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## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

# Music and Sound in the Twenty-First-Century U.S. Presidential Campaign

*You Shook Me All Campaign Long: Music in the 2016 Presidential Election and Beyond.* Edited by Eric T. Kasper and Benjamin Schoening. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2018. 352 pp.

*Discordant Democracy: Noise, Affect, Populism, and the Presidential Campaign.* By Justin Patch. New York: Routledge, 2019. 176 pp.

Scholars familiar with the literature on persuasion in presidential elections will note that most studies in that literature focus on rhetorical appeals, visual style, demography, and various other aspects, while largely scanting music and other aural phenomena. These two recent books—one an edited volume about music in the 2016 election, the other a monograph about noise resulting from democratic impulses in the 2008 and 2016 elections—believe that trend by exploring aural aspects of recent U.S. presidential campaigns. They are therefore welcome contributions to the scholarly discourse on U.S. politics.

With *You Shook Me All Campaign Long*, Eric T. Kasper and Benjamin Schoening have assembled an impressive group of scholars from multiple disciplines, employing variegated methodologies to address music—and sound, broadly construed—in the 2016 presidential election. Divided into 10 chapters and an introduction, the book offers astute analyses using rhetorical and textual analysis, musical genre associations, timbral connotations, and more, as well as general observations about the 2016 political scene. One aspect lacking in the chapters is any traditional musical analysis, which would have made the book more valuable to musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and other scholars with expertise in music. And given that music is the central focus, as stated in the book's subtitle, one would have expected to find at least some discussion of music qua music. It is admittedly hard work to situate music analysis within broader contexts, but such work often yields the most fruitful results. Nevertheless, the book has much to recommend it, as noted below.

Many edited books are characterized by some unevenness of the relevancy or efficacy of the arguments of particular contributors. This book is no exception. Generally speaking, the chapters are well-researched and offer complementary perspectives on the music

and soundscapes of the election. Justin Patch writes compellingly about active listening and the repurposing of pop music, which is so much a part of modern political discourse. Lars J. Kristiansen presents a taut account of punk's legacy in a well-written, mostly historical survey of punk in American politics, which, he concludes, has rebelled most vociferously against Republican presidents, particularly Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush and, most recently, Donald Trump. Eunice Rojas deftly applies Antonio Gramsci's theories to the counterhegemonic, antineoliberal hip-hop of Latino artists Rebel Diaz and Residente. And Nancy A. Wiencek, Jonathan Millen, and David R. Dewberry argue that confusing campaign song list choices reflect poor campaign organization; the authors' results are mixed, and they make no causal connection between the two factors.

Elsewhere, Kasper treats candidates' use of music as indicative of their interpretive frameworks for the U.S. Constitution, with Ted Cruz advancing originalism; Donald Trump, structuralism; Hillary Clinton, pragmatism; and Bernie Sanders, living constitutionalism. Kasper's argument is thought-provoking in an academic sense but is not altogether convincing, because there is no indication that campaigns choose music to reflect their constitutional views—maybe, instead, they choose music for a tight groove or soaring vocals. Quentin Viregge's argument about the Trump campaign song, “Freedom's Call” by the USA Freedom Kids, is more convincing, framing the music as hewing to a reflection of the authoritarian, strict parent model of which linguist George Lakoff writes (*Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* [White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2014]).

Not surprisingly, Trump receives a great deal of attention from the contributors. Lily E. Hirsch, for example, observes how music was used as a tool of distraction during the 2016 campaign, particularly through generating outrage by using artists' music without their permission or by calling out the cast of the Broadway show *Hamilton* for embarrassing Vice President Mike Pence at a performance. And David Wilson describes in detail the variety in Trump's campaign song list, which included “Nessun Dorma” from Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot*, “Memory” from Andrew Lloyd Webber's Broadway musical *Cats*, Twisted Sister's “We're Not Gonna Take It Anymore,” Adele's “Skyfall” (featured in the eponymous James Bond film of 2012), and the Rolling Stones' “You Can't Always Get What You Want.” Wilson offers speculation about what each song choice might say about Trump's character. (Unfortunately, there is no chapter in the book devoted solely to the ad music of Bernie Sanders's Democratic primary campaign, which, with Diplo's “Revolution” and Simon and Garfunkel's “America,” offered the most intriguing uses of music in the 2016 election.)

Filling out the roster of chapters are the book's weakest and strongest entries, by Kate Zittlow Rogness and Daniel Oore, respectively. In a chapter titled “This Is Our Fight Song,” Rogness writes about gender in the election, specifically, about how former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented herself as a strong woman through her campaign song list as well as how Rogness believes that the U.S. public held Clinton's gender against her at the voting booth. The author devotes the first half of her chapter to a general discussion of Clinton's 2016 campaign, in which Senator Bernie Sanders and his supporters are the target of the author's obloquy. Using the epithet “Bernie Bro”

uncritically, Rogness also writes of the “enthusiastic animosity” of “Bernie Bros” toward Clinton and her supporters (219). Not only does Rogness's chapter become bogged down in unfounded attacks on the alleged sexist motivation of criticisms of Clinton's policies, but it also loses sight of the musical aspects of her campaign.

The chapter offers almost no discussion of the music itself of “Fight Song,” and the little that is offered is simplistic: “The chorus's major key conveys not only the rightness of the audience's emotional connection, but the belief that they can now, more than ever before, take back their life that has been held hostage by sexism” (228–29). Rogness does not explain why the major mode would necessarily connote the appropriateness of an audience's connection to the song. Moreover, the video is on YouTube, so there is no clear positive audience reaction the author can point to, as the message is one direction only, although the viewer comments posted underneath are almost universally negative (“Democratic National Convention—Our Fight Song” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YttscNOoAjA>).

In contrast, Oore's chapter, “Trump the Musical Prophet,” is a tour de force. I am not certain that I can fully express how powerful its arguments are, but I will try. The author divides Trump's musical gestures into four categories: lexical, kinesthetic, auditory, and mythic. Such gestures, Oore argues, have a hypnotizing effect on the U.S. public: “While we are glued to screens showing Trump's gestures, he is no less fixated on how we receive and reconstruct them. The notion that ‘Trump is actually a very good listener’ provokes ‘laughter’ and ‘cynical chuckles,’ but it is precisely by attending to our reactions—however selectively—that he has learned to mesmerize and misdirect us with gestures that are ‘newsworthy’” (265). (The internal quotations are from Jean Grant, “Five Things We Learned from Justin Trudeau's Interview with the New York Times at U of T,” *Toronto Life*, June 23, 2017, <https://torontolife.com/city/toronto-politics/five-things-learned-justin-trudeaus-interview-new-york-times-u-t/>; Ian Austin, “Trudeau on Trump: ‘He Actually Does Listen,’” *New York Times*, June 22, 2017, sec. Americas, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/22/world/americas/trudeau-trump-nafta-canada.html>; and Savannah Guthrie, “‘Fire and Fury’ Author Michael Wolff: ‘I Absolutely’ Spoke to President Donald Trump,” *Today* [NBC News, January 5, 2018], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REEg6Jwmp6s>.) According to the author, then, Trump's gestures are effective because he attends to his reception by the public.

Oore's chapter required a startling amount of research; in approximately 32 pages, there are 215 endnotes. With magisterial sweep, the author analyzes a dizzying number of user-generated musical reassembling of Trump's speeches on YouTube, such as Avner Hanani's “Trump Sonata,” which uses Steve Reich–inspired minimalism to bring out Trump's spoken inflections and rhythms, and the bass cover by Iggy Jackson Cohen titled “Donald Trump Says ‘China,’” in which Cohen plays along with a video of Trump saying “China,” each bass lick conforming to Trump's rhythmic and intonational patterns. Oore argues further that the focus in various YouTube parodies on the corporeality of Trump (repetition of his vocables, phonemes, words, and phrases as well as caricatures of his appearance) paradoxically fixes his mythic status in the minds of the public. Throughout the chapter, Oore examines Trump's persona as an exhibitionist performer, how Trump

exploited public outrage against him, and how he benefited from public mash-ups of his campaign speeches and interviews.

Patch's *Discordant Democracy* takes a broader approach than the Kasper and Schoening volume in that it does not treat music per se; rather, it addresses the role of noise in two presidential election cycles. It is sometimes hard to ascertain what exactly the author means by *noise* because he sometimes writes of differentiating the signal from the noise (72ff), while at other times he writes that “the noise is the signal” (97). Addressing music from recent campaigns, Patch writes of the use of genre to reach out to voters by presenting a musical identity with which certain demographics would identify: Barack Obama with the rhythm and blues–tinged pop of Stevie Wonder; Mitt Romney with the country rock of Kid Rock; Clinton with the electropop of Katy Perry; and Bernie Sanders with the folk rock of Simon and Garfunkel (28).

In several ways, *Discordant Democracy* is not written as a typical academic monograph. The author states outright that he makes no pretenses toward distanced, disinterested analysis, opting instead for an unabashedly emotional stance toward his subject. Written in two modes, with vignettes set off by italics from the roman font of the rest of the body text, Patch's narrative presents theoretically underpinned discussions of magic, faith, and affect, and their relation to sound, interspersed with vignettes based on the author's own experiences.

Patch is an ethnomusicologist. Like anthropologists, ethnomusicologists conduct field work. The cardinal rule for such scholarship is to avoid becoming too involved in the observed rituals so as to avoid partiality and to retain some semblance of objectivity. Patch freely admits that he is abandoning this principle with his vignettes and his submission to “getting spun” (22) by the 2008 and 2016 campaigns. He does so for a reason. Through his surrender to what he calls “campaign magic” (Chapter 3: “Campaign as Modern Magic”), Patch gains insights that he would not have acquired had he tried to remain aloof to emotional appeals. The author's approach is an analog to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: the more precisely one can determine the characteristics of a political element in stasis, the less certain one is of the political momentum of that aspect. Typical scholarly studies of campaigns, therefore, must necessarily leave out important information; a campaign can only be experienced by a human being through the lenses of contingent subjectivity and emotionality.

Reception theory of the affective aspect of campaigns, Patch correctly argues, has been underexplored. Accordingly, the chapter knowingly surrenders pretense at objectivity in hopes of being compensated by compelling insights. Patch's effort is in the spirit of academic activism of the type that Cornel West embodies. The author acknowledges that “listening to campaign spin means opening up to the possibility of being spun, of being transformed by rhetoric, noise, and music” (29), but defends his choice of “setting aside assumptions about objectivity, releasing the ego of the truth-seeking, transcendent ethnographer, and writing the experience of getting spun in a mimetic mode” (29).

One drawback to this methodology is the author's tendency to situate his work incompletely within the scholarly sphere. Many citations read merely “see Lakoff” (15) or “see Morath” (15), rather than providing details of how his arguments relate to the

theories presented in his cited works. This pattern makes it difficult for the uninitiated reader to ascertain exactly how Patch's book fits into the broader scholarly discussion.

Chapter 8, “Our Politics: Deafened and Dumbstruck”—about how American citizens do not listen to each other in political discourse—is of particular interest. That the Democrats and Republicans represent two sides of a tug-of-war, both poised on opposite poles of an ideal societal configuration, is merely an opinion. Another would be that one party has a habit of refusing to compromise, while the other party continually acquiesces in the majority of cases to the positions of the uncompromising party—thus, obviating the need for the victorious party to compromise. Yet another opinion would be that neither the Democratic nor the Republican Party is invested in the struggles of the lower orders, because both serve primarily the interests of oligarchs (Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives in Politics* 12 [2014]: 564–81). Thus, Patch's plea for the powerful elites to listen to the plight of society's vulnerable might be a bit too optimistic. What is the incentive for the powerful to listen to the cries of the disadvantaged or oppressed? Perhaps the only way to effect lasting political change will be through mass nonviolent civil disobedience, as Chris Hedges maintains (*America: The Farewell Tour* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018]).

Despite these relatively minor shortcomings, however, Patch raises many questions—even ending some chapters with a question—and this is perhaps the strongest aspect of this smart and incisive book. *Discordant Democracy* is well-researched, and its heuristic value is significant.

Considered together, *You Shook Me All Campaign Long* and *Discordant Democracy* contribute viewpoints on the role of sound and music that have been sorely needed in presidential studies. Readers will find in their more than five hundred combined pages ample material with which to ponder how music and other aural phenomena add to our presidential campaign discourse. In fact, both books can, by and large, be understood by general readers without specialized musical training.

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