup>45</sup> Stephen Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), x.



specific campaign message, evident through a revised version of Frank Sinatra's cover of "High Hopes" during Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign, the candidates prior to him had relied heavily on original campaign music specifically written to be utilized throughout an election cycle.

One of the first and most notable uses of popular song as a vehicle for promoting a specific campaign message came at the Democratic National Convention in 1932. Democratic nominee Franklin Delano Roosevelt intended to use the song "Anchors Away" to celebrate his nomination at the convention. Upon hearing the song performed by the band during rehearsal, Bronx Democratic boss Edward Flynn asked if the band could perform something "peppy," resulting in the band playing "Happy Days Are Here Again" from the 1930 film *Chasing Rainbows*. After hearing the song, Flynn then told the convention floor manager to have the latter work performed in the place of "Anchors Away." This prompted Roosevelt and his team to have "Happy Days" serve as his official campaign song during the 1932 presidential election.<sup>46</sup> It was not, however, the song's "peppy" melody alone that made the song ideal for Roosevelt's campaign, but its lyrics that promised better days that lay ahead within the context of the Great Depression:

"Happy days are here again,  
The skies above are clear again,  
Let us sing a song of cheer again,  
Happy days are here again.  
Altogether shout it now,  
There's no one who can doubt it now,

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<sup>46</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About Music*, 142-143.

So let's tell the world about it now,  
Happy days are here again.”<sup>47</sup>

After the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression ensuing in its wake, this song demonstrated how popular song in its original, unaltered form could be used successfully to encapsulate current issues and capture the votes of disenfranchised American voters.

“Happy Days Are Here Again” came to be associated with the legacy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt throughout all four of his presidential runs, with the song also serving as the theme for his economic recovery plan of 1934. The song became a standard for the Democratic Party in following elections, and was eventually used to celebrate Jimmy Carter’s nomination at the Democratic National Convention in 1976.<sup>48</sup> This not only furthered the idea that a popular song could transcend its original meaning and be used in a political context, but also demonstrated to candidates that popular music could be just as effective in selling the image of the American president. Roosevelt’s campaign team carefully selected a song popular among the general public that successfully spoke to the aspirations and dreams of the America. Future President Ronald Reagan, however, attempted a similar strategy that unintentionally led to his team misinterpreting the meaning of one of his 1984 campaign songs.

It is important to remember that before his presidential bid in 1980, Ronald Reagan was registered as a Democrat during his time in Hollywood. As an actor throughout the 1940s, he threw

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<sup>47</sup> Lyrics to “Happy Days are Here Again.” Accessed March 10, 2019, <https://genius.com/Annette-hanshaw-happy-days-are-here-again-lyrics>

<sup>48</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About Music*, 143.

his support behind many notable Democratic political candidates. One of the most notable examples of Reagan's Democratic leanings was a campaign benefit he held in Hollywood for then-sitting President Harry S. Truman in 1948. He supported Minnesota senatorial candidate Herbert Humphrey that very same year, along with vocalizing his approval of Senator Helen Gahagan in 1950 (ironically, running against future Republican president Richard Nixon).<sup>49</sup> For someone who later became known for his strong Republican values and viewpoints throughout his political career, it comes as a surprise that Reagan identified as a Democrat for much of his early life. Like most celebrities, however, it can be difficult to maintain one's image in Hollywood when politics come into play. Reagan was accused of extensive leanings toward leftist politics due to his affiliation with the American Veterans Committee (AVC), one of the country's most liberal postwar Veterans organizations. In 1946, the Hearst papers accused the AVC as being a "left-wing effort to marshal veterans for left-wing purposes."<sup>50</sup> This had to do largely with the organization's goal of initiating the Full Employment Bill for American war veterans, assuring that each returning member would be guaranteed employment through the efforts of "private enterprise and government."<sup>51</sup> Despite severing ties with the AVC near the end of the 1940s, Reagan would continue to support America's servicemen and women throughout his political career, which led to unforeseen controversy during his 1984 reelection bid.

The 1984 U.S. Presidential Election proved significant in that it was the first time that both presidential nominees used unaltered popular music for their official campaign songs.

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<sup>49</sup> Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, 157-158.

<sup>50</sup> Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, 163.

<sup>51</sup> Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, 164.

Campaigning against Democratic nominee Walter Mondale, Ronald Reagan and his campaign team selected two specific campaign songs that they felt exemplified the President's strong patriotism and American values. While they may have had the best of intentions, a serious misunderstanding of the lyrics to one of these songs generated a controversy that became a definitive aspect of the 1984 Election.

Walter Mondale also utilized popular song throughout his presidential bid. In preparation for the upcoming presidential election, the Democratic nominee and his team decided on the song "Gonna Fly Now" from the Oscar winning film *Rocky*. The work is primarily instrumental, with short, repetitive lyrical refrains that emphasize a simple message of both personal growth and a desire to achieve:

“Trying hard now,  
It's so hard now,  
Trying hard now.

Getting strong now,  
Won't be long now,  
Getting strong now.

Gonna fly now,  
Flying high now,

Gonna fly, fly, fly.”<sup>52</sup>

While the lyrics themselves seem to depict Mondale’s desire to rise up from his underdog status and fight to serve the American people, it was the musical performance itself that made it perfect for his campaign. Jeff Pearlman of *Runner’s World* pointed out how the horn section’s “soaring optimism” coupled with the “cheesy chant of ‘gonna fly now’ in the chorus” was indicative of a “runner’s high” that created a motivational appeal for Mondale’s presidential campaign.<sup>53</sup> The song’s use can also be seen as an attempt to draw parallels between both Walter Mondale and the character of Rocky Balboa himself. Since *Rocky* pertains to the story of an underdog who “triumphs against impossible odds,” it also suggested that Mondale could eventually triumph over Ronald Reagan, a sitting president whose popularity far exceeded that of Mondale’s, the same way that Rocky attempted to triumph over his experienced competitor in the boxing arena.<sup>54</sup> By associating himself with a film that inspired legions of Americans to rise up and pursue their dreams, regardless of upbringing or experience, Mondale was able to use “Gonna Fly Now” as a way to connect with the pursuit of the American dream, and the inspiration found within the stories of mainstream films in the United States.

Another point to be made about Mondale’s use of “Gonna Fly Now” is that it had become a mainstay of popular culture through its use in the *Rocky* film franchise. Despite the song having been released almost ten years prior to the announcement of Mondale’s presidential bid, the song

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<sup>52</sup> Bill Conti. Lyrics to “Gonna Fly Now.” Accessed March 11, 2019, <https://genius.com/Bill-conti-gonna-fly-now-lyrics>

<sup>53</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 149.

<sup>54</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 150.

continued to be used as the theme for both *Rocky II* (1979), and its follow-up, *Rocky III* (1982).<sup>55</sup> While popular song often serves to establish a connection with voters by using a piece of music familiar to a large audience, the art of film is often juxtaposed with musical compositions to form emotional bonds with those watching a specific movie scene. The use of “Gonna Fly Now” as a campaign song allowed for voters to associate their fondness of the film with Mondale’s campaign, furthering the parallels one could draw between both the candidate and the character of Rocky Balboa. The film *Rocky* also takes place in the city of Philadelphia, a location of great historical significance and American patriotism. While this might seem irrelevant to some, there are those who believe Mondale felt that using “Gonna Fly Now” would lead to voters associating him with the powerful political legacy of this great city.<sup>56</sup> Whether this was Mondale’s intention or not, many future political candidates wound up using the song at campaign rallies of their own, including Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Mike Huckabee in 2008.<sup>57</sup> The song’s composer, Bill Conti, does not seem to mind the use of his work by presidential candidates. In an interview for *Philadelphia* in 2016, he stated that “anytime something I created is used, I am happy about that.” He also stated that music has “no politics attached to it” and that he is “an equal opportunity kind of guy.”<sup>58</sup> This sort of use might not have bothered Conti, but another popular American songwriter was about to take issue with the use of his own work during the 1984 election.

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<sup>55</sup> Rocky III – Training 2 “Gonna Fly Now” in High Definition (HD) \*\*WOW\*\*, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqerjNXNN4Y>

<sup>56</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 150.

<sup>57</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 226.

<sup>58</sup> Fiorillo, Victor, “We Asked Rocky Composer Bill Conti About Donald Trump Using His Music,” *Philadelphia* (September 27, 2016), accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2016/09/27/donald-trump-song-rocky-theme-bill-conti/>

One would think that Reagan’s celebrity status might increase the chances of enlisting the support of popular musicians to help support his reelection bid. However, as the 1984 election approached, it became readily apparent that there were not many popular musicians of the era who were interested in having Reagan’s presidency continue. The President had already sought the support of musicians Billy Joel and John Cougar Mellencamp, but both declined the offer.<sup>59</sup> While Joel himself has never been one to openly express his political beliefs (stating in a *Rolling Stone* interview that he “stays out of politics” and finds musical performers to be “jesters” as opposed to “philosophers”<sup>60</sup>), Mellencamp was more vocal. Throughout the 1980s, he was a notable critic of Reagan’s presidency, later emphasized in his 1989 song, “Country Gentleman”:

“Country gentleman walked a crooked mile,  
Got our money in his pocket.  
Did it all with a very handsome smile,  
Now, he’s livin’ it up in a great big office.  
He ain’t a-gonna help no poor man,  
He ain’t a-gonna help no poor man  
He ain’t a-gonna help no poor man,  
He’s just gonna help his rich friends.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 154.

<sup>60</sup> Doyle, Patrick, “The Last Word: Billy Joel on Self-Doubt, Trump and Finally Becoming Cool,” *Rolling Stone Magazine* (June 14, 2017), accessed March 25, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/the-last-word-billy-joel-on-self-doubt-trump-and-finally-becoming-cool-203477/>

<sup>61</sup> John Mellencamp. Lyrics to “Country Gentleman,” accessed March 25, 2019, <https://genius.com/John-mellencamp-country-gentleman-lyrics>

While songs like this indicated a disconnect between many musical acts and the President, Reagan was still able to convince the era's biggest pop star, Michael Jackson, to appear at the White House, in order to honor him for his "Beat It" campaign that aimed to discourage teens from drinking and driving.<sup>62</sup> While this would have been the ideal platform to have one of the world's biggest popstars endorse the president's reelection campaign, Jackson simply walked up to the podium after Reagan's speech and thanked those in attendance for the honor. Jackson was a relatively private person who did not often share his personal or political views with members of the press, so this was nonetheless a major success for Reagan and his team of advisors. It was now time for Reagan to take action and find a way to utilize popular musical artists during his campaign, whether these performers liked it or not.

It should be noted that Reagan and his wife Nancy were staunch believers in musical patronage, as was evident throughout President Reagan's first term in the White House. While Jimmy Carter had hosted a large number of formal classical performances during his four years in office, the Reagans felt it was important to encourage variety when it came to the musical acts who performed at special White House events. These performances consisted of a large array of genres and styles, ranging from Broadway and country, to gospel and jazz (similar to the musical diversity showcased throughout performances held during John F. Kennedy's time in office). Many of these performances were documented on the PBS television series, *In Performance at the White House*, which became one of the most successful arts ventures to come out of the White House.<sup>63</sup> With

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<sup>62</sup> President Ronald Reagan Hosts Michael Jackson at the White House, accessed March 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEmj9MTqoGk>

<sup>63</sup> Kirk, *Music at the White House*, 349-350.



this series, the Reagan White House was one that prioritized showcasing the vast musical talent found within the fabric of American culture's past.

If *In Performance at the White House* presented Ronald Reagan's consistent support of American music throughout his presidency, why was it so difficult for his campaign team to successfully enlist the support of popular musical artists of the 1980s? Perhaps voters felt that the president was out-of-touch with the current era's most notable entertainment forces, preferring to focus on a variety of musical artists and styles that fit his own personal tastes from a bygone era. His first inaugural ceremony in 1981, the most expensive in history at a hefty \$16 million, featured musical entertainment from bygone artists of the "old-Hollywood" era such as Ethel Merman, Bob Hope, Donny Osmond, and Frank Sinatra (a former Democrat turned Republican who also directed and produced these galas himself).<sup>64</sup> When the Reagans and their musical patronage reached out to genres and performers they were comfortable with from their era, it demonstrated an administration focused on old-fashioned ideals that failed to resonate with a younger audience attuned to musical acts of the MTV generation. In an attempt to connect with younger voters of 1980s America, Reagan and his campaign team attempted to utilize one of the era's most acclaimed, well-versed, and popular musical performers: Bruce Springsteen.

In the sphere of American popular music, Bruce Springsteen is often viewed as one of the greatest American songwriters and performers of his generation. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, an era when rock & roll appeared to be declining in terms of its cultural relevance and popularity, Springsteen came forth as someone whose showmanship and timely lyrics would place him in the pantheon of music legends. One of his signature songs, "Born in the U.S.A.,"

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<sup>64</sup> Kirk, *Music at the White House*, 347.

demonstrates just how well Springsteen could blend the sound of radio-friendly rock with lyrics defining issues in American politics. In this case, the song lamented the Vietnam War and its negative effects on American servicemen:

“Born down in a dead man’s town,  
First kick I took was when I hit the ground.  
End up like a dog that’s been beat too much,  
Till you spend half your life just coverin’ up.  
Born in the U.S.A. . . .”<sup>65</sup>

The song went on to describe how the aftermath of the war led to the deaths of those closest to the servicemen, showing how the conflict was responsible for the destruction of numerous relationships:

“Had a brother at Khe Sahn,  
Fighting off the Viet Cong.  
They’re still there, he’s all gone.  
He had a woman he loved in Saigon,  
I got a picture of him in her arms now.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 155.

<sup>66</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 155.

Springsteen was clearly a musical artist unafraid to share his personal beliefs on American issues with mass audiences. However, listeners could possibly hear “Born in the U.S.A.” for the first time and mistake its major tonality and thunderous rhythm section for a song primarily concerned with American patriotism and pride for one’s country. This appeared to be the case, with Ronald Reagan, the work was selected as a campaign song for his 1984 reelection campaign.

It appears that through the use of “Born in the U.S.A.,” Reagan and his team felt they were selecting a song that fell in line with the campaign’s overtly patriotic and zealously American viewpoint. When speaking at a campaign rally on 19 September, 1984, Reagan stated the following:

“America’s future rests in a thousand dreams inside your hearts. It rests in the message of hope in songs of a man so many young Americans admire: New Jersey’s own Bruce Springsteen. And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about.”<sup>67</sup>

According to Marc Dolan in online magazine *Politico*, Reagan and his team had decided that the reelection campaign would be focused on securing votes from moderate and independent voters through the use of images rather than issues. By co-opting as much mainstream U.S. culture as possible, the Reagan campaign set out to use “Born in the U.S.A.” as an inspirational work of American popular culture in order to secure votes.<sup>68</sup> It appeared that the Reagan team was confident that their candidate’s Republican supporters were strong enough to help win him the

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<sup>67</sup> Greil Marcus, *Ranters & Crowd Pleasers: Punk in Pop Music 1977-92* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 267.

<sup>68</sup> Marc Dolan, “How Ronald Reagan Changed Bruce Springsteen’s Politics,” *Politico Magazine* (June 04, 2014), accessed March 11, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/bruce-springsteen-ronald-reagan-107448>

election, but the use of music media was a strategy that brought Reagan's campaign message to an even wider audience. This showed a crucial difference between Reagan's use of non-campaign songs as opposed to that of his competitor Walter Mondale's: the former realized the importance of recognizing current mainstream music culture to bolster his association with a younger audience, while the latter appeared to use past popular hits to associate himself with film culture and the working-class.

The use of "Born in the U.S.A." during Reagan's reelection campaign was not openly embraced by Springsteen or his team when the President began having the song played at rallies. Michael Deaver, the director of Reagan's reelection campaign, contacted the artist's agent with the intention of having Springsteen appear with the President on the campaign trail. Even after the agent declined Deaver's offer, Reagan continued to use "Born in the U.S.A."<sup>69</sup> This highlights a possible reason for many past candidates employing songwriters to compose campaign songs for them: the problem of utilizing popular song without the artist's consent. Unlike Kennedy's support from Frank Sinatra when utilizing "High Hopes" during 1960 campaign, Reagan and his team failed to acknowledge Springsteen's beliefs when using his song as a campaign message.

Misunderstanding the lyrics of "Born in the U.S.A." was not limited to Ronald Reagan and his campaign team, however. There were many fans and music critics alike who believed the song to be explicitly about American patriotism. The final chorus alone makes use of the song's title over six times, doing little to help listeners understand what the song was truly about:

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<sup>69</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About the Music*, 155.

“Born in the U.S.A.,  
I was born in the U.S.A.  
Born in the U.S.A.,  
I’m a long gone Daddy in the U.S.A.  
Born in the U.S.A.,  
Born in the U.S.A.  
Born in the U.S.A.,  
I’m a cool rocking Daddy in the U.S.A.”<sup>70</sup>

Music journalist/critic Greil Marcus admitted in a 1984 piece for *Artforum* that the song came off as a “piece of cheese,” a work from an album that was drastically different than its predecessor, *Nebraska*. While Marcus felt that Springsteen’s previous effort appeared as a direct response to the Reagan administration’s desire to “create a whole new epistemology and set of rules governing what it meant to live or die,” he felt that *Born in the U.S.A.* lacked an “eye and ear for detail” that then drifted into a “contemplation of motifs.”<sup>71</sup> While Marcus later changed his opinion after further listens, many attending Springsteen’s concerts during the Born in the U.S.A. Tour continued to view the work as a symbol for American pride.

An occasional advisor for Ronald Reagan throughout his presidency, columnist George F. Will had been called up out of the blue by Springsteen’s drummer Max Weinberg to see if he

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<sup>70</sup> Bruce Springsteen. Lyrics to “Born in the U.S.A.,” accessed March 26, 2019, <https://genius.com/Bruce-springsteen-born-in-the-usa-lyrics>

<sup>71</sup> Marcus, *Ranters & Crowd Pleasers*, 269-69.

wanted to attend one of the Born in the U.S.A. shows, with Will accepting the offer as an attempt to impress his children.<sup>72</sup> After attending, he then wrote a column that praised the performance using somewhat political terms:

“If all Americans – in labor and management, who make steel or cars or shoes or textiles – made their products with as much energy and confidence as Springsteen and his merry band make music, there would be no need for Congress to be thinking about protectionism.”<sup>73</sup>

According to an article from *The Nation*, Regan’s campaign staff caught wind of this column and sought to use the song as a form of “right-wing patriotic bombast” to bolster the President’s reelection campaign. The same article makes note of the fact that George Will left at the show’s midpoint, for unknown reasons, and wrongly considered Springsteen as somewhat of a “right-wing icon.”<sup>74</sup> It became apparent that “Born in the U.S.A.” and its boisterous chorus alluded to a powerful anthem about the greatness of American life, but unintentionally mired the song’s intended meaning regarding the Vietnam War.

Unlike Bill Conti’s seemingly indifferent reaction to Walter Mondale using “Gonna Fly Now” at campaign rallies, Bruce Springsteen made it apparent to both his fan-base and President Reagan that he was displeased with “Born in the U.S.A.” serving as Reagan’s campaign song. Fans of the artist knew that Springsteen had expressed dismay with the former Governor’s election in

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<sup>72</sup> Steve Inskeep, “What Does ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ Really Mean?,” *NPR* (March 26, 2019), accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/26/706566556/bruce-springsteen-born-in-the-usa-american-anthem>

<sup>73</sup> Inskeep, “What Does ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ Really Mean?,” <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/26/706566556/bruce-springsteen-born-in-the-usa-american-anthem>

<sup>74</sup> Eric Alterman, “Springsteen’s Political Voice,” *The Nation*, April 30, 2012, 14.

1980, stating at a concert held the day after the election that he found his win to be “terrifying,” reflecting his disbelief in the results.<sup>75</sup> While musical acts expressing their political beliefs were nothing new, an artist as popular as Springsteen could have risked ruining his reputation by speaking his mind in front of a large American audience. The singer, however, had already built his reputation on using his songs to express important social and personal issues such as mistreatment of the working class and mental illness. At a show in Pittsburgh on 21 September, 1984, the first after Reagan’s initial use of “Born in the U.S.A.,” Springsteen publicly denounced the President’s decision in front of a large audience:

“The President was mentioning my name the other day and I kinda got to wondering what his favorite album musta been. I don’t think it was the *Nebraska* album. I don’t think he’s been listening to this one.”<sup>76</sup>

Only twenty minutes into his set, Springsteen and his band then went directly into “Johnny 99,” a work from the *Nebraska* album concerning an auto worker who is driven to murder due to his unemployment.<sup>77</sup> In misusing a popular artist’s song, the President was now under a direct attack from the very same artist he was using to bolster his reelection campaign.

While the use of pop music to reinforce Ronald Reagan’s patriotic image was creating much controversy due to Springsteen’s disdain over the use of “Born in the U.S.A.,” it seemed that country music artist Lee Greenwood was fine with the President’s use of his song “God Bless the

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<sup>75</sup> Marcus, *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers*, 162.

<sup>76</sup> Rock & Rap Archives, “Number 17 / October 1984, accessed March 26, 2019, <http://www.rockrap.com/archive/archiv17.html>

<sup>77</sup> Rock & Rap Archives, “Number 17 / October 1984.

U.S.A.” as the second campaign song of Reagan during the 1984 election. This song was the perfect selection for Reagan’s reelection bid, with the chorus praising the brave deeds and actions of American servicemen fighting overseas for the sake of the country’s freedom:

“And I’m proud to be an American,  
where at least I know I’m free.  
And I won’t forget the men who died,  
Who gave that right to me. . .”<sup>78</sup>

Not only did the song present the President as a supporter of the American military, but it proved to be a song that greatly made up for the campaign team’s misinterpretation of the Springsteen work. In directly stating its patriotic intentions in the lyrics, the song was one that could relate to a majority of both the American people and, most importantly, the electorate. The lyrics are also openly optimistic and more universal than those of “Born in the U.S.A.,” a song whose misleadingly bombastic musical performance overshadows a much darker meaning. “God Bless the U.S.A.” was also a work that many Americans were familiar with on multiple levels: not only was the song used as the sign-off for many television stations across the country, but it had also served as a supplement to “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” at many baseball parks during the seventh inning stretch. Along with being nominated for Song of the Year at the Country Music Association Awards and staying within the top ten of *Billboard*’s Country Singles Chart for ten

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<sup>78</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 151.



weeks, the song was a much better exemplifier of the President's campaign values than Springsteen's.<sup>79</sup>

It should be noted that neither "Born in the U.S.A." nor "God Bless the U.S.A." were composed with the intention of being used for a presidential campaign. Lee Greenwood, in his book *God Bless the U.S.A.: Biography of a Song*, said that it was "surprising" to have Ronald Reagan seeking his permission to use "God Bless the U.S.A." as an official campaign song:

"Anyway, I thought it'd be alright. . . . I really hadn't planned for it to be used to endorse a candidate. But I guess we all should feel lucky that we can be involved in the political process without being afraid of reprisals."<sup>80</sup>

If a recording artist is not an openly political person, it would be hard for this individual to accept the use of his or her work by a political candidate for campaign purposes. In the case of a presidential run, however, it is most likely that this artist's song will be heard by a large majority of Americans, resulting in a general surge in popularity of the selected song. Considering the fact that Greenwood's song had already made its way onto both radio and television airwaves, having it serve as an official campaign song for a popular American president like Ronald Reagan would only further Greenwood's celebrity profile. The question that might arise from this is whether or not Reagan himself cared about the song's use and its effect on Greenwood's career trajectory. Should a presidential candidate take into account the popularity of the artist performing his

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<sup>79</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About the Music*, 152.

<sup>80</sup> Lee Greenwood, Gwen McLin, *God Bless the U.S.A.: Biography of a Song* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 1993), 157.

campaign song, or does he simply choose a work due to its previous or current popularity with the American people? In the case of Reagan, music journalist and author Greil Marcus made the point that Reagan used primarily popular song not to increase the profile of the artist performing the work, but to simultaneously increase his image as well:

“Yes, Ronald Reagan has never said a public word about Prince or Madonna, only had Michael Jackson to the White House and appropriated Bruce Springsteen for a campaign speech. But by those acts and thousands like them, he validated the process by which stars are validated. He became bigger; so, for the moment, did they. The difference is that he is not in it for the moment.”<sup>81</sup>

In retrospect, the 1984 reelection campaign is still seen as a monumental time for the campaign song. No longer viewed as a mere work composed directly for the purpose of promoting a candidate, the campaign song could find its place within the spectrum of popular music here in America. While this would sometimes result in lyrical misinterpretations on the campaign team’s part that showcased the risk in utilizing popular song (“Born in the U.S.A.” being the most notable instance), it showed that candidates were making a consistent effort to try and reach out to younger, more contemporary voters. Even if this came at the expense of the artists performing the selected campaign songs, the use of popular song changed the way presidents were sold to the American people, for better or for worse.

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<sup>81</sup> Marcus, *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers*, 293.

## BARACK OBAMA, THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CAMPAIGN SONG

In 2008, Democratic Senator Barack Obama of Illinois won the U.S. Presidential election, beating out Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona. Obama won in a landslide victory, making history as he became the first African American president in the nation's history. While this was indeed an historic moment, the election of the charming and popular Obama over grizzled Vietnam War veteran John McCain can be viewed as an election that, once again, sought to sell candidates' campaigns through the use of various forms of mass media, including music. While previous candidates, such as Ronald Reagan, had demonstrated how important popular music was in connecting with the Electorate, the 2008 election showed a return to using a campaign song that was written specifically for a candidate's presidential bid. The reliance on the internet to promote the musical works written for John McCain and Barack Obama's respective campaigns expanded the candidates' popularity among Millennial voters. With the Obama/McCain race came a new era in political advertising, one involving the use of music as both a promotional tool and an attack on other candidates.

To understand how the use of music affected the course of the 2008 election, one should look at the election cycles following Ronald Reagan's presidency. After the controversy surrounding the use of Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." by Reagan and his campaign team during the 1984 presidential elections, the year 1988 brought about the use of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" during George H.W. Bush's first presidential run. In a fashion similar to Reagan's use of Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." in 1984, the Bush

campaign team believed in using a song whose title worked as a musical “hook” that delivered the candidate’s campaign values while showcasing his staunch American patriotism. Ironically, Guthrie was a supporter of the Communist Party, often performing at many of their functions. Unlike “Born in the U.S.A.,” a song whose title and redundant chorus overshadowed the anti-war message in the verses, “This Land is Your Land” appeared to take on a solely patriotic viewpoint, with its first verse alluding to the idea of a land where America is open to all of its citizens:

“This land is your land, This land is my land  
From California to the New York island;  
From the red wood forest to the Gulf Stream waters  
This land was made for you and me.”<sup>82</sup>

The chorus comes off as a seemingly non-partisan statement that worked well for George Bush and his campaign. Instead of his campaign team selecting a work that appeared to align itself with either Democratic or Republican pundits, this folk song made for a safe bet that generated little to no controversy the way “Born in the U.S.A.” did with the Reagan campaign. The trouble arises with the song’s fifth verse, which makes a far more political statement:

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<sup>82</sup> Woody Guthrie. Lyrics to “This Land Is Your Land.” Accessed February 15, 2019, [https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This\\_Land.htm](https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This_Land.htm)

“As I went walking I saw a sign there  
And on the sign it said “No Trespassing.”  
But on the other side it didn’t say nothing,  
That side was made for you and me.”<sup>83</sup>

The lyrics reflect a populist viewpoint that was written in response to Guthrie’s irritation toward Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” being played endlessly on American radio in the 1930s.<sup>84</sup> For a candidate like Bush, an American World War II hero, this could appear to be an unfit song for a campaign designed to be centered around U.S. patriotism and staunch Republican values. While this misinterpretation proved much less controversial than “Born in the U.S.A.,” stemming primarily from “This Land is Your Land” not making direct statements contradicting the song’s title, it was another instance in which presidential campaigns failed to perform a comprehensive analysis of selected popular songs and their lyrics.

In the presidential election following George H. W. Bush’s first term, another instance of candidates failing to analyze the lyrics of a popular song came with Democratic candidate Bill Clinton and his use of Fleetwood Mac’s “Don’t Stop.” The repeated use of “Don’t Stop” throughout the song’s lyrics emphasized his idea to move toward America’s future, serving as an extension of his core campaign message of “progress” emphasized throughout his run. One of the major benefits for Fleetwood Mac in having “Don’t Stop” as Clinton’s official campaign

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<sup>83</sup> Woody Guthrie. Lyrics to “This Land Is Your Land.” Accessed February 15, 2019, [https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This\\_Land.htm](https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This_Land.htm)

<sup>84</sup> Nick Spitzer, “The Story of Woody Guthrie’s ‘This Land Is Your Land,’” <https://www.npr.org/2000/07/03/1076186/this-land-is-your-land>, (February 15, 2012).

song was that the work experienced a newfound level of success: the song found itself among the top five on the Billboard charts that year, showing how beneficial it was in having a popular candidate on your side when it came to him/her patronizing a musical act's music.<sup>85</sup> Fleetwood Mac even reunited all five members of its classic lineup to perform at Bill Clinton's inaugural gala in 1993, showing the band's gratitude in having their song represented in his presidential campaign.<sup>86</sup>

Clinton, however, found himself in a situation similar to the one George H. W. Bush and Ronald Reagan had faced: not taking a closer look into the song's lyrics. The chorus to "Don't Stop" declares a promise toward a brighter future, not attempting to look back to one's past mistakes in order to move forward:

"Don't stop thinking about tomorrow,  
Don't stop, it'll soon be here.  
It'll be better than before,  
Yesterday's gone, yesterday's gone."<sup>87</sup>

When these lyrics of hope and progress are coupled with the song's third verse however, its meaning becomes far less consistent with the candidate's presidential message:

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<sup>85</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About the Music*, 172-173.

<sup>86</sup> Fleetwood Mac ~ Don't Stop ~ Live 1993, Accessed March 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3JA1nWPFqM>

<sup>87</sup> Fleetwood Mac. Lyrics to "Don't Stop," <https://genius.com/Fleetwood-mac-dont-stop-lyrics>, (February 15, 2019).

“All I want is to see you smile,  
If it takes just a little while,  
I know you don’t believe that it’s true,  
I never meant any harm to you.”<sup>88</sup>

When taking this verse into consideration, the use of “Don’t Stop” draws parallels to the Reagan campaign team’s misinterpretation of “Born in the U.S.A.” in that Bill Clinton and his campaign team failed to recognize the direct meaning of the song. Written for Fleetwood Mac’s 1977 album *Rumours*, the work reflected the feelings that vocalist/keyboardist Christine McVie had after separating from her husband John McVie, who also happened to be the band’s bass player.<sup>89</sup> This once again proved to be another example of misusing musical works within the context of an American presidential campaign.

Other than the use of campaign music, Clinton utilized his own musical talents on the saxophone throughout his campaign. The most notable display of his abilities on the instrument occurred during a memorable appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992. The show began with Clinton performing saxophone alongside the house band, soloing on the Elvis Presley standard “Heartbreak Hotel.”<sup>90</sup> This was in contrast to previous candidates who attempted to showcase their musical talents through television, with Richard Nixon’s performance of an

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<sup>88</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 223.

<sup>89</sup> *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Don’t Stop (Fleetwood Mac song),” last modified February 18, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t\\_Stop\\_\(Fleetwood\\_Mac\\_song\)#cite\\_note-Bob-1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t_Stop_(Fleetwood_Mac_song)#cite_note-Bob-1)

<sup>90</sup> Bill Clinton playing saxophone on Arsenio Hall Show (HD), accessed February 1, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a\\_WuGDYawFQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_WuGDYawFQ)

original piano concerto on *The Tonight Show* being an early example (although this occurred after he ran for president in 1960).<sup>91</sup> Bill Clinton's musical showcase took a rock & roll approach as opposed to a typically dignified, poised musical styling that was favored by previous administrations. It spoke directly to the "MTV generation" and helped define Clinton as an "average guy" who was "good for the American people," rather than a "tax-and-spend liberal."<sup>92</sup>

Despite some members of Bush's campaign team feeling that presidential candidates appearing on late-night talk shows was somewhat un-presidential, the strategy seemed to work. Clinton was able to make a strong impression on select demographics in a "settled environment" by appearing on *Arsenio*. One of these demographics was African American viewers, giving Clinton the opportunity to reach out to a generation of voters that was racially diverse. The appearance on a show like *Arsenio Hall* demonstrated how the use of media such as music and television were capable of boosting a candidate's popularity to even greater heights.<sup>93</sup> In the process, music or musical performance throughout a campaign could be seen as integral to grabbing the attention of voters, especially if the strategy increased the mobilization of voters pertaining to specific minority groups. Presidential candidates were now able to reach out to voters who would typically feel politically unaware, particularly Generation X in the 1990s and the Millennials in the 2000s/2010s. Campaigning through entertainment media, such as television, is now viewed as integral to convince politically uninformed voters to go to the polls

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<sup>91</sup> Richard Nixon plays his Piano Concerto #1, accessed March 16, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCsGSMze\\_6Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCsGSMze_6Q)

<sup>92</sup> Robert E. Denton Jr., *The 1992 Presidential Campaign: A Communication Perspective* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1994), 146.

<sup>93</sup> Gallagher, *The American Presidency and Entertainment Media*, 54-55.



in November. Utilizing the art of music to capture an even larger pool of voters in America began with the candidacy of Barack Obama in 2008.

The 2008 presidential election was a historic moment in American politics. Not since the year 2000 had there been a Democratic president sitting in office, with Presidential Nominee Barack Obama himself stating that having his Republican rival John McCain win the election would be akin to “Bush’s Third Term.”<sup>94</sup> With the U.S. economic collapse wreaking havoc on the country's financial structure, the time had come for substantial change when electing America’s next president. Barack Obama ran a campaign that was defined by his message advocating “hope and change” for the American people.<sup>95</sup> The way Obama’s campaign team orchestrated a successful election cycle that relied heavily on media usage, particularly internet platforms such as YouTube, showed the role campaign songs played in promoting his candidacy through niche networking. Whether they were original songs from popular musical acts, or popular music works used within his campaign advertisements, the art of the campaign song came back to prominence during the 2008 election, greatly affecting the campaign outcomes of both Barack Obama and John McCain in the process.

Politics can prove to be nothing short of a popularity contest when it comes to presidential elections. Each campaign team finds a unique way to sell a candidate’s ideals and agendas through the use of mass media, which is precisely where campaign music comes into play. Previously, I noted the merits of Kennedy and Eisenhower using the art of the campaign

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<sup>94</sup> West, *Air Waves*, 1, 5.

<sup>95</sup> Signs of Hope & Change, accessed February 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcRA2AZsR2Q>

song to bolster their popularity among the Baby Boomer generation that was becoming even more defined by its excessive media consumption. While Reagan, Bush, and Clinton chose specific songs by popular artists during their campaigns, the candidacy of Barack Obama expanded upon this idea and simultaneously took a page from the Kennedy notebook: using campaign songs specifically written for the purpose of promoting a presidential bid. Even in an era defined by modern technology such as the internet, music streaming, and cable television, the 2008 election showed that Barack Obama was looking to past candidates and their campaign strategies in order to secure his role in American politics.

Before delving into how Barack Obama used campaign music to capture the hearts and minds of American voters, it is important to look at the ways in which his campaign rival Hillary Clinton used modern technology and music in an attempt to win the Democratic nomination. When deciding upon a campaign song to use for her 2008 run, Hillary Clinton decided to take advantage of modern day technology by e-mailing and texting supporters in order to ask which song would make the cut. The final list consisted of a selection of works spanning different genres of American music including pop/rock, U2's "City of Blinding Lights," modern rock, Smash Mouth's "I'm a Believer," and country, the Dixie Chicks' "Ready to Run." Hillary Clinton then released to her constituents the final ten selections in order for them to select the winning work.<sup>96</sup> To announce the top pick, she uploaded an elaborate parody of the final episode of *The Sopranos* in which Bill and Hillary sit in a diner booth as the latter inserts a quarter into

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<sup>96</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About the Music*, 210-211.

the jukebox to play the selected song (the camera cuts to black before the song is heard, directly referencing the original finale of *The Sopranos*).<sup>97</sup>

Hillary Clinton's strategy was a brilliant move. By allowing the public to vote on what would be her official campaign song, it gave her supporters the feeling that they had a "personal stake" in the election. It is also important to point out that Clinton compiled a shortlist consisting of songs that she felt were already immensely popular with a large majority of Americans. Doing so led to the idea that if the song selected was popular among her supporters, then it is possible that like-minded individuals would consequently find both the song and the candidate appealing as well. However, this strategy does present potential problems which may have hindered its initial success among the electorate. If the actual song vote turned out to be relatively slim, resulting in a small majority or plurality, then the selected song might prove to be unpopular among the candidate's core group of supporters. There was even talk during the 2008 election that Hillary Clinton's dissenters might rig the online system from which voters could select her campaign song. While there is no evidence of this happening, the accessibility of the internet would have made it easy for non-supporters to do so.<sup>98</sup> The latter risk is one that previous campaigns did not bother to worry about, since the internet, in the case of Bush and Bill Clinton's presidential runs, was still in the process of undergoing technological advancements regarding networking with a mass audience. As the twenty-first century was proving for many candidates, the internet was becoming even more integral in selling the image and political ideals

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<sup>97</sup> Hillary Clinton Sopranos Parody, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BEPcJlz2wE>

<sup>98</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About the Music*, 210-211.

of presidential candidates, but the use of popular music as a campaign song was becoming more complex in the process.

It should be noted that the winning work chosen as Hillary Clinton's official campaign song, Celine Dion's "You and I," failed to embody what she had to offer as a presidential candidate, coming off as a bland and mediocre love song that did not emphasize any of her political agendas or beliefs:

"You and I,  
We're meant to fly,  
Higher than the clouds,  
We'll sail across the sky,  
So come with me,  
And you will feel,  
That we're soaring,  
That we're floating up so high,  
Because you and I were meant to fly."<sup>99</sup>

While the lyrics are inspiring as a love song, they do not exemplify a specific agenda behind Hillary Clinton's campaign. Because of this, the song works more as a tribute to her meaningful relationship with supporters than as a call to action regarding feminism, politics, or American

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<sup>99</sup> Celine Dion. Lyrics to "You and I." Accessed March 06, 2019, <https://genius.com/Celine-dion-you-and-i-lyrics>

patriotism. All three of these were topics that could have worked to Clinton's advantage in showcasing what her candidacy represented, but the song became another example of how popular music can easily be misused or misunderstood by voters when placed in the context of American politics. Barack Obama appeared to follow the same strategy, selecting Stevie Wonder's "Signed, Sealed, Delivered I'm Yours" as a song that would be played at many of his rallies.<sup>100</sup> While the refrain presented the message that Obama was "here, yours, and ready to serve," some of the lyrics described a man who had practiced unintended foolishness and was attempting to rise from his mistakes:<sup>101</sup>

"Like a fool I went and stayed too long,  
And now I'm wondering if your love's still strong.  
Ooh baby, here I am, signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours!

Then that time I went and said goodbye,  
Now I'm back and not ashamed to cry.  
Ooh baby, here I am, signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours!"<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Barack Obama-Signed, sealed, delivered, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wune3JKUtRo>

<sup>101</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About the Music*, 215.

<sup>102</sup> Stevie Wonder. Lyrics to "Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)." Accessed March 06, 2019, <https://genius.com/Stevie-wonder-signed-sealed-delivered-im-yours-lyrics>

While the Wonder selection was a smart choice for Obama’s campaign, presenting himself to voters by using a song by one of America’s most iconic African American musical acts, these words unintentionally implied that Obama maintained a sense of doubt regarding the future of his candidacy, showing even more so how problematic the use of popular song was when it came to running a successful campaign. This did nothing to hinder his campaign, however. Stevie Wonder himself ended up speaking and singing at an Obama campaign rally at UCLA.<sup>103</sup> In order to use music in a way that connected with voters, while also projecting strong political and social messages, the Obama campaign team would have to use creative strategies that reshaped how the campaign song was composed and heard.

In 2008, Grammy winning artist will.i.am. of rap/pop group The Black Eyed Peas released an unsolicited campaign song entitled “Yes We Can,” a song that derived all of its lyrics from a speech made by Obama at a primary in New Hampshire:

“It was a creed, written into the founding documents.

That declared the destiny, of a nation – yes we can.

It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists,

As they blazed a trail toward freedom – yes we can, yes we can.

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores,

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<sup>103</sup> Obama-Stevie Wonder at UCLA, accessed March 06, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWL1G8iu32g>

And pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness – yes we can.”<sup>104</sup>

Unlike the majority of campaign songs discussed in previous sections, “Yes We Can” derived its lyrics exclusively from the words of its candidate. In doing so, it not only gave listeners a sense of the type of candidate Barack Obama was, but also showed how powerful his speeches could be. While the song itself is uplifting, the music video accompanying the song was even more significant in its attempts to reach out to voters. Released on the video streaming platform YouTube, it features will.i.am. and notable celebrities such as John Legend, Herbie Hancock, Common, and Tracee Ellis Ross filmed in dramatic black and white cinematography as they sing and recite the words from Obama’s speech. The actual audio and video of Obama making the speech is juxtaposed with this footage, creating a stirring effect that makes the video unlike any campaign endorsement seen in American campaign history.<sup>105</sup> This video was an example of an ongoing strategy being utilized by both Obama’s campaign team and that of his rival’s, John McCain, with both candidates setting up YouTube channels prior to their 2008 presidential bids to go along with their official campaign websites. Obama’s YouTube page had amassed 113,000 subscribers by November 2008, with its 1,760 videos being viewed a staggering 94 million times.<sup>106</sup> These numbers indicate just how popular internet campaigning was with Millennial

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<sup>104</sup> will.i.am. Lyrics to “Yes We Can.” Accessed April 01, 2019, <https://genius.com/William-yes-we-can-lyrics>

<sup>105</sup> Yes We Can-Barack Obama Music Video, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY>

<sup>106</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 219-221.

voters, demonstrating how the internet was becoming an integral force in promoting the image of presidential candidates to the American electorate. More importantly, videos like “Yes We Can” took the art of the campaign song and used it to bolster the image of Barack Obama by using his exact words.

The lyrics to “Yes We Can” cannot exactly be called original since they derived directly from Obama’s speech, but they still presented him as a candidate concerned with promoting the values of hope and freedom to millions of voters. It also helped that the accompanying video featured a large number of African American celebrities since a large portion of the Senator’s supporters were of that minority. This played an important role in mobilizing African American voters of the Millennial Generation, showing how the use of niche networking sites helped bolster the campaign of Obama in 2008. Even if will.i.am. and his musical work showed that campaign music worked best when using the candidate’s own words, Obama’s Republican rival John McCain and his team followed the strategies of Kennedy and Eisenhower by using campaign songs that were either completely original, or centered on a previously popular work with revised lyrics pertaining to the election.

As opposed to selecting songs that emphasized messages of hope, prosperity, and the idea of community, McCain and his team were handed two songs by popular artists whose lyrics reflected, or had been reworked to promote his candidacy. Whereas Obama received substantial support from celebrities throughout his campaign, as evident through the appearance of many famous individuals in the “Yes We Can” music video, the McCain campaign team reached out to conservative country artists John Rich and Hank Williams Jr. to create a set of songs for his



presidential run. The first, “Raisin’ McCain” by John Rich, follows the standard ‘rock n roll’ 12-bar blues blueprint, with a vocal refrain similar to Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B Goode” (1958).<sup>107</sup> In “Raisin’ McCain,” there was a heavy reliance on placing emphasis on the candidate’s name over a catchy rhythm in order to grab the listener’s attention:

“Well we’re all just raisin’ McCain,  
Everywhere across the USA.  
You can get on the train or get out of the way,  
We’re all just raisin’ McCain.”<sup>108</sup>

The song also makes reference to the candidate’s past experience in the military, painting the Arizona Senator as an American war hero:

“Well he got shot down in a Vietnam town,  
Fighting for the red, white and blue.  
And they locked him up in the Hanoi Hilton,  
Thinking they could break him in two.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 219-221.

<sup>108</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 219.

<sup>109</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 220.

Watching the official promotional video for John Rich's "Raisin' McCain" showcases the artist performing in what appears to be a honkey-tonk as the audience waves banners and posters sporting the senator's name.<sup>110</sup> When coupled with the obvious cowboy imagery and patriotic content, the campaign now had a song built to please the Senator's conservative audience. Whether this would be enough to help capture more base votes or not, the song still showed that the original campaign song was alive and well in the twenty-first century.

While "Raisin' McCain" made an explicit effort to highlight the patriotism and military experience of John McCain, Hank Williams Jr's "McCain-Palin Tradition" took a different approach by focusing more on attacking left-wing liberals:

"The left wing liberal media have,  
Always been a real close knit family.  
But, most of the American People,  
Don't believe em anyway ya see.  
Stop and think it over,  
Before you make your decision.  
If they sell something,  
They're gonna come down strong.  
It's a McCain-Palin tradition."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> John Rich-Raisin' McCain Music Video, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmKgITJefg>

<sup>111</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About the Music*, 220.

The song was more aggressive than “Raisin’ McCain,” choosing to use the campaign song as a mode of attack instead of highlighting McCain’s past experiences or political agendas. “McCain-Palin Tradition,” however, was a hit among McCain’s supporters, with Williams himself even appeared at one of the Senator’s campaign rallies to perform the song in the company of Vice-Presidential Nominee Sarah Palin and her family.<sup>112</sup> The lyrics of “McCain-Palin Tradition” make the song come off as juvenile in its execution. As opposed to writing the lyrics to reflect the core values and beliefs of John McCain’s presidential bid, the song was an example in showing what the Obama team was doing right: relying on the candidate’s own words to provide a sense of reliability to voters that Obama was concerned about securing a successful future for all Americans.

As the election began to reach its completion in 2008, John McCain began to use popular song more extensively throughout his campaign, a strategy popular with many of the candidates discussed in earlier sections such as Walter Mondale and Ronald Reagan. Like Reagan however, McCain and his team took popular songs at face value based on musical hooks such as the vocal refrain, guitar riff, or other musical features. At rallies, the song “Thunderstruck” by rock band AC/DC would be played beforehand to ramp up the crowd.<sup>113</sup> The pulsating rhythm, blistering guitar riff, and powerful vocal performance make for a song ideal for escalating the energy of a large audience. The problem was that the song contained many lyrics concerning references to lude behavior and illegal activity:

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<sup>112</sup> Hank Williams JR-“The McCain-Palin Tradition”, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2MKG2hFWao>

<sup>113</sup> Schoening and Kasper, *Don’t Stop Thinking About the Music*, 222-223.

“Went down the highway,  
Broke the limit, we hit the town.  
Went through to Texas,  
Yeah, Texas and we had some fun.  
We met some girls,  
Some dancers who gave a good time.  
Broke all the rules, played all the fools,  
Yeah-yeah, they, they, they blew our minds.”<sup>114</sup>

The continuing misuse of popular song by presidential campaign teams had carried itself into the 2008 election, once again proving that using songs outside of the political spectrum or failing to highlight a candidate’s agendas can be problematic. The use of “Thunderstruck” could have made it difficult for some voters to perceive John McCain the way he wanted to be as a presidential candidate. Obama’s use of mass media, semi-original campaign music, and support from celebrities helped catapult the Illinois Senator to the presidency and, in the process, become America’s first African American president.

If there is anything to be learned from the strategies utilized by both Barack Obama and John McCain, it is that the use of niche network sites such as YouTube played a large role in connecting younger voters with presidential candidates. While artists John Rich and Hank Williams Jr. had maintained steady followings over the course of their careers, the musical

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<sup>114</sup> AC/DC. Lyrics to “Thunderstruck.” Accessed April 01, 2019, <https://genius.com/Ac-dc-thunderstruck-lyrics>

variety and diversity seen in will.i.am's "Yes We Can" video showcased the impact Obama made on musicians popular with a younger, more culturally diverse audience. In the process, he was able to capture the vote of Millennials looking for a leader who spoke to their ideals and beliefs. Mirroring this idea of connecting with a younger generation, Barack Obama's pre-inaugural celebration consisted of a varied lineup of performers who embodied both musical and ethnic diversity:

- Bruce Springsteen (rock musician)
- Mary J. Blige (R&B artist)
- John Legend (urban contemporary)
- will.i.am. (hip-hop/R&B)
- Herbie Hancock (jazz)
- Renée Fleming (opera)
- James Taylor (folk)
- Sheryl Crow (pop/country)<sup>115</sup>

In demonstrating throughout his campaign how music could bring people together through the utilization of internet platforms, Obama was a president whose legacy not only demonstrated

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<sup>115</sup> Jack Shepherd, "Donald Trump inauguration line-up vs Barack Obama's: How the two celebrity filled concerts measure up," *Independent* (January 17, 2017), accessed March 27, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/donald-trump-barack-obama-inauguration-line-up-concert-a7531261.html>

how far America had come from a social and political standpoint, but also gave future candidates the blueprint for how to run a campaign through the use of mass media and music.

## CONCLUSION

After examining the role of music in presidential campaigns over the past sixty years, what conclusion can be made about the campaign song and its impact on an election's outcome? The strategies utilized by the Kennedy, Reagan, and Obama teams highlighted their respective political agendas and viewpoints, but also furthered the notion that American celebrity had officially bled into the realm of politics. This had to do primarily with the role mass media played in bolstering presidential campaigns beyond the realm of radio and newspaper press outlets.

In using the mass medium of television to promote campaign music, as evidenced by the Eisenhower and Kennedy campaigns, candidates were able to connect with a mass audience in a manner similar to talk show hosts and notable television stars. In the 1960s, Kennedy had his campaign songs aired as commercial jingles that would become engrained in viewers' heads, while also exploiting his charming personality in order to appear more relatable to the American people. This is the point at which the idea of celebrity came to define how a candidate presented himself to voters, laying the foundation for the modern presidential election by manipulating the emotions of the electorate. Kennedy and his campaign also showed how important it was to begin selling one's candidacy as if it were a product in addition to stating political goals, agendas, or policies, as discussed previously with the "I Like Ike" advertisement from 1952.

In the 1980s, Reagan continued to exploit the idea of celebrity status in using both his Hollywood connections and well-liked musical works to reinforce his already popular presidency. The backlash he faced from certain popular artists after misusing their songs, as with Bruce Springsteen and "Born in the U.S.A.," cast a shadow over this strategy, but the size of this

shadow depends on the demographic of voters who truly cared about how Reagan misinterpreted Springsteen's hit song. Reagan's landslide victory at the close of the 1984 election suggested that it was simply a blip on the public radar, consequently opening the door for future campaigns to commit similar actions in the future (as was the case with both George H. W. Bush with "This Land Is Your Land," and Bill Clinton with "Don't Stop"). While public figures should respect the wishes of popular songwriters, a case can also be made for understanding the reasons a candidate might blindly select a popular song: how is a candidate to know the true meaning of a musical work if its chorus or "hook" prominently contradicts the content of the verses?

This notion has carried itself well into the twenty-first century. Barack Obama's use of "Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)" was a notable example, but did little to affect the impression he had made on supporters-including Stevie Wonder himself. John McCain had chosen a safer route by using original works written for his campaign, but they were songs whose lyrics were largely unfamiliar to voters. While Obama's "Yes We Can" seemed like a similar case, the fact that they lyrics derived almost entirely from one of the candidate's own speeches helped to give voters a much clearer representation as to what type of president he hoped to be. In retrospect, both popular song and original campaign works served significant purposes, but "Yes We Can" proved that the beliefs and actions of the candidate himself mattered far more than the musical content of the campaign song. This showed just how little it mattered to voters how music related to the candidate, as it did not directly define what the candidate stands for in the long run.

With these ideas in mind, what should one make of America's political climate today when regarding music's role in an election? In the case of Donald Trump, the use of "You Can't



Always Get What You Want” proved just how irrelevant campaign music appeared to be in influencing the opinions of the electorate, as the song did nothing more than serve as a musical cue that heightened the energy of the audience. It seems as if the 2008 election was the end of an era, one in which advancements in modern technology helped to bolster the profiles of songs such as “Yes We Can” and “Raisin’ McCain.” While this new media helped present campaign songs from a unique perspective that gave them a renewed sense of relevancy, the increased reliance on mass technology used by the Millennial generation has now been taken for granted, making the campaign song an antiquated relic of American politics.

While candidates might rely less on campaign songs to reinforce their political agendas and presidential messages, the works from the past can be used not only to understand how elections were run in the years prior, but also to make the distinction between candidates presenting themselves as straight up politicians and later as political celebrities. The arc of politics in America has officially been diverted into the world of entertainment media, making the idea of celebrity a central role in defining the success of a presidential candidate among voters. From this perspective, it becomes easy to understand how and why candidates such as Kennedy and Obama triumphed over less charismatic individuals such as Nixon and McCain. Celebrity has played such an integral role in defining recent presidential campaigns, that the true values, agendas, and, on occasion, morals of candidates can become unclear or overshadowed altogether. Looking at an advertisement such as “Kennedy” from 1960 proves this point all too clear: in focusing so much on the candidate’s youth and personality, Kennedy was able to charm his way into the hearts and minds of the American people, creating an almost mythic presence in the media that overwhelmed other aspects of his presidency.

For the future, it is important to not only remember these campaign songs for their lyrics, compositional structure, and performance elements that sold them to the electorate, but to also view them as an important relic of America's past. As each era progressed, the songs came to define not just the candidates, but the cultural atmosphere surrounding each election. In a way, each song serves as a time capsule for a bygone generation, one whose legacy will continue to be remembered as long as these songs continue to be analyzed, mused over, and enjoyed in the years to come. Whether or not they serve to influence the campaigns of future candidates, they will always be remembered for their role in helping shape the future of the American presidential candidate, for better or for worse.

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