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Music for Counting Votes

As the counting of votes for the 2020 presidential election in Philadelphia wore on through the week, two competing sound systems were set up outside the city's Convention Center, right across the street from one another at 12th and Arch. On one corner, outside the entrance to the Reading Terminal Market, a coalition of progressive groups conducted a raucous, roiling dance party that on most days stretched late into the night. Separated from the dance party by a line of police and metal barricades, a much smaller group of Donald Trump's supporters gathered waving flags and "Stop the Count" signs. They erected their own sound system and proceeded to create their own soundscape: mostly classic rock, sports arena anthems, several iterations of the Village People's "YMCA," and at least once Rage Against the Machine's "Killing in the Name."

The immediate reaction of many academic and journalistic voices to Trump supporters mobilizing this music was one of mockery: there is a "correct" meaning to these songs, from the Village People's celebration of anonymous gay sex in gyms to Rage Against the Machine's left-wing excoriation of police violence, and conservatives lack the savvy to know this, just as with famous examples, such as "Born in the USA" or "Fortunate Son."

Our mockery (for I of course include myself in this initial reaction) is at odds with longstanding perspectives in popular music studies, which frequently points out that the "meaning" of a song is not solely determined by the songwriter's intention, nor indeed does the song ever have just one meaning.[1] That is true of all music, but perhaps especially popular music in the United States, descended from centuries of often violent appropriation and exploitation, produced through complex corporate mediations, and consumed by extremely diverse audiences. As much as we might like it to be so, and despite the outraged tweets and cease-and-desist orders, neither Rage Against the Machine nor savvy critics such as ourselves actually control how their songs are used. Rather than speak about what the meaning of a song "actually" is, we ought instead ask, "What work do these songs accomplish?" Perhaps more importantly, what can we learn about practical issues of political organizing from that work?

I was prevented by police from engaging with the Trump supporters directly, but as an outside observer, it seemed evident that their sound system was helping them delineate

1. See for example the historiography of Daphne A. Brooks, which emphasizes how the long history of popular music studies prioritizes political and cultural contexts for musical meaning: "'Once More with Feeling': Popular Music Studies in the New Millennium," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 22, no. 1 (March 2010): 98–106.

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community, both the physical space of their small fenced-in pen, and the conceptual space of their chosen world. In the twenty-first century, political work almost always begins with constructing and mobilizing identity. Trumpism as a phenomenon certainly builds on the work of previous right-wing communities, especially the segregationist and anti-abortion white Christian right, but also has successfully expanded that political identity into new precincts. The playlist of the Trump community in Philadelphia seemed to be doing precisely that work of expansion, rooted in traditional right-wing commitments to whiteness and the evangelical mode of defiance against (presumptively liberal) "culture," but in a more avowedly secular form of both.

While not every participant was white, the playlist nevertheless affirmed the centrality of whiteness to the group's identity. It wasn't that the music was "white," exactly. Plenty of it, from Queen to the Village People, was by artists who can't be considered white. But the curation of what constitutes classic rock, either at this rally or on many radio stations, seems purposefully calculated to eschew the sorts of groove-oriented rhythmic complexities and technological mediations those particular white audiences themselves code as non-white.

When I asked colleagues on Twitter what to make of "YMCA" specifically, many mentioned the song's common use in sports stadiums and school dances. As Robin James pointed out, the simplicity of the dance requires little coordination and musicality.[2] It is not actually the case, of course, that whiteness is incapable of more complicated dancing and physical embodiment, but sometimes white anxiety leads to its rejection. To complicate matters, it would also be inaccurate to read these stilted physical gestures as elements that accrued to the song over the decades since its release. As Judith Peraino has shown, by 1979, the Village People were being constructed by producer Jacques Morali as a series of "banal media products" whose identities were "inherently disposable." As she writes, we can only read the Village People as a joke on conservative listeners if "we neglect a public relations program that vigorously straightens out the ample gay codes in their songs, and the inherent misogyny that allies gay and straight macho men."[3]

If "YMCA" perhaps drew upon cultural work of white masculinity already inherent in the song itself, the choice of Rage Against the Machine's "Killing in the Name" was a more vexed example of the malleability of aesthetic ideologies. The band and the song are, famously, explicitly leftist, and even the most cursory reading of the lyrics makes clear the intended political effects of the song: to summon anger against police violence and white supremacy. But in a sensitive reading of the "limitations and contradictions of anger" in the band's work, Andrew Green notes how difficult it is for a musical performance of anger to lasso a specific ideology for its audience.[4] With its repeated invocation of "Now you do what they told ya" and Tom Morello's aggressive guitar work seeming to

2. Robin James, Twitter post 6 November 2020, 5:20 pm. https://twitter.com/doctaj/status/1324839029418958850

3. Judith A. Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 185–86.

4. Andrew Green, "Rage Against The Machine, Zapatismo, and the Aesthetics of Anger," *Popular Music* 34, no. 3 (2015): 404–405.

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model rebellion against social norms, "Killing in the Name" easily becomes an anthem of defiance at the mainstream liberal culture imagined to be "stealing the vote."

The work of these songs was effective to an extent. To be more specific, we might follow the example of Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks to think through the relationship of music and social movements as a series of tasks: education, conversation and recruitment, mobilization, and a series of gestures these authors group as "serving the committed."[5] If the music didn't itself recruit and draw Trump supporters to the convention center—given local political demographics, it would be fair to assume that most of them were unlikely to have stumbled across the rally, and had already made plans to travel to the location—it nevertheless sustained their commitment, and gave coherence to their presence; however, if the goal was literally to "stop the steal," it did not achieve that political goal. The crowd never grew large enough, the threatened violence either did not materialize or was stopped by authorities. And ultimately, the musical environment across the street won out, in both sheer numbers and eventual outcome of the vote counting. What was different?

On the temporary dance floor of 12th and Arch, between Reading Terminal Market and a Panera Bread, the music ranged from Motown, to 70s soul, to 90s electronic dance music, to plenty of contemporary hip hop. The somewhat cumbersome gestures of "YMCA" across the street were replaced by a marathon rendition of the "Cha Cha Slide," with local politicians dipping in to take their turn. During the day, spontaneous live music-making materialized from around the city, from the Kol Tzedek Simcha Band to the Positive Movement Entertainment drumline featuring the locally famous "Philly Elmo." The overriding theme, however, was to situate the moment in larger political struggles of the past, while also rooting itself in the local geography of what Charles Carson calls the "fluidity of musical boundaries in Philadelphia," especially its many forms of Black music-making.[6] At one moment on Friday night, the classic 1967 track "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," sung by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell, and long a soundtrack of scenes of political struggle, melded from there into the 2000 Daft Punk-Romanthony collaboration "One More Time" and a series of remixes of classic Philly soul records from the 1970s. In fact, if one could have passed through the Trump supporter barricades, traveling just another block up 12th Street would have brought you to the old home of Sigma Studios, where many of those records were produced.

The location was chosen largely for strategic reasons: with Trump supporters threatening to disrupt the protracted counting of mail-in ballots, the dance party allowed the left-liberal coalition to maintain a presence that could be mobilized against such violence if the need arose. Nevertheless, the decision to maintain that presence with a dance party was equally strategic. Pastor Nicolas O'Rourke, an organizer, told a reporter for the

5. Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 123.

6. Charles Carson, "Broad and Market: At the Crossroads of Race and Class in Philadelphia Jazz, 1956–1980" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

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Philadelphia Inquirer, "Joy is itself an act of resistance."[7] This joyfulness translated into a physical street presence that felt safe, welcoming, and above all, sustainable, in a way that a more typical protest vigil perhaps would have not done. Children were a regular presence; my wife and I brought our small children there to dance one evening, and we were not alone in doing so. It also helped harness a larger crowd. Coming eight months into the pandemic, with winter weather looming just ahead, many embraced the chance to dance in a crowd for the first time all year.

Undoubtedly another key component of the dance party's success was that, unlike the Trump supporters' geographic remove from their own centers of power, the party originated in local political structures, drawing on years of progressive organizing in the city. Joe Biden's campaign was not involved; indeed, many of the individuals and organizations had been supporters of the Sanders and Warren campaigns in the primary. Particularly crucial was a Working Families Party-affiliated group called the Election Defenders led by strategist Nelini Stamp, whose "Joy to the Polls" project had organized similar DJ sessions outside early voting stations in Philadelphia.[8] A series of viral videos helped garner national attention, and "Joy to the Polls" became both a hashtag and a brand, with celebrities from Barack Obama to DJ Jazzy Jeff contributing public Spotify playlists under its rubric.

If the dance party formally originated with the efforts of the Working Families Party, it also gained energy from a larger coalition of Philadelphia progressive organizations. The city has, in recent years seen an effort to coordinate and unite political organizing on the left, which had only grown in scope since Trump's election. Importantly, both Trump and the local Democratic Party machine became foils for an ever-growing web of organizational alliances and campaigns, both electoral and issue-centric. The November presidential ballot also affirmed a series of victories by local progressives who had toppled local Democratic incumbents in primaries earlier that year, including a state senator and a state representative, and joining similarly insurgent officials who had already gained three city council seats and the district attorney's office. In the speeches that interrupted the dance party, the explicit focus was usually on defeating Trump, but it was equally clear that the organizers had larger goals that did not involve the local Party machine.

At the end of the day, the dance party should be judged a success at meeting its stated goal: the vote counting continued safely, unmarred by physical violence, new supporters were drawn into the network of progressive Philly organizations, and already mobilized participants no doubt felt energized and sustained by these victories. Nevertheless, in assessing this success with an aim to replicate it for future political organization, I want to think more carefully about the notion of a dance party in the street. A great deal of media coverage was positive, and taking its cue from the rhetoric of the organizers, made an

7. Anna Orso, "Philadelphia Was Told to Brace for Mass Unrest after the Election. Instead, the City Danced," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9 November 2020, https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia/philadelphia-election-dance-party-philly-elmo-biden-trump-working-families-party-20201109.html; See also Avi Wolfman-Arent et al., "'Philly's Got This': Dueling Rallies Converge on Ballot-Counting Center," *WHYY*, 5 November 2020, https://whyy.org/articles/phillys-got-this-dueling-rallies-converge-on-philly-ballot-counting-center/.

8. In full disclosure, I have myself in the past fundraised and canvassed for the Working Families Party in Philadelphia, although not in a capacity related to the 2020 election.

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argument that resonates with generations of dancers and their critics: the dance floor can be more than entertainment, it can model new political possibilities. As Luis-Manuel Garcia writes, "Inasmuch as nightclub dance spaces can serve as rehearsal spaces for modes of being-together that are better, more just, more caring, more fulfilling, or simply less harmful, they are also spaces of utopianism."[9] Unlike the Trump supporters' musical demarcation of space and identity, rooted as it was in a defensive, defiant posture, the progressive musical space was porous, accommodating of multiple strands of identity and left politics, and with a political vision pointed towards the future rather than the nostalgia of "Make America Great Again."

As Garcia has written elsewhere, however, "The tricky thing about dance floors is that they are places where both inclusion and exclusion happen."[10] In a forthcoming monograph, Garcia notes the ambivalence many, especially women, queers, and people of color, feel about the potential of the dance floor. The intensity of "coming undone" on the dance floor brings with it risks, and the utopian pleasure of embodied engagement with strangers has to be mitigated through what Garcia terms "filtration": through passive measures such as subcultural compatibility, and through active measures such as the "door apparatus" of bouncers, hosts, and the box office.[11] The apparent randomness of our encounters on the dance floor and our ability to truly experience the pleasure of dance are in some respects predetermined.

The street outside the Convention Center was, however, not actually a nightclub; there was no door apparatus, and unlike an underground party, invitations to attend were circulated as widely as possible. Filtration, however, can occur in more nuanced ways. One personal observation: it must be said that the racial demographics of the crowd—rather than the organizers—seemed significantly whiter than the city of Philadelphia as a whole. This is an observation made without access to any empirical data of the unstable phenomenon of a quasi-spontaneous street party. It instead relies on my own experience visiting the party once in the afternoon, and once in the evening, and also examining social media accounts of the party.

As such, the dance party engaged larger tensions on the left. There have been moments, for example, in Trump-era left organizing in the city that have sometimes pitted white progressives against longstanding symbols of Black political power. As an example, one of the incumbent politicians defeated by an insurgent progressive that year, Jim Roebuck, was a twenty-five-year Black veteran of the Pennsylvanian assembly, and long a prominent supporter of public education and other liberal issues. His successful opponent, Rick Krajewski, is Black, but is also a comparatively recent arrival to the neighborhood, and whose political base, the group known as Reclaim Philadelphia, is mostly white and has gained its most traction in gentrifying areas of south and west Philly. Certainly

9. Luis-Manuel Garcia, "Richard Dyer, 'In Defence of Disco,'" *History of Emotions - Insights into Research*, November 2014, 1, https://doi.org/10.14280/08241.32.

10. Luis-Manuel Garcia, *Together, Somehow: Music, Intimacy, and Affect on the Dance Floor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming), 1. I am grateful to Dr. Garcia for providing me with an advance copy of his work.

11. Ibid., 7–8.

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not all progressive organizations in Philadelphia are predominantly white—far from it—but within those whiter groups, there are often palpable tensions over how to center Black and Brown working class Philadelphians from a position of personal remove.

Music is sometimes used strategically to elide these tensions. Cosmo Baker, one of the more prominent DJs for the dance party, is a useful example of this. His official playlist for Joy to the Polls, found on Spotify, is probably more carefully curated than was his actual live set but is nevertheless a reasonable approximation.[12] Baker, who is white, chose to center musical Blackness in his set. Not only are all twenty-six songs fronted by Black musicians, but politicized Blackness is made explicit, from Michael Kiwanuka's "Black Man in A White World" to Sharon Jones's cover of "This Land is Your Land," to the historical connections of Fela Kuti, Sam Cooke, James Brown, and more. To be clear, this is not an accusation of the exploitative appropriation that, as Matthew D. Morrison argues, is intertwined with the consumption of commercial popular music.[13] Not for an event organized by a number of Black-led organizations, featuring Black speakers and other DJs, and coming from an artist who has often used his platform to address such issues. As Baker told an interviewer earlier that year, white DJs such as himself should "never forget that you are a guest in a house that was built by Black folk. You should be grateful to even have a space in this. So earn your keep."[14]

And yet, if we usually consider appropriation through a lens of consumption, its mobilization for progressive political ends raises a new set of questions. If, as I argued earlier, the Trumpist perspective on popular music might be more strategic than we wish to admit, it is only fair to ask if the progressive approach being outlined here, a self-conscious centering of Black music, is as effective as it hopes to be. After all, if the Trump vote rally did not succeed in "stopping the steal," a year later their movement seems as emboldened as ever. Can the left say the same?

My own experience in white progressive spaces is often that Black music is often used aspirationally, as a kind of sonic Black Lives Matter lawn sign. It functions to dream of inclusivity and the decentering of whiteness, and as such it is laudatory, and it is not, in and of itself, sufficient political work. As a white, recent transplant to Krajewski's district who teaches classes on Black music and is involved in progressive political organizing in the city, these observations implicate me as well. These are issues to consider, however, not to absolve one of white guilt, or prove one's individual correctness. Instead, to return to the opening question, it is to ask relentlessly: what works? What makes change? ■

12. "Cosmo Baker's #JoyToThePolls" *Spotify*, https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5yFen99mlzCrDsPVZDkBiM?si=M-etD2V9SVG5GU0MTA0G5w.

13. Matthew D. Morrison, "Exploring the Limits of Cultural Appropriation in Popular Music," in *Culture as Catalyst*, ed. Isolde Brielmaier (Saratoga Springs, NY: The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College, 2020), 207–208.

14. DJ Santero, "Cosmo Baker," *Heavy Hits* (blog), 18 June 2020, https://heavyhits.com/blog/cosmo-baker/.

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