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AUDIOVISUAL AFTERLIVES:
THE SOUNDTRACK OF LIBERAL NOSTALGIA

by

Max W. Kaplan

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2022

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Audiovisual Afterlives: The Soundtrack of Liberal Nostalgia

by

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Following the 2016 American Presidential election, celebrity endorsements proved to be a more narrow gauge of public opinion than ever. The symbolic alignment with popular musicians, which had long abetted the Democratic Party's standing with youth and particular identity groups, seemed only to reaffirm the party's establishment status, drawing disavowal in a wave of anti-establishment sentiment on both the left and right. 'Retromania,' a term first coined by Simon Reynolds in 2010, can be tracked conceptually from the nostalgic inclinations of twenty-first century popular culture to the ideological sphere, where nostalgic, essentialized constructions of community, identity, and progress have coalesced into a political platform. Through the Democratic Party's strategic relationships with the likes of Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, and Stevie Wonder, the party's identification with class, gender, and race, has emerged on a cultural stage circumscribed by nostalgic notions. Tracing the *audiovisual afterlives* of these artists through contemporary television soundtracks, which have preserved the legacy of twentieth century musicians, we can glean moments where a soundtrack of liberal nostalgia begins to form. Drawing on sound studies, gender and race theory, and postmodern media critique, "Audiovisual Afterlives: The Soundtrack of Liberal Nostalgia" illustrates how this twentieth century soundtrack has become ingrained in a collective memory that has confused yesterday's ambitions for today's visions of progress.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Collective Memory, Soundtracks, Political Music, Audiovisual Afterlife

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Introduction: Hip Figures and Baby Boomer Nostalgia

The summer of 2016 saw Walter Benjamin's conception of "the aestheticization of political life" reified, albeit peculiarly, in the spectacles of both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. Benjamin famously presaged either the inevitable aestheticization of destruction manifested through Fascism, or the politicization of art by way of Communism.¹ The 2016 conventions were undoubtedly aesthetic affairs, and while the stakes were lower than a full blown world war, the liberal, Democratic status quo faced its gravest threat in decades, as Trumpism invoked their time-worn symbols through an idiosyncratic barrage that shook its strategic foundations. Popular music, namely rock n' roll, for a brief July weekend, became an aesthetic battleground of its own.

Through the incipient decades of the twenty-first century, the Democratic Party has cultivated a strategic relationship with artists across the pop and rock spectrum, as evidenced by the progressive-minded Rock the Vote organization, the 2004 Vote For Change Tour, and the star-studded roster of popular musicians that accompanied Barack Obama on the campaign trail in 2008 and 2012. But at the 2016 Republican National Convention in Cleveland, the setlist churned out by G.E. Smith's cover band seemed to suggest the Republican's willingness to tap into the well of Baby Boomer nostalgia, targeting a demographic that is now more likely to identify as conservative than liberal.² Before Trump, the Republican Party of Reagan had tried and failed to gain support of popular rock artists of the Baby Boomer generation—Bruce Springsteen, Billy Joel, and John Cougar Mellencamp were among their prospects.³ In pivoting

¹ Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 217-252. (New York: Schocken Books, 2007).

² Deaville, James. "The Unconventional Music of the Democratic and Republican National Conventions of 2016." *American Music* (Champaign, Ill.) 35, no. 4 (2017): 450.

³ Schoening, Benjamin S, and Eric T Kasper. *Don't Stop Thinking About the Music: The Politics of Songs and Musicians in Presidential Campaigns*. (Lanham, MD: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2012), 164.

and adopting Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." as his official theme song, Ronald Reagan ensured an unflinching, patriotic position, tailored to fit his faithful, country music loving Moral Majority. But "God Bless the U.S.A." was nowhere to be found on G.E. Smith's setlist. Instead, the band played through The Clash's "Rock the Casbah," The Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun," Free's "All Right Now," The Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want," and a slew of other nostalgic hits from the 60s, 70s, and 80s, suggesting that the Democrats may not have proprietary claim over the classic pop and rock canon after all.

The Democratic Convention, on the other hand, strode in a decisively more pop-oriented direction, recruiting artists ranging from Boyz II Men to Paul Simon to Demi Lovato to Alicia Keys to appeal to their diverse voter base.⁴ And as the November election neared, several of the twentieth century's biggest artists took to the stage to perform at Clinton campaign events. Bruce Springsteen and Stevie Wonder, respectively, performed at events in Philadelphia,⁵ while Madonna took to the mic to perform a selection of her greatest hits in a surprise appearance at a campaign event in New York City.⁶ In the end, the star power wasn't decisive enough to carry Clinton across the finish line. Trump, who cultivated spectacles of his own making, was hardly as reliant on mainstream pop musicians to solidify his authenticity to his voter base. Trump voters rejected the performance of liberal elitism being flaunted on stage in progressive coastal cities, seeking identity on their own terms. G.E. Smith's setlist of cover songs seems indicative that the very presence of the artists on the campaign trail only accounted for so much all along,

⁴ Deaville, "The Unconventional Music," 451.

⁵ Angermiller, Michele Amabile. "Bruce Springsteen, Jon Bon Jovi Set for Final Hillary Clinton Rally in Philadelphia." *Billboard*, November 7, 2016.

<https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/bruce-springsteen-jon-bon-jovi-hillary-clinton-rally-philadelphia-7565741/>

⁶ Moss, Emma-Lee. "Madonna Performs at Surprise New York Rally: 'Save This Country, Vote for Hillary Clinton.'" *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, November 8, 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/nov/08/madonna-performs-at-surprise-rally-in-new-york-save-this-country-vote-for-hillary-clinton>.

and that such artists' personal politics were merely irrelevant. The power was in the music itself— decontextualized, depoliticized and charged with the enigmatic force of nostalgia.

In the post-Obama era, the symbolic capital of pop music's liberal glory days has significantly waned. As suggested by Douglas Kellner, Obama himself had "become a master of the spectacle and a global celebrity of the highest order."⁷ In fact, Obama's celebrity has superseded that of the rock stars he enlisted for his campaign spectacle. Following his presidency, with the help of his bestselling memoir, end of the year playlists, and Netflix production deal, Obama's status as a media celebrity was firmly cemented, even before he announced "Renegades: Born in the USA," his exclusive Spotify podcast with Bruce Springsteen, released in 2021. To a skeptic, the converging trajectory of Obama and Springsteen alights on the incorporation of rock musicians, once presumed to be totems of hip cultural authenticity, into the lucrative landscape of neoliberal platform capitalism. But the incorporation of "hip" into the Democratic Party's cultural program features into the party's past, well before podcasts and production deals were even on its radar.

In *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party*, Michael Szalay challenges Obama's claim as "the nation's first hip president," contending that his presidency was the culmination of postwar liberalism's tendencies to incorporate the hip vernacular of bebop jazz music and contemporary literary voices into the party's cultural platform. It's not in Obama, but in the very person of John F. Kennedy that Szalay traces "the newfound importance of style to American liberalism."⁸ Drawing on the work of sociologist David Riesman, he sees mainstream political thought of the early sixties pivoting inevitably towards a "process by which people

⁷ Kellner, Douglas. "Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle." In *Putting Knowledge to Work and Letting Information Play*, edited by Timothy W. Luke and Jeremy Hunsinger, 185-210. (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2009), 186.

⁸ Szalay, Michael. *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 2.

become related to politics, and the consequent stylizing of political emotions.”⁹ Channeling the vernacular cool of beboppers, the 'hip figures' initially absorbed into the Democratic Party's orbit in the 1960s were literary stylists such as Ralph Ellison, John Updike, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer, who Szalay heralded as “the most important political strategists of their time.” But a larger ‘coalition culture’ took shape as “their novels joined a range of expressive forms—jazz, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll prominent among them—that militated on behalf of new unions between black and white voters.”¹⁰ Central to this coalition was the very wellspring of youth, who in American culture of the 1960s, had experiences which represented to Simon Frith, the intensified “conflict between public and private obligations, between freedom and responsibility.”¹¹ Rock music became a definitive vehicle of expression for these tensions to play out on a political stage, especially as “new styles of consumption (drug consumption, in particular), new notions of personal freedom (particularly sexual freedom), and a more critical understanding of ‘the system’”¹² took hold. Over subsequent decades, however, popular musicians—drawn from the spheres of rock, soul, R&B, and eventually hip-hop—became critical vectors for political mobilization *within* the system, as they became forms of representational currency for politicians to exchange.

As the youth subcultures of the sixties graduated to the mainstream of the seventies, new opportunities had become available for political systems to sublimate the affective charge of popular music into ideological agendas. In the late 1980s, as Democratic strategists feared that the party was becoming “too liberal”¹³ and Reagan and Bush were consolidating their stronghold on the Moral Majority of middle America, the party sought to augment their cultural platform,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Szalay, *Hip Figures*, 3.

¹¹ Frith, Simon. *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll*. 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 194.

¹² Ibid, 193.

¹³ Schoening and Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking About the Music*, 181.

phasing away the subcultural grit, while adhering to a mainstream standard of hipness. Through the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), the New Democrats, with Bill Clinton as their poster child, “advocated a third way to American politics, which included continuing to advocate for liberal social issues but also more moderate/centrist positions on fiscal issues.”¹⁴ In—now ironically—stark contrast to the prosaic milk toast of Reagan's theme song “God Bless The USA,” Bill Clinton opted for Fleetwood Mac’s forward-looking 1977 hit “Don’t Stop (Thinkin’ About Tomorrow)” as a campaign anthem. Though a decade and a half old at the time, the use of a popular rock song signaled a reconciliation between the Democratic Party of the 1990s and the youth culture of the 1960s and 70s, a generation it could appeal to through its “hip image” and “liberal social values,” embodied now by the saxophone-wielding candidate hitting the late night talk show circuit donned up in sunglasses and a slick suit, recalling the “newfound importance of style to American liberalism” of the Kennedy years. As heirs to the MTV President’s New Democrats, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama traded in cultural signifiers that solidified their claims to identification and representation amongst their constituencies. Popular music in the twenty-first century still wielded political power; it was just a matter of how it could be posited to articulate meaning.

John Street tracks the bifurcating dimensions through which pop music achieves its power: “On the one side stand those who see music as a way of representing political ideas and promoting political causes, who see it as a form of political expression. From this point of view, music has symbolic force, it deploys the power of language to create visions, articulate ideals, and to form bonds.” The flip side of the equation is more akin to Benjamin’s ‘aestheticization of politics,’ which foretold the cultural programs of fascistic regimes in Europe. “On the other side stand those who fear for music’s effects, for whom politics lie in its ability to exercise power

¹⁴ Ibid.

over its listeners, to shape and influence thoughts and actions.”¹⁵ Carrying Street’s argument a step further, Justin Patch distinguishes the ultimate shortcomings of the representative power of music through redeeming the listeners’ agency, and their choice between cultural signifiers and political affiliations. “Music culturally represents the candidate in ways that invites voters to place themselves alongside the candidate’s persona and vision in cultural consumption and similitude.”¹⁶ Patch continues, “A structural problem arises because political representation is anchored in beliefs (which produce legitimacy), and cultural representation is based on choices.” While there is overlap between cultural and political representation, Patch finds fault in a critical binary attached to political representation. “Belief,” he writes, “implies a binary system in which the subject is presented with a proposition that has two responses: dis/belief.” Whereas on the other hand, “cultural choice is not binary; there are many gradations.”¹⁷ At the heart of this cultural choice is the matter of taste, which Pierre Bourdieu frames as essential to the manifestation of identity through difference. “Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes.”¹⁸ The success of Donald Trump’s 2016 Presidential Campaign was due in large part to its ability to reconfigure cultural choice as a binary, which could be affirmed through negation. Trump was hardly deterred by the artists and their estates lining up to disavow the use of their music in his campaign—from Adele to Neil Young to Rihanna to Queen among many others¹⁹—because by his logic, this negation only abetted his cause. He wasn’t looking for the artist’s personal

¹⁵ Street, John. “Rock, Pop, and Politics.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, edited by Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street, 243-255. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 244.

¹⁶ Patch, Justin. “Representational Bind: Why Campaign Music Often Fails.” *American Music* (Champaign, Ill.) 35, no. 4 (2017): 422.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 56.

¹⁹ Kopp, Jennifer “Can Artists Legally Stop Trump From Using Their Music?,” *JIPPEL Blog*, December 21, 2020, <https://blog.jipfel.law.nyu.edu/2020/12/can-artists-legally-stop-trump-from-using-their-music/>.

endorsement. It didn't matter if he was left with Ted Nugent and Kid Rock as his official endorsements from the world of popular music. Difference was his key, and as the subject of flagrant negation by mainstream culture, represented by the New Democratic Party of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, he penetrated a populace weathered in the excorporative logic of authenticity.

Historically, the American political system has undoubtedly been riven by sets of binaries that have subsequently come to define the nation's polarizing disposition: black/white, urban/rural, secular/religious, north/south, young/old; and notably, (and most recently) mainstream/alternative and establishment/anti-establishment, which have become crucial factors following the rise of Trump and the so-called Alt-Right. In *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music*, Jeffrey T. Nealon figures this emergence of excorporative positioning through the logic of rock music authenticity. Rising out of the avant garde jazz milieu of the 1950s—as mentioned by Szalay— notions of fan and consumer authenticity grew to new heights with the folk revival of the early 1960s, where “authenticity became a mass oppositional force against the commodification and alienation of modern life.”²⁰ Nealon goes on to link artistic authenticity as the underwriter of the ‘mass individuality’ which has characterized the era of neoliberalism. “In the era of neoliberal individualism, nobody (Right or Left) wants to be branded as mainstream anything, and the cultural and political logic of that mass refusal of the mainstream was honed far from the twenty-first-century politics in the rock authenticity years of the late twentieth century.”²¹ When Dick Hebdige famously theorized punk rock's epochal outburst in the late-1970s, he witnessed a space of societal fissure, where double meaning could be sublimated from forbidden identity into sources of cultural value. No longer

²⁰ Nealon, Jeffrey T. *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 67.

²¹ Ibid, 61.

ascribed the inherently liberatory possibilities of subculture, wherein Hebdige witnessed the “celebration of the abnormal and forbidden,”²² Nealon’s conception of negation wallows in the empty space, where “rock’s authenticity-producing ‘no’ (without any necessary ‘yes’ or core content) has migrated from its position as a musical identity marker to become the dominant form of identity configuration in the American present.”²³ In championing the symbolic capital of the anachronistic, twentieth century notion of the “authentic artist,” later subsumed within mainstream culture, the Democratic Party had positioned itself as a ripe target for mass negation, evidenced by Donald Trump’s campaign, which “used every opportunity to paint her [Hillary Clinton] A-list artists as elite liberals who have no connection to heartland America.”²⁴ Pivotaly, Trump skewered the Democrats right where they’d previously thrived: in their appropriation of hip figures as generative vehicles towards mass voter mobilization.

*

On the surface, figures like Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, and Stevie Wonder seem to carry a broad appeal, a sweeping cross-generational coalition that spans class, gender, and race. They remain among the most beloved and recognizable figures in American music, selling out stadium and arena tours globally, appearing regularly on radio and television programs, and commandeering the stage at Democratic rallies. Consequently, the reigning logic of the nostalgia industry and the musical heritage institutions that buttress it, have acted to foreground twentieth century pop musicians and sustain their status atop the cultural pantheon.

In *Retromania*, his classic study on retro-fetishism in the twenty-first century, Simon Reynolds describes the peculiarity of our cultural moment: “For all its ubiquity across culture, retro-consciousness nonetheless seems most chronically prevalent in music. That may well be

²² Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. (London: Routledge, 1979), 105.

²³ Nealon, *I’m Not Like Everybody Else*, 64.

²⁴ Deaville, “The Unconventional Music,” 448.

because it somehow feels especially *wrong* there. Pop ought to be all about the present tense, surely? It is still considered the domain of the young, and young people aren't supposed to be nostalgic."²⁵ Musically, nostalgia can be seen manifested through recycled sonic allusions and the influx of endlessly hagiographic reunion tours, throwback radio programming, biopics, anniversaries, and reissues; while culturally, it embeds itself in fashion trends and retro aesthetic motifs seen in various forms of media. But as Katharina Niemeyer points out, nostalgia can become a more powerful tool for reckoning with temporality in the twenty-first century's ever-accelerating media environment: "It [nostalgia] very often expresses or hints at something more profound, as it deals with positive or negative relations to time and space. It is related to a way of living, imagining, and sometimes exploiting or (re)inventing the past, present, and future."²⁶ In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym imagines the potential of a futuristic nostalgia in the process of nation building: "Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future."²⁷ She continues, "Nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory."²⁸ Schematized, nostalgia can wend its way into everyday life in a process that Niemeyer describes as "a liminal, ambiguous phenomenon that migrates into deep emotional and psychological structures as well as into larger cultural, social, economic, and political ones."²⁹ Often associated with manipulated imaginaries of the past, strategic uses of nostalgia invoke Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering's concept of 'retroyping,' in which "The only elements taken from the past are embellished or idealised and foreclose conflict or

²⁵ Reynolds, Simon. *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. 1st American ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), xviii-xix.

²⁶ Niemeyer, Katharina. Introduction to *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, edited by Katharina Niemeyer. 1st ed. 2014. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 2.

²⁷ Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvi.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Niemeyer, *Media and Nostalgia*, 6.

tension in their way of presenting former times.”³⁰ Inevitably, the ideological deployment of nostalgia has become heavily associated conservative political movements’ regressive invocations of the pastoral idealism of imagined communities. Theorists on the Left, such as Herbert Marcuse, have likewise envisioned nostalgic sentiment as political motivator, albeit leveraged as an agent through which progressive movements could facilitate social change.³¹

Concurrent with twenty-first century stagnation in musical innovation is the stagnation in progressive political momentum, burdened in the post-industrial era by the onslaught of managerial capitalism and the suppression of mass social movements. Mark Fisher observes that “The impasse of politics are perfectly reflected by the impasses in popular music.” Fisher tracks the courses of twentieth century idealism in the entwined idioms of cultural and political ambition. “As political struggle gave way to petty squabbles over who is to administrate capitalism, so innovation in popular music has been supplanted by retrospection; in both cases, the exorbitant ambition to change the world has devolved into a pragmatism and careerism.”³² That exorbitant ambition to change the world indexes the emergent folk politics of New Left in the 1960s, which sought to bring politics “down to a ‘human scale’ by emphasizing temporal, spatial and conceptual immediacy.” Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams continue, “At its heart, folk politics is the guiding intuition that immediacy is always better and often more authentic.”³³ But aside from small-scale projects, the conceits of folk politics, which emerged out of a postwar society have become impotent in the face of global capitalism in the twenty-first century. Srnicek and Williams, while sanguine about the New Left’s breakthroughs in feminist, anti-racist, gay-rights, and anti bureaucratic demands, ultimately see its shortcomings as being “unable to

³⁰ Ibid, 13-14.

³¹ Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

³² Fisher, Mark. “Party For Your Right to Fight.” *New Statesman* (1996). No. 4994 (2010). 41.

³³ Srnicek, Nick, and Alex Williams. *Inventing the Future : Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. (London: Verso, 2016), 10.

institutionalise itself and articulate a counter hegemony.”³⁴ Thus, as the century progressed certain social platforms of the New Left were absorbed into the mainstream neoliberal order. “Feminists, for example have made significant gains in terms of pay equality, abortion rights and childcare policies, but these pale in comparison to projects for the total abolition of gender.” Srnicek and Williams follow the same arc in Black liberation movements: “While anti-racist employment policies and anti-discrimination laws were widely enacted, they had not been accompanied by other radical programmes espoused by earlier movements.”³⁵ If folk political thinking represented the radical change presented by twentieth century grassroots movements, they merely laid the groundwork for twenty-first century movements that were bound up by institutional norms. “Much of the success seen by the new social movements today is confined within the hegemonic terms established by neoliberalism—articulated around market-centered claims, liberal rights and a rhetoric of choice.”³⁶ Confined to the same plane as commodities, the pathos of twentieth century folk politics has become inseparable from other forms of nostalgia that define contemporary private and public life. The twenty-first century has come to inhabit a formulation of Frederic Jameson’s ‘nostalgia mode,’ which Fisher posits as “a formal attachment to the techniques and formulas of the past, a consequence of a retreat from the modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience.”³⁷ It is in this ‘nostalgia mode’ that time in the twenty-first century has flattened out, reverting avant garde visions of social progress to specters of the past, which preside and linger over our inflections of the future.

³⁴ Ibid, 21.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Fisher, Mark. “The Slow Cancellation of the Future.” In *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 11-12.

Inextricably bound to the political, nostalgia's full-fledged integration into the culture industry represents further complications in the harmonizing of personal, social, and national memories. Boym writes, "The sheer overabundance of nostalgic artifacts marketed by the entertainment industry, most of them sweet ready-mades, reflects a fear of untamable longing and noncommodified time."³⁸ As it flattens out time, nostalgia conjures the public's imagination in ways that often obfuscate the conditions of the present. "Nostalgia tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence," Boym observes, "it is about the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial."³⁹ The Democratic Party of the twenty-first century, through channeling the working-class folk politics of Bruce Springsteen, the radical feminism of Madonna, or the Black Power of Stevie Wonder, has fallen to the temptation of nostalgia, with its penchant for materializing the folk politics of the twentieth century as symbols of progress and change, while remaining confined within the hegemonic terms established by neoliberalism, administered by its prevailing rhetoric of individual choice. It may not be that the music itself has lost its affective power, but rather that its (and the artists') symbolic effect as a political force of community building has been dampened through time and repetition, fundamentally altering its symbolic currency and meaning upon the collective memory.

Barry Shank, in *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*, pins the misled concept of group identity on a conceit in the field of ethnomusicology: "The idea that groups make music that identifies the group and thereby expresses the values of that group relies on a static concept of identity and a relatively firmly bounded notion of the group that frustrates any effort to think about the political force of music."⁴⁰ This notion of essentialism, often bound to groups' ethnos, can be an inhibiting force upon political, collective progress. Shank cites Paul Gilroy's *The Black*

³⁸ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.

³⁹ Ibid, xvii.

⁴⁰ Shank, Barry. *The Political Force of Musical Beauty*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 14.

Atlantic, a seminal study of racial formation in the Americas, where Gilroy asks, “What special analytical problems arise if a style, genre, or particular performance of music is identified as being expressive of the absolute essence of the group that produced it?”⁴¹ Shank sees in such essentialism a hazard in the way of building identity and community:

When that occurs, that identity becomes a reified object rather than a subjective set of processes. Identity becomes susceptible to essentialist concepts, and the linkage between music and identity loses its dynamism. Music’s political role is reduced to the advance, or the defense, of this identity, and the music loses its capacity for productive action in the world.⁴²

As the twentieth century saw the United States reckon with its exceptional status as a multicultural nation, the progressive political movements of the latter half of the century examined new formations of identity that extended beyond mere class, race, and ethnicity. Popular music emerged as an arena in which this identity could be engaged, celebrated, and brought to terms with on a cultural scale. Shank evokes Lauren Berlant’s cultural phenomenon of ‘intimate publics,’ which can be formed through pop anthems, where listeners are made to feel the sense that they “already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience.”⁴³ It is through such inclusive processes of listening that Shank witnesses political potential that exceeds essentialized notions of identity, observing, “The affective power of musico-cultural figures can change the relationship of the ethnos to the demos, shifting the relations of those who are legitimately included inside the political community.”⁴⁴ It is these very intimate publics that politicians on both sides of the aisle

⁴¹ Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 75.

⁴² Shank, *The Political Force*, 14.

⁴³ Berlant, Lauren Gail. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), viii.

⁴⁴ Shank, *The Political Force*, 16.

sought to target when they began aligning themselves with popular musicians on the campaign trail, tapping into a plurality of identities through cultural symbols that could ignite an affective power amongst their fans.

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The representational logic that defined the folk political movements of the 1960s and 70s, and even the strategic middle ground that can be attributed to the rise of the New Democrats, is due for reappraisal amidst the advent of platform capitalism and musical heritage preservation in the early twenty-first century.⁴⁵ Music streaming platforms have instituted a commercial logic, through which “every aspect of music consumption becomes datafied,”⁴⁶ whether through data mining, taste profiling, or listening algorithms, signaling a critical transformation in the ways that music is culturally valued. At the same time, heritage institutions are working to preserve the history of twentieth century popular music, which, according to Raphaël Nowak, have “emerged out of a generational ‘urge to look back on one’s own past.’” Concurrently, these trends point to a cultural environment that both propagates the continuing legacy of twentieth century pop musicians, all the while moving towards a more fragmented cultural sphere, where popular music of the past will become increasingly sanitized and therefore betray its supposedly original and/or true meaning.⁴⁷ Nowak challenges the ultimate significance of music as a cultural symbol in the twenty-first century: “By drawing on variables such as popularity and critical acclaim, heritage institutions make a statement about cultural value, and even reinforce regimes of cultural hierarchies (Bake et al. 2018). In the age of the adoption of streaming platforms as the

⁴⁵ Nowak, Raphaël. “Questioning the Future of Popular Music Heritage in the Age of Platform Capitalism.” In *Remembering Popular Music’s Past*, edited by Lauren Istvandity, Sarah Baker, and Zelmarie Cantillon, 145-158. London: Anthem Press, 2019), 147.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 148.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 150.

dominant way to distribute and consume music, the construction of cultural significance must be questioned.”⁴⁸

Music, however, is only one form of contemporary media that is reacting nostalgically to shifts in consumption and commemoration. The sociocultural effects that television has had in the twenty-first century are already immense. The advent of ‘quality television’ has spurred a revolution in programming that has become more transmedial, more widely representative, and even interactive, through fan communities and social media groups. Nostalgic television, whether through reboots, period pieces, or spin-offs, has become commonplace in twenty-first century programming. Ryan Lizardi observes, “Looking at the television lineups in recent years, it quickly becomes evident that the industry believes shows that trigger or reify a nostalgic view of the past are a safe bet for programming, but not to encourage an adaptive and critical mindset.”⁴⁹ In the realm of music heritage commemoration, the televisual medium has emerged as a highly visible and effective site for ‘mediated nostalgia’⁵⁰ to connect with audiences. For Andy Bennett, this involves both film and television taking on the role of rock heritage institutions, where they have “played their part in serving up and reinforcing critical canons through which baby-boomer audiences have come to re-classify rock as an aspect of late twentieth century heritage.”⁵¹ Through ‘screened nostalgias’ of documentaries, biopics, induction ceremonies, competition shows, and late night television appearances, rock and popular music heritage acts have remained ubiquitous, spectral figures in American popular culture, in spite of declining record sales and critical acclaim in recent years. The spectrality of these figures can be witnessed on display in contemporary television soundtracks, which often make use of twentieth

⁴⁸ Ibid, 152.

⁴⁹ Lizardi, Ryan. “The Nostalgic Revolution Will Be Televised.” In *Remake Television: Reboot, Re-Use, Recycle*, edited by Carlen Lavigne, 42-55. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 52.

⁵⁰ Lizardi, Ryan. *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014.)

⁵¹ Bennett, Andy. “‘Heritage Rock’: Rock Music, Representation and Heritage Discourse.” *Poetics* (Amsterdam) 37, no. 5 (2009): 478.

century popular music by means that often tend to alter the meaning of the song (if there is to be one), or complicate it through temporal juxtapositions that are characteristic of a ‘presentism’ at display through mediated nostalgias, of which Niemeyer observes: “The present is ‘nostalgized’ by the aesthetics of the past to create a new method of engaging with the ‘moment.’” But as historical reality is destabilized in mediated form, Niemeyer witnesses a phenomenon through which “typical elements of the past can be simulated in the present without referring to something that really existed.”⁵² Put into action, David Pierson sees these screened nostalgias become spaces for nostalgic individuals and groups to “actualise with their pasts,” allowing the imagery to act as “a repository for contemporary historical stirrings and political action.”⁵³

Through its commodified nostalgia, the retro phenomenon resolves nostalgic pasts into meaningful experiences in the present, whose “affective horizon is plagued by a slow ongoing cancellation of the future, a contemporary lack of utopian thinking and an ensuing commodification of a retro-aesthetic, promising the possibility of futures in its reminiscent transportation toward a simulation of the past.”⁵⁴ Critical to the ‘nostalgic imaginary’⁵⁵ that has become a core aspect of recent retro television series, such as *Mad Men*, *The Get Down*, *Stranger Things*, *Glow*, *The Americans*, and *Fresh Off The Boat*, is a desire to return the viewer “to another time, a time in tune with one’s imagination.”⁵⁶ Faced with televisual representations of the past, audiences are left to either get lost in “escapism and a dangerous longing for the mythical past” or to examine history through ‘counter-memories’ which “can be employed to establish an oppositional consciousness critical of existing dominant social institutions, and

⁵² Niemeyer, *Media and Nostalgia*, 12-13.

⁵³ Pierson, David. “AMC’s *Mad Men* and the Politics of Nostalgia.” In *Media and Nostalgia*, edited by Katharina Niemeyer, 139-151. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 148.

⁵⁴ Ahlberg, Oscar, Joel Hietanen, and Tuomas Soila. “The Haunting Specter of Retro Consumption.” *Marketing Theory* 21, no. 2 (2021): 168.

⁵⁵ Pierson, “Politics of Nostalgia,” 139.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 142.

thereby, promote social change for the future.”⁵⁷ The landscape of today’s televisualized nostalgia privileges the former mode of representation, enshrining the past in its mythic dimensions, forsaking oppositional consciousness for static representation. In this space of televisual nostalgia, soundtracks can be read as invaluable vectors for negotiating temporal representation. Increasingly, popular series’ will deploy nostalgic hits in a manner that eschews the progressive potential of ‘counter memory,’ leaving both time and meaning liable to be flattened. This sonic dimension of televisual nostalgia complicates Berlant’s ‘intimate publics,’ which congregate around pop anthems, throwing the music into temporal confusion, and placing meaning in the hands of a mediated force that deploys nostalgia to suit the historical present. The more anachronistic soundtracking predominates, the more essentialist notions of identity convene around the musical references, upending both the artist’s symbolic import and their ownership over meaning.

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The cultural force of twentieth century popular music in the 2020s has been omnipresent. For one, there’s Joe Biden and Kamala Harris’ “Official Inauguration Playlist,” which juxtaposes Hall & Oates and Kendrick Lamar, Led Zeppelin and Dua Lipa, and Stevie Wonder and Vampire Weekend in a curatory move that is hardly surprising in the streaming era. Meanwhile, U2’s Bono and The Edge are performing in Ukrainian bomb shelters and Paul McCartney is taking shots at “mad captain” Donald Trump in his recent solo recordings. In the spring of 2022, “Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God),” Kate Bush’s modestly successful 1985 hit, started charting globally after its use in *Stranger Things* Season 4, and its subsequent viral explosion via TikTok⁵⁸. The ‘retromania’ that Simon Reynolds diagnosed in 2010 has become even more fully

⁵⁷ Ibid, 145.

⁵⁸ Savage, Mark. “Kate Bush Is Number One, Thanks to Stranger Things.” *BBC News*. BBC, June 17, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-61843442>.

entrenched in today's culture, and with it, the ways that music and culture shape identity formation and collective memory have been thrown into confusion, serving up questions that speak to the impasse of today's cultural and political moment: How has the unprecedented lifespan of twentieth century popular music shaped how we temporally consider music and its embedded political power? What relevance do folk political symbols and ideals of the twentieth century have today? How has the digital plentitude of the Internet reconfigured how identities are formed and disseminated? What, then, are we to make of the potential legacy of 'intimate publics' cultivated through shared historical experience? Amidst these changing technological mediums through which Americans engage with popular music, how have musico-cultural figures been utilized to serve as political, ideological symbols—and to what effect?

Reading television soundtracks of the 2010s and 2020s as key texts, we can trace the emanation of *audiovisual afterlives* of the music and artists featured. As three of the most prominent popular music icons associated with the Democratic Party, Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, and Stevie Wonder serve as invaluable examples of the audiovisual anachronism extant in television today. The three artists, respectively, served as ideological symbols for Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign, rendering their symbolic value vital to American cultural politics of the twenty-first century. From Springsteen's working-class authenticity, to Madonna's provocative feminism, and Wonder's liberatory Black Power politics, the symbolic and hegemonic representation of the artists has proven, on one hand pivotal for reigning in liberal-minded voters, but on another, proof of crystalizing beliefs—on both the left and right—that the Democratic Party is out-of-touch with voters. Facing widespread disillusionment with establishment politicians, the prevailing reliance on nostalgic representations of twentieth century liberalism draws into question the symbolic resonance of these once 'hip figures.'

Evidenced by their audiovisual afterlives, the spectrality of Springsteen, Madonna, and Wonder's music has become symptomatic of a society that is both culturally and politically indebted to the past to create visions for the future.

Glory Days: The Political Arc of Bruce Springsteen

There are two photographs taken forty-five years apart from one another, both shot in black and white. The first shows white man with a guitar slung around his left shoulder, his right arm perched tenderly on the shoulder of a fedora-ed black man, crouched to his height, gazing into the distance as he blows meaningfully on his tenor sax. The white man's eyes and cracked smile evoke a brotherly affection, a languid ease elsewhere captured through his bohemian getup: a black vintage leather jacket with stretched and tattered undershirt dangling over his skinny frame. His name may be the one billed on the album cover—his third release—but his softened grip on his Telecaster and side-wise glance testify to his role as a leader that values the contributions of his bandmates over his own centerstage heroics. The more recent photo shows the same white man on the right, and this time, it's his shoulder being held by the man on his left, a black man with salt-and-pepper hair, gently smiling. Across the face of the same right profile featured in 1975, the white man's signature hooked underbite twists into a grin, and his eyes glimmer with a reverence that exceeds the playful sort of rock n' roll complicity which he'd reserved for his bandmate Clarence Clemons. The text over the recent image doesn't bear the sleek modernism of the album cover, with the sort of suggestive wonder captured in a phrase: "Born to Run." This cover, rather, is cluttered with a loudness that only seems fitting for two figures of their stature. Across the top, bold text promises: "Dreams / Myths / Music"; the middle

of the cover declares the title: “Renegades: Born in the USA”; and the bottom delivers their all-too-familiar names: Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen.

The latter image comes from the book version of the “Renegades” podcast, which featured the rock icon and the former President candidly discussing the state of American culture through their characteristically optimistic, if nostalgic perspectives. Recorded for Spotify in the midst of the 2020 pandemic, in the waning months of the Trump Administration, the conversations are situated in a divisive time for the American body politic, where systemic racism, income inequality, LGBTQ rights, gun reform, environmental justice, and universal healthcare sat among the most pressing progressive social concerns. Though Obama and Springsteen allude to such issues, their central preoccupation is in rediscovering a common narrative. Bound more in rhetoric than action, Obama and Springsteen often cite history as a source of inspiration. Obama says: “I think this is part of the reason why we want to resurface some of these older conversations, remind ourselves, ‘Alright, here's the past we've traveled, here's where we came from.’ Maybe that will allow us a chance to get back to a place that is an inclusive common story about America.” If Obama’s 2008 campaign was an exercise in channeling the past to construct a common narrative for twenty-first century Americans, Springsteen’s vision of an artist’s role is more or less in tow with the politician’s: “What the artist does is he tries to get his audience to experience those common values, that sense of shared narrative and to take that outside with them and to put it into practice in their everyday lives and in the real world. As a musician, that's basically my job.”⁵⁹ For the last fifty years of his career, Springsteen has wielded his muscle as a rock n’ roll everyman, connecting with audiences on that very grounded, quotidian level. Long before he through his weight behind Barack Obama

⁵⁹ Pruitt-Young, Sharon, Audie Cornish, Matt Ozug, and Courtney Dorning. “In a New Book, Barack Obama and Bruce Springsteen Envision a More Unified America.” *NPR*. NPR, October 25, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/25/1048032010/obama-bruce-springsteen-podcast-book-renegades>.

with his endorsement in the 2008 Democratic Primaries,⁶⁰ Springsteen embodied many of the raw materials necessary to make him a symbol for working-class America, and despite a period of misunderstanding during the Reagan years, Springsteen has become a master at sublimating that symbolic cultural authenticity into political momentum.

Rising up from the Asbury Park rock scene in the late-60s and early-70s, Springsteen's musical identity was in flux: going from long-haired jammer with his band Steel Mill to the leather-jacket city slicker in a matter of years. Following his first two soul-inflected rock albums with Columbia, Bruce, along with the E-Street Band recorded *Born To Run*, the cinematic opus colored by songs of romance, adventure, and transformation, made him a cultural phenomenon and landed him on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* in the same week in 1975. Springsteen's political awakening came soon after, when he was recommended essential working-class readings, notably Henry Steele Commager and Alan Nevins's *Pocket History of the United States of America*. In them, Springsteen found a mirror into his past: "They helped me understand how when I was a kid all I remember was my father worked in a factory, his father worked in a factory..." Springsteen continued at a 1978 concert in Cleveland, "The idea was that [in the United States] there'd be a place for everybody, no matter where you came from, what religion you were or what color you were...But like all ideals, that idea got real corrupted."⁶¹

Through the late-70s and 1980s, as his musical stories grew more rooted in the plight of the post-industrial working class, Springsteen's partisan and ideological stance was still rather under-formed. Brian K. Garman writes, "Unlike [Woody] Guthrie, who was part of a movement that was critical of capitalism, Springsteen does not engage questions of political economy."

Despite this, Springsteen's lived experience in a working-class family gave him a preternatural

⁶⁰ Goldenberg, Suzanne. "Born to Run: Springsteen Throws Weight Behind Obama." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, April 16, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/17/barackobama.uselections2008>.

⁶¹ Garman, Bryan K. *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 197.

ability to tap into the sense of dread looming over such communities nationwide. Garman continues, “Nonetheless, his characters begin to understand that their lives are being unjustly affected by economic forces and develop a nascent consciousness of their class and a desire to alter their circumstances.”⁶² Entering the Reagan years that recentered the “silent majority” whom he had written songs about, Springsteen emerged as a peculiar commodity. On one hand, his performances could be gleaned as “unthreatening treats exuding the glory days of ‘white working-class masculinity associated with Fordist regimes of mass production and capital accumulation’ according to Fred Pfeil.”⁶³ While on the other hand, Springsteen could be celebrated as the latest in a long line of American working-class organic intellectuals, as his songs of the 1980s “began to experiment with the intersections between local stories and the forces of national history.”⁶⁴ The stance of the working-class hero, incidentally, took on different dimensions in the 1980s. As Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm write, “While the reality of the working class in the 1970s was increasingly multiracial and multicultural by any objective measure, the *idea* of the working class in the popular idiom had, by the 1980s, devolved even further into a repository for patriarchy and racism.”⁶⁵ No longer were the politics of the factory line defined by the multiracial solidarity of Guthrie’s Popular Front. Reagan’s “working-class” placed blue collar men at the center, reifying class into a white, male construct,⁶⁶ and to his dismay, Springsteen became an emblem of *that* America and the immense popularity of *Born in the U.S.A.*, despite its left-leaning intent, was a cross he had to bear.

Post-Reagan, Springsteen, doing what he thought was necessary, shed his macho image, understanding that “the working-class hero’s defiant white masculinity and the concept of

⁶² Ibid, 200.

⁶³ Cowie, Jefferson, and Lauren Boehm. “Dead Man’s Town: ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, Social History, and Working-Class Identity.” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006): 353.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 354.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 357.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 358.

heroism itself—had done more to hinder his cultural politics than it had done to help them.”⁶⁷ As the New Democrats ruled the political scene of the 1990s, Springsteen’s writing became decisively less ambiguous about its liberal perspective—releasing “Streets of Philadelphia” about the AIDS epidemic, “Galveston Bay,” which investigates the politics of whiteness, and “American Skin (41 Shots),” condemning the NYPD’s brutal murder of Amadou Diallo, a young Guinean immigrant, in the Bronx. Following 9/11 and the ensuing ineptitude of the Bush-Cheney years, Springsteen began to throw his symbolic might behind the Democratic Party. In 2004, he became a principal organizer for the Vote for Change concert tour, published a *New York Times* Op-Ed endorsing the Kerry-Edwards ticket, and even introduced John Kerry at several campaign stops, giving short, well-received speeches.⁶⁸ When Barack Obama became the party’s nominee in 2008, Springsteen was back on the campaign trail in more ways than one: “The Rising” became one of the campaign’s unofficial theme songs, and Springsteen himself made several campaign stops, even appearing alongside Obama, with their wives and families, at a campaign stop in Cleveland. In 2008—and later 2016 when he endorsed Hillary Clinton—Springsteen’s role as a moral prophet of humanity was on full display.

In “The Country We Carry in Our Hearts is Waiting,” Edward U. Murphy sees Springsteen as a part of a genealogy of American writers capable of “challenging audiences to question received truths and to break out of an unthinking complacency. They address a classic problem faced by liberals and all those advocating a higher level of national and international social solidarity.”⁶⁹ Recently, however, the ‘intimate publics’ that popular musicians were once pivotal in fostering have become jeopardized by twenty-first century social conditions. Murphy

⁶⁷ Garman, *A Race of Singers*, 248.

⁶⁸ Murphy, Edward U. “The Country We Carry in Our Hearts Is Waiting: Bruce Springsteen and the Art of Social Change.” In *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream*, edited by Jerry Zolten. (Farnham: Routledge, 1991), 177-178.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 181.

writes, “American society seems to be increasingly fragmenting into multiple groups separated by class, education, political affiliation, region, sexual orientation, religion, and race-ethnicity. The feeling of shared fate has eroded.” The fragmentation of publics can be witnessed firsthand through the musicians that Hillary Clinton campaigned behind: from John Legend and Pharell Williams, to Elton John and Sting, to Katy Perry and Beyonce. The conspicuous heterogeneity behind such hip figures that surrounded her campaign ultimately rang hollow as pointed gestures to pander to mainstream, if diverse, audiences on a largely symbolic level.

When Springsteen performed a three-song set on Election Eve 2016 outside Philadelphia’s Independence Hall, his song choices were reflective of a draining of the once trenchant specificity which had powered his music.⁷⁰ The setlist was comprised of “Thunder Road” (1976), “Dancing in the Dark” (1985), and “Long Walk Home” (2007), three songs that touch, more than anything, on a nostalgic sense of hope and/or escapism, without any palpable political implications other than a longing for brighter days, in the past *or* future. Whether coordinated with the Clinton campaign or not, Springsteen’s setlist conveys a middle ground or mainstream appeal that is shorn of the more radical political incursions of Springsteen’s earlier career. Spanning four decades, the setlist suggests a flattening of both historical time and the artist’s career. Whatever affective charge these songs may have carried at one point in time becomes filtered through a nostalgic lens that treats the present as a vector for the past more than the other way around.

Culturally, the persistent popularity of Bruce Springsteen in 2010s, and into the 2020s, attests to the significance of musical heritage institutions. Through a continual stream of new albums, a memoir, a Broadway Musical and its Netflix special, stadium tours, and talk show

⁷⁰ Kreps, Daniel. “See Bruce Springsteen Play Solo, Rip Trump at Clinton Rally.” *Rolling Stone*. Rolling Stone, June 25, 2018. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/see-bruce-springsteen-perform-solo-set-rip-trump-at-clinton-rally-113483/>.

appearances, Springsteen has become a cottage industry of his own. Garman observes, “As one of the world’s wealthiest and most recognizable musicians, he became a symbol for the narratives of upward mobility that he deconstructed.”⁷¹ Yet, in the eyes of the Democratic Party, he remains a vestigial symbol of a brand of twentieth century folk politics, which the party has attempted to channel through nostalgic cultural representation. Over two decades into the twenty-first century, Springsteen’s once progressive imprint upon the collective memory has been jeopardized by his status as a mainstream superstar.

Moving into the digital age, film and television syncs, as strategic musical placements, have become a lucrative springboard for record labels to both push new artists, and cash in on the back catalogs of heritage acts.⁷² Springsteen may seem to have enough of a presence without them, but the televisual syncs of his songs have bolstered his cultural relevance, as well as his bottom line. The audiovisual afterlives that have emerged through these syncs are revealing of a collective memory that popular music produces and molds, and how it changes as it moves through time and space, accumulating new meanings through new contexts, while shedding old signifiers. As they occur in soundtracks, audiovisual afterlives function on two levels: through the visual narrative unfolding on screen, and also through the sonic accompaniment that cultivates an affective response to the story. The audiovisual afterlives of Bruce Springsteen, thus, shed light onto his transformation from authentic spokesman of the disenfranchised to a nostalgic relic of an imagined white working-class.

⁷¹ Garman, *A Race of Singers*, 245.

⁷² Forde, Eamonn. “That Syncing Feeling: How Stranger Things Supercharged the Music Industry.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, July 12, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/jul/12/that-syncing-feeling-how-stranger-things-supercharged-the-music-industry?utm_source=pocket_mylist.

The Audiovisual Afterlife of Bruce Springsteen

In the midst of boiling racial tensions in America, HBO's 2015 mini-series *Show Me A Hero* brought forth a hero in the form Nick Wasicsko, the 28-year old mayor of Yonkers, New York, who fought to desegregate the city's public housing in the late 1980s. The show (based on Lisa Belkin's book) was created by David Simon, who had previously explored the intertwinings of race and politics in the post-industrial American city through both *The Wire* and *Treme*. Airing concurrently with shows like *Scandal*, *House of Cards*, and *Madam Secretary*, which focused their attention on executive politics, *Show Me A Hero* proved that an American political drama could be riveting, even outside of the realm of national, electoral politics. Oscar Isaac's captivating depiction of the young mayor evokes a sensitive politician dedicated to resisting the status quo of municipal politics, no matter how much it wears on his physical health. Issac's portrayal of Wasicsko brings to life the grittiness and corruption of Yonkers in the late-80s and early-90s. Beyond a sprinkling of hip-hop from the era, such as Digable Planets, Public Enemy, and Boogie Down Productions, the show's soundtrack relies most heavily on the music of Bruce Springsteen, which provides the emotional core for the story of a tragic working-class hero fighting for justice within a corrupt system.

Show Me A Hero finds its legs as a historical drama through a 'nostalgic imaginary' that represents the era as both alluring and repellent.⁷³ The timeliness of its airing in 2015 indexes a facet of nostalgia that "operates as the search for a continuity of specific values and meanings from the past."⁷⁴ David Pierson recalls Stuart Tannock's work on the mobilization of nostalgia as a rhetorical practice: "Nostalgia responds to a discontinuity in the present; to the sense that

⁷³ Pierson, "Politics of Nostalgia," 139.

⁷⁴ Tannock, Stuart. "Nostalgia Critique". *Cultural Studies*, 9(3), (1995): 453-464, quoted in Pierson, "Politics of Nostalgia," 141.

something is blocking or threatening an agency or identity in the present and that this is leading to a separation from the cultural and communal traditions of a creatively remembered past, homeland, community, or family.”⁷⁵ Rhetorically, the screened nostalgia of *Show Me A Hero* delivers a depiction of a political ideal that may seem extinct in the historical present: the scrupulous politician. Fighting through the bribery and blackmail of municipal politics, the incorruptible Wasiesko serves as an progressive example of nostalgia that Pierson sees throughout popular culture, where “representations that feature moments of excluded histories that counter or contradict hegemonic, traditional conceptions of a particular era can function as a source of continuity and inspiration for individuals seeking to alter present-day conditions.”⁷⁶ Taken in stride, the progressive nostalgia at hand in *Show Me A Hero* certainly shows glimpses of inspiration, but ultimately relies too narrowly on twentieth century ideals of agency that don’t bear the same resonance in the twenty-first century.

A pivotal scene takes place in the series’ first episode, where at a modest Yonkers diner, Nick takes a meeting with a pair of advisors that lay out the incumbent mayor’s corrupt schemes. Nick grumbles back, “Don’t get mad, get a new mayor,” before he inserts a coin in a jukebox and plays Bruce Springsteen’s 1980 hit “Hungry Heart.” His advisors lament, “Springsteen?”—“This again?”—to which Nick replies, “Oh, come on. It’s my theme song.” The song continues out of the diner, going from the diegetic (sound existing within the storyworld) to extra-diegetic space, leading into a montage of the multiracial cast of characters, featuring Carmen, a single Dominican mother working late sanding tables at an office furniture workshop; Norma, an African American health aid who lives in the projects administering medications to a patient; and Doreen, a young African American woman and her boyfriend Skip as they are eyed-down by a

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Pierson, “Politics of Nostalgia,” 148.

lurking patrol car; then finally, back to Nick himself, looking weary as he sits through a meeting between corrupt city councilmen.

“Hungry Heart,” which became a top 10 hit for Springsteen in 1981, colors the *Show Me A Hero* montage with a sense of yearning romance and nostalgia. Despite the varying plights of the characters, the song conjures a sense of shared emotional struggle, with the hero Nick at its core, and the other characters playing the roles as the hard-working proletariat, desiring relief from the constraints of an American society rife with injustices. As Springsteen sings, “Everybody needs a place to rest/ Everybody wants to have a home,” the show’s soundtrack sets the stage for battle for the humanistic liberal ideals that Wasicsko and Springsteen both espouse. Yet the nostalgic limits of the period piece put all of the agency in the hands of the white working-class hero, who ascended the institutional ladder to defend and give voice to his multiracial public. Ultimately, Wasicsko—an archetypal working-class hero—falls short of the same revolutionary change that hindered the politics of Springsteen, who himself was confined within the institutional norms of the culture industry. Garman writes, “Because these heroes believed that the original vision on which the Republic was founded was unflawed, they frequently located corruption and injustice in immoral individuals rather than questioning the political system itself.”⁷⁷ Such nostalgic rendering of the scrupulous politician in *Show Me A Hero* testifies to a longing for twentieth century ideals that were bound in individual morality rather than any collective dismantling of a flawed system. The second Wasicsko presses play on the jukebox, the audiovisual afterlife of Springsteen’s music becomes situated in a world where the white working-class hero is a more nostalgic manifestation of progress than any beacon of sweeping change.

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⁷⁷ Garman, *A Race of Singers*, 257.

Showtime's *Billions*, which first aired in 2016, centers around corruption in the world of high finance. Largely based on true scandals in the American financial sector, *Billions* positions itself as an ostensibly progressive show that exposes the greed and corruption teeming through Wall Street and beyond—it's even been said to be one of the first American television series featuring a non-binary character, in Taylor Mason. Much like HBO's *Succession*, the show feeds the liberal imagination of the outlandish greed of the one-percent. Through the lens of attorney Chuck Rhoades Jr., played by Paul Giamatti, who ascends to the position of Attorney General of New York, audiences are provided with a foil to scheming hedge fund managers (namely Damian Lewis' character Bobby Axelrod), but also a ruthless figure in his own right. When the show's sexual politics come to the fore, Rhoades, who is dominated by his wife Wendy in BDSM role play, is meant to complicate traditional roles of masculinity; however, the series tends to generally pulsate with a masculine aggression, often utilized to heighten its dramatic tensions. Demographically, with its two leading roles belonging to white men in their late 40s and early 50s, *Billions*' soundtrack is crafted to suit its target audiences, featuring sync placements for U2, Warren Zevon, Mötley Crüe, Bad Company, Van Halen, and of course, several placements for Bruce Springsteen.

Billions, in its contemporary setting, may not rely on the same explicit appeal to nostalgia as a series like *Show Me A Hero*, though its construction of a 'hegemonic masculinity'⁷⁸ positions it as a show that is ultimately more reliant on twentieth century male archetypes than it is critical of them. Building off of the Gramscian concept of 'cultural hegemony,' Raewyn Connell sees 'hegemonic masculinity' in the form of "white, heterosexual, competitive, individualist and aggressive men in the paid labor force who dominate the moral, cultural and financial

⁷⁸ Feasey, Rebecca. *Masculinity and Popular Television*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 2.

landscape.”⁷⁹ Rebecca Feasey elaborates that, “The hegemonic male is said to be a strong, successful, capable, and authoritative man who derives his reputation from the workplace and his self-esteem from the public sphere.”⁸⁰ It is these authoritative, successful men that have been idealized in American visual culture for years; that is, until the ‘crisis of masculinity’ entered public discourse, notably in the 1990s and 2000s, to refer to a contested masculinity that was appearing more and more on screen. Donna Peberdy distinguishes between the broad male insecurity that surrounds the term ‘crisis’ and its more apt counterpart ‘angst’ which “more usefully refers to the specific manifestations, performances and presentations of masculinity.”⁸¹ The male angst of *Billions* often manifests itself in performances of ‘hegemonic masculinity,’ which eschew compassion for a more vulgar form of masculinity that buttresses the characters’ stature in society.

In “Implosion,” the ninth episode of *Billions*’ fifth season, Springsteen’s music is called upon to highlight a particular moment of masculine angst. The scene focuses around Nico Tanner, a chiseled-to-his-veins expressionist in the mold of Jackson Pollock, who also happens to be the most recent lover of Wendy Rhoades. In an attempt to inspire his creativity—untainted by financial reward—Wendy sabotages Tanner’s lucrative commission from Bobby Axelrod, which ultimately destroys their relationship. When Wendy confronts him in his loft studio, Tanner is livid, stressing “I’m a grown man. I decide what I need, I decide when I need it.” As he explains to Wendy that he needs a girl to understand his needs, Wendy replies, “Your problem is you need a girl.” Bitterly eyeing her down, Tanner picks up a razor and slices his finished canvas in half. The bluesy crunch of Bruce Springsteen’s “Adam Raised A Cain” enters the extra-diegetic space

⁷⁹ Connell, Raewyn. *Masculinities*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 77 quoted in Feasey, *Masculinity*, 2.

⁸⁰ Feasey, *Masculinity and Popular Television*, 2-3.

⁸¹ Peberdy, Donna. *Masculinity and Film Performance: Male Angst in Contemporary American Cinema*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), 8.

as Wendy declares their affair over and Tanner proceeds to ravage whatever was left of his canvas and frame, along with his dignity. Springsteen's biblical 1978 scorcher expresses the frustrations of a working-class son who feels outcast by his father's scorn. The second track on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*—an album of songs that Edward U. Murphy believes “articulate a deep longing for a better life and a country that lives up to its promise”⁸²—is here reappropriated as a signifier of the very hegemonic male angst that both Connell and Feasey describe. Channeled through Tanner, Springsteen's passionate and gritty delivery becomes an expression of the painter's despair in a moment where he is stripped of two essential components of his masculinity: a paycheck and a woman.

Transposed from a working-class town somewhere in the hinterlands of America to the rarefied lofts of Soho, “Adam Raised A Cain” becomes a different song. In its audiovisual afterlife, we see Springsteen's Steinbeckian inclinations refracted through the lens of a coastal television drama that emphasizes the very hegemonic masculinity that Springsteen so willfully shed in the mid-80s. What's left is an afterlife that reaffirms the more reactionary qualities that Garman gleaned in Springsteen's mid-80s persona. “Like Reagan and Rambo,” he writes, “the apparently working-class Springsteen was for so many Americans a white hard-bodied hero whose masculinity confirmed the values of patriarchy and patriotism, the work ethic and rugged individualism, and who clearly demarcated the boundaries between men and women, black and white, heterosexual and homosexual.”⁸³ Lost in this iteration of Springsteen are the adamantly progressive homosocial and multiracial politics that he espoused throughout his career, ones most famously on display through his decades long friendship with Clarence Clemons, and later mirrored through his association with Barack Obama. The Springsteen brand that's become

⁸² Murphy, “The Country We Carry,” 179.

⁸³ Garman, *A Race of Singers*, 225.

synonymous with American liberalism has taken on a new dimension through its audiovisual afterlife in television soundtracks, one that transmits a progressive nostalgia and hegemonic masculinity which have become inextricable from the Boss' public persona.

Strike a Pose: The Political Arc of Madonna

A grainy fan-made video angles over to the side-stage monitor at Madison Square Garden. Madonna Ciccone is centerstage introducing Amy Schumer, the raunchy comedian known for her irreverent, often provocative brand of femininity. It's October 2016 and the 58 year-old posterchild of MTV glam looks rather unassuming in the shaky, handheld quality of a YouTube video. Her perennial youth shows through a black bomber jacket bedazzled with large dollar signs. The long black dress she's wearing underneath suggests a Madonna who has matured; one who has perhaps even moved past the shock tactics that made her one of pop music's most iconoclastic and enduring feminist stars. But then Madonna continues, sneaking in one more statement before she calls the 'genius of comedy' up onstage. With fingers pinched to thumbs, Madonna pleads, "If you vote for Hillary Clinton, I will give you a blowjob...And I'm good." Scattered laughter and hollers roll through the audience. Madonna continues, "I take my time, I have a lot of eye contact, and I do swallow,"⁸⁴ throwing two thumbs up and breaking into a cheeky grin. For a day or so afterward, the video racked up a modest amount of views, and received its sporadic share of tabloid coverage. In actual effect, it made more ripples than the waves which the Queen of Pop may once have been more accustomed to.

⁸⁴ Blake, Liza. "Madonna Opens for Amy Schumer, Makes Scandalous Campaign Promise to Hillary Clinton Voters." *Billboard*, October 19, 2016. <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/madonna-amy-schumer-hillary-clinton-madison-square-garden-7549120/>.

Weeks later, on the eve of the election, Madonna made a surprise appearance at New York's Washington Square Park. Armed with a red acoustic guitar and minimal accouterments, Madonna was evidently bent on channeling the park's history as a bastion of the Greenwich Village folk music scene. Between songs in her brief set, Madonna declared "Women are marginalized, let's face it. As far as I'm concerned, we still live in an extremely chauvinist, sexist, misogynist country. And that's why Hillary Clinton needs to be president."⁸⁵ Stumping for a moderate liberal presidential candidate may seem like a far cry for a star, who Steve Allen once lamented, "has become successful because of her willingness—even eagerness—to resort to the grossest sort of vulgarity."⁸⁶ But Madonna's career trajectory from the sexual underground of New York's avant garde to every television set in America is ultimately a sheer product of the very brand of managerial capitalism touted by the New Democratic Party of the Clintons.

In "The Erotics of Power," Paul Rutherford attributes Madonna's rise to the prevailing business ethos of her era. "Madonna's rise was both a consequence and a cause of the exploding popularity of music television, a novel form that emerged in America in the 1980s." He continues, "The irony was that what music television played as entertainment amounted to commercials meant to sell the star and the record."⁸⁷ Not taking long to capitalize on the cliché of "sex sells," Madonna emerged as a provocateur of the music video world after she performed "Like A Virgin" onstage at MTV's 1984 Video Music Awards, where her "simulated sexual frenzy"⁸⁸ ignited both controversy and adulation in one rolling, ecstatic gesture. Madonna's rise throughout the 1980s, with her wannabes in tow (Madonna's devoted troupe of teenage girls who dressed like her), bore testament to her unquestionable talent as a performer and her knack for

⁸⁵ Correal, Annie. "Madonna Gave a Surprise Pop-up Concert to Support Clinton. We Were There." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, November 8, 2016.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/nyregion/madonna-brings-feminist-message-to-surprise-concert-for-hillary-clinton.html>.

⁸⁶ Allen, Steve. "Madonna." *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (1993): 6.

⁸⁷ Rutherford, Paul. *A World Made Sexy*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 174.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 175.

exploiting a diffuse range of symbols to her artistic advantage. From her donning of a crucifix as an ornament in “Like A Prayer,” to her ode to the powers of consumption in “Material Girl,” Madonna rode the wave of transgression right to the bank, becoming a lucrative industry in her own right, and even earning *Forbes*’ acclaim in 1990 as “America’s Smartest Businesswoman.”⁸⁹

That same year, critic Camille Paglia, a feminist provocateur herself, took to the *New York Times* Op-Ed to anoint Madonna “A Real Feminist.”⁹⁰ In Madonna, Paglia saw a performer who inspired women to be “fully female and sexual while still exercising total control over their lives. She shows girls how to be attractive, sensual, energetic, ambitious, aggressive and funny -- all at the same time.” Bucking the stuffy, academic “puritanism” of second-wave feminism, Paglia praised Madonna’s deconstructed vision of feminine authenticity: “She sees both the animality and the artifice. Changing her costume style and hair color virtually every month, Madonna embodies the eternal values of beauty and pleasure. Feminism says, ‘No more masks.’ Madonna says we are nothing but masks.” As Madonna became something of a muse in the field of cultural studies, as the “postmodern icon nonpareil,”⁹¹ her use of disembodied signifiers drew questions regarding her authenticity. Was she truly a “sex radical” as the media seemed to proclaim, or merely a hollow simulacra of radicalism? Rutherford writes, “Everything Madonna did seemed orchestrated for effect; she was the master publicist who fashioned her own self as myth, one reason why people wondered whether there was anything authentic about Madonna and why biographers later had such difficulty separating the fact and the fiction in her life.”⁹²

Unlike a figure like Bruce Springsteen, who used a heightened sense of authenticity to sell his

⁸⁹ Greenburg, Zack O'Malley. “Madonna at 60: The Material Girl by the Numbers.” *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, August 16, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2018/08/16/madonna-at-60-the-material-girl-by-the-numbers-60th-birthday/?sh=43895db3604e>.

⁹⁰ Paglia, Camille. “Madonna, Finally, a Real Feminist.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, December 14, 1990. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/14/opinion/madonna-finally-a-real-feminist.html>.

⁹¹ Rutherford, *A World Made Sexy*, 177.

⁹² *Ibid*, 178.

product, Madonna shirked more static definitions of authentic identity. She manipulated eclectic imagery, very much in a Baudrillardian sense, as she constantly appropriated and juxtaposed symbols from different times and places.

Nowhere was Madonna's use of visual pastiche more powerful than in her music videos. Though animated by a scrambling of signifiers, Madonna's videos were also charged with a sense of fabrication that established her genius of myth-making. "She drew upon the signifiers of her own Italian-American and Catholic background, on gay and black culture, on the past stars of Hollywood."⁹³ If her lyrics weren't politically explicit, Madonna's pop radicalism spoke through her videos. In "Material Girl," Madonna channels Marilyn Monroe to both affirm and deny the power of materialism, while in the video for "Papa Don't Preach," Madonna confronts her father over keeping her baby. The *Metropolis*-referencing "Express Yourself" even sees Madonna shifting the gaze, leading a sex revolt among the toiling male masses.⁹⁴ Rutherford writes, "The music videos were Madonna's key mode of publicity. But they were also more than that: they were the artistic renditions of her fantasies, her desires, the narcissism of her many selves."⁹⁵ In a feminist sense, Madonna's power came through sexual expression. She once claimed "Power is a great aphrodisiac, and I'm a very powerful person."⁹⁶ While the more salacious aspects of Madonna's persona infuriated critics on the right, Madonna's blatant commercialism and individualism spurred detractors on the left. Brendan Canavan and Claire McCamley write, "For thirty years she has acted the provocateur in singing about her individual right to sexual pleasure. This fight is the fire that drives and the cause which collates her being."⁹⁷ Ever-present through her video work, that right to pleasure has been one of Madonna's most bidding influences in pop,

⁹³ Ibid, 179.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 180.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 181.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Canavan, Brendan and Claire McCamley. "The Passing of the Postmodern in Pop? Epochal Consumption and Marketing From Madonna, Through Gaga, to Taylor." *Journal of Business Research* 107 (2020): 277.

though it has also urged many to question *who* has that right, and *who* Madonna's music and art truly speaks to and for.

Feminist critics have at once revered and reviled Madonna's ludic femininity. Geraldine Harris writes, "The aesthetic qualities of Madonna's video performances were variously used to exemplify a democratized, postmodern 'resistant' popular culture; a postmodern notion of subjectivity as fluid and discursive." On top of this, Madonna adopts "a Butlerian strategy of subversive repetition which 'denaturalizes femininity' and challenges *both* genders because it reveals 'gender as a sign system that does not necessarily co-inside with identity.'"⁹⁸ As a purveyor of utopian brand of feminism, Madonna was often linked to postmodern feminism, which liberated women to "perform or mimic femininity."⁹⁹ But despite her deconstructivist aesthetic leanings, Madonna's representative capacity has faltered through crucial shortcomings. For one, she engages primarily in a white subjectivity. bell hooks sees Madonna's subjectivity—as a "quintessential white girl," and outsider to black experience—as a vehicle, which enables her to "colonize and appropriate black experience for her own opportunistic ends even as she attempts to mask her acts of racist aggression as affirmation."¹⁰⁰ Madonna has likewise drawn critics from queer music communities, especially following her 1990 single "Vogue," which despite becoming an iconic anthem in its own right, has been flagged for the erasure of its queer, black origins; appropriating the vogue dance from New York's gay underground ballroom scene. Terre Thaemlitz, a transgender activist primarily known for her work as DJ Sprinkles, takes Madonna to task for her work, "Authenticity is not the issue. What is at issue is how the track functions as media, and as a representational device - particularly as a pop track that sold several

⁹⁸ Harris, Geraldine. *Beyond Representation Television Drama and the Politics and Aesthetics of Identity*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 44.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ hooks, bell. "Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?" In *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*, edited by Gail Dines and Jean McMahon Humez. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), 29.

hundreds of thousands of copies, if not millions. “Vogue” bought its access to the mainstream marketplace by aggressively erasing the factors of race and gender which gave rise to voguing, all for mainstream appeal.”¹⁰¹ Being the businesswoman that *Forbes* once praised her as, Madonna’s trajectory has in fact been tied to mainstream appeal from its very onset, often bypassing critical opportunities in favor of marketability.

Madonna’s stature as a postfeminist icon is entwined with the sort of “individualistic, free-market, postindustrial, capitalist feminism”¹⁰² that Sara Ahmed once criticized for citing race and class as “figures for difference” more than constructive sites for analysis.¹⁰³ Madonna’s persistent influence is ultimately a product of her periodization as a popular culture symbol of the 1980s and 1990s—a period entrenched in postmodern cultural critique. Harris writes, “a postmodern postfeminism may represent a reversal and a substitution of the old ‘dominant norms’ that reaffirm the ‘superiority’ of the white, bourgeois subject by other means, whilst retaining an aura of progressiveness through its association with (old) feminism.”¹⁰⁴ One generation removed from Madonna’s rise, her status as a radical feminist has undergone a similar transformation. After she fought for the right to express pleasure, her expression became the new status quo. As the Democratic Party, and Hillary Clinton in particular, have aligned themselves with Madonna, they are reaffirming their belief system through their association with an anachronistic feminism that upholds an individualistic aspect of feminine expression, while critically overlooking functions of representation and constructive difference.

If Madonna’s music videos endure as artifacts of her iconoclastic past, uses of her music in recent television soundtracks have etched a different sort of mark in America’s cultural

¹⁰¹ Warren, William. “DJ Sprinkles on How to Lose Fans and Alienate the Music Industry.” *VICE*, September 24, 2014. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jpn7py/terre-thaemlitz-aka-dj-sprinkles-gives-it-to-madonna-straight>.

¹⁰² Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. (London: Routledge, 2000), 41 quoted in Harris, *Beyond Representation*, 46.

¹⁰³ Harris, *Beyond Representation*, 46-47.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 47.

memory. In fact, Madonna's influence in television is so prominent today that it's spawned its own sub-genre of episode: "The Madonna Special." Series such as *Glee* (2010), *The Carrie Diaries* (2013), *This Is Us* (in 2017), and *Ru Paul's Drag Race* (2020) have each dedicated entire episodes and plotlines to celebrating the music and fashion of Madonna. Elsewhere, Madonna's music has been licensed out to countless competition series such as *American Idol*, *Lip Sync Battle*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *The Voice*, ensuring her music's prominence in homes across the nation, even if her record sales have significantly slid off in recent years.¹⁰⁵ It is thus that the audiovisual afterlife of Madonna can be grasped through her musical syncs in popular television series, which project her music and persona across time as a testament to a nostalgic conception of feminism that prioritizes pleasure over perspective and marketability over meaning.

The Audiovisual Afterlife of Madonna

Replete with all the requisite nods to 80s pop culture lore—synth-laden soundtrack, ragtag group of young detectives, paranormal wonder and doomed teenage romance—*Stranger Things* has ridden the nostalgic wave to mass acclaim and popularity. Since its debut in 2016, the Duffer Brothers' Netflix original series has revitalized the television blockbuster, becoming one of television's highest budgeted shows—with Season 4 costing a staggering \$30 million per episode.¹⁰⁶ The show is centered in the small, fictional town of Hawkins, Indiana, where a series of paranormal events take place, set into motion by a child testing facility and its creation of a

¹⁰⁵ Jann, Dula. "Ranking Every Single Madonna Album, Based on U.S. Sales." *TheThings*, June 18, 2021. <https://www.thethings.com/ranking-every-single-madonna-album-based-on-u-s-sales/>.

¹⁰⁶ Beck, Robyn. "Netflix, Facing Reality Check, Vows to Curb Its Profligate Ways." *The Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company, April 22, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/netflix-facing-reality-check-subscriber-loss-stock-plummet-cut-costs-vows-to-curb-its-profligate-ways-11650547424>.

portal to an alternate reality called “The Upside Down.” Imbued with strains of Cold War anxiety, the version of 1980s America on display in *Stranger Things* becomes a predominantly aestheticized one, where youthful innocence and small town America are merged into sites of desire and longing. And the more the Duffer Brothers incorporate stylistic nods to Steven Spielberg and David Lynch, as well as teen buddy films like *The Goonies* and *Stand By Me*, the more apparent it becomes that the show’s temporal setting is more pointedly nostalgic than it is historical.

Stranger Things may not be a direct remake, but its pastiche of 80s pop culture invokes a trope of retrotyping that Ryan Lizardi describes as giving an “illusion of a shared past, but one based on artificial mediated nostalgia that has been contemporized and idealized.”¹⁰⁷ He contends that such idealized nostalgia is formally individualized and shaped to “trigger a yearning for the past no matter the content or viewing situation.”¹⁰⁸ The ‘playlist pasts’ that Lizardi describes in *Mediated Nostalgia* are ultimately products of the digital era technologies that elide collective engagement, favoring instead individual media texts that can be played back at any time.¹⁰⁹ Quite literally, *Stranger Things* has proven to be a playlist show par excellence. Its official Spotify playlist has over a half million “likes” to date and testifies to the show’s eclectic sonic palette, mixing The Cramps, Devo, and Metallica with The Beach Boys, Ricky Nelson, and Chopin. When Kate Bush’s “Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)” became a leitmotif in the show’s fourth season, it subsequently became a TikTok phenomenon, and in turn, charted globally for the first time in nearly four decades. But in spite of the commercial resonance of the ‘playlist past,’ the persistence of retrotyping in television runs the risk of flattening the meaning of symbols through nostalgic repetition. As Lizardi warns, “Nostalgia exists throughout the

¹⁰⁷ Lizardi, “The Nostalgic Revolution,” 49.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 52.

¹⁰⁹ Lizardi, *Mediated Nostalgia*, 8.

television medium, and asks viewers to examine the past on a cursory level at the expense of significant critical engagement.”¹¹⁰ When Madonna’s music appears in the show’s third season, it comes more as a nostalgic homage to the star’s past, relying on an essentialized representation of postmodern feminism that privileges a white suburban subjectivity.

In Season 3’s “The Mall Rats,” a montage shows two female characters, El [Eleven] and Max romping through a suburban shopping mall, trying on new clothes and getting into trouble as “Material Girl” soundtracks the revelry. In the opening scene of the following episode “The Case of the Missing Lifeguard,” the two are seen hanging out in El’s bedroom, listening to Madonna’s 1984 hit “Angel.” Max dances across the room, singing into a microphone as El pages through photo spreads in 80s teen girl magazines, coming across a foldout poster of Ralph Macchio. Max joins her on the bed, saying “He’s so hot right? I bet he’s an amazing kisser too.” El blushes when Max asks her if her boyfriend Mike is (or was) a good kisser. While the scene briefly allows the girls space to gaze upon a male figure, and thus explore their sexuality, the use of Madonna’s music is hardly portrayed in the toxic sense that Steve Allen conceived of when he singled out Madonna as “high on the list of those responsible” for the vile language and references entering the American consciousness.¹¹¹ The version of Madonna we see is a tamed one.

Stranger Things aims for verisimilitude, with its representation of El and Max as fairly accurate—if a bit idealized—versions of wannabees. Despite the scenes’ emphases on the liberated feminine subject, the progressivism on display becomes more representative of Madonna’s “postmodern rebellion of one,” in which she is “not interested in wider movements or change, but in doing one’s own thing.”¹¹² If Madonna’s later forays could be witnessed as more

¹¹⁰ Lizardi, “The Nostalgic Revolution,” 52.

¹¹¹ Allen, “Madonna,” 4.

¹¹² Canavan and McCamley, “The Passing of the Postmodern,” 225.

radical engagements with sexual rebellion, the audiovisual afterlife of Madonna, as seen through *Stranger Things*, engages primarily with wannabees as individualized subjects prone to a heavily commodified form of rebellion, essentialized through a white, heterosexual, suburban subjectivity.¹¹³

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ABC's short-lived sitcom *Happy Endings* aired from 2011 to 2013. Much in the vein of *Friends* and *How I Met Your Mother*, it worked within the standard formula of American sitcoms revolving around a group of friends experiencing the ups and downs of relationships and city life in their 30s. While the former series' have been oft-criticized for their narrow subjectivity around white, heterosexual couples, *Happy Endings*, in the current of liberal representation in the 2010s, features several gay characters, including Max, a main cast member played by straight actor Adam Pally. Contrary to Derrick, Stephen Guarino's more stereotypically gay recurring character, Max exhibits very few gay stereotypes, and even once had a kiss scene with another man cut from an episode.¹¹⁴ Such erasure, however, is hardly uncommon in a television environment that has long desexualized gay characters. In "Nothing Queer About Queer Television," Guillermo Avila-Saavedra argues, "The presence of homosexual characters in American television would seem to imply an endorsement of a liberal agenda of tolerance and inclusion of alternative lifestyles and sexual orientations." While Avila-Saavedra sees queer representation as a positive reflection of a more tolerant society, he witnesses the hegemonic liabilities of expanded representation: "However, the perceived progressiveness of gays' sudden appearance on American television could be undermined if it responds to traditional norms of

¹¹³ Blanco, Jose F. "How to Fashion an Archetype: Madonna as Anima Figure." *Journal of Popular Culture* 47, no. 6 (2014): 1157.

¹¹⁴ Hartinger, Brent. "Exclusive: No Gay Kiss for Max on 'Happy Endings.' Here's Why." *Logo TV*. May 11, 2011. <https://www.logotv.com/news/6uhxlm/exclusive-no-gay-kiss-for-max-on-happy-endings-heres-why>.

social relations.”¹¹⁵ *Happy Endings*, despite its mild corrective on traditional sitcom sexuality, representatively focuses a white, male homosexuality that bespeaks a ‘queer sexism’ which sees male homosexuality being absorbed into a “contemporary hegemonic masculine bloc.”¹¹⁶

In Season 2’s finale, “Four Weddings and a Funeral (Minus Three Weddings and One Funeral),” Max is finally given a stage to perform his queerness, literally. At Eric and Derrick’s wedding, Max and his band reunite to perform Madonna’s “Like A Prayer” as the episode closes into its credits. Onstage, flanked by two male guitarists in Madonna-esque vintage wedding dresses, Max gets down on all fours, shimmies, and writhes in pleasure. Max is backed by a gospel chorus and joined onstage by Brad, the sole black character in the show’s main cast, in a callback to the multiracial harmony of Madonna’s “Like A Prayer” music video. However, as the scene on and offstage coalesces into frenzied ecstasy, the camera returns to Dave and Alex—a man and woman, and two of the show’s central characters—as they make affectionate eye contact with one another. From behind, the camera lands on Dave and Alex holding hands, before panning out on the wedding scene from their perspective.

Much like the postmodern feminism of Madonna, *Happy Endings*’ attempt at queering the sitcom falls short in its ultimate affirmation of the white, bourgeois subject position. The aura of progressiveness that has followed Madonna into the twenty-first century as a queer icon has come on the back of anthems such as “Like A Prayer,” “Express Yourself,” and “Vogue.” Through such associations, Madonna had symbolically mined gay culture and proposed to speak on behalf of marginalized groups. bell hooks questions the efficacy of such a stance: “Those Madonna fans who are determined to see her as politically progressive might ask themselves why it is she completely endorses those racist/sexist/classist stereotypes that almost always

¹¹⁵ Avila-Saavedra, Guillermo. “Nothing Queer About Queer Television: Televised Construction of Gay Masculinities.” *Media, Culture & Society* 31, no. 1 (2009): 5.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

attempt to portray marginalized groups as “defective.” Let’s face it, by doing this, Madonna is not breaking with any white supremacist, patriarchal *status quo*; she is endorsing and perpetuating it.”¹¹⁷ Madonna, and notably Lady Gaga after her, have tapped into gay communities through their endorsements of such micronarratives of self-expression and tribal solidarity, but in spite of such symbolic support, D.E. Holtzman sees this as nothing but the “appropriation and projection of the gaze and desire of others.”¹¹⁸

Happy Endings may appear as progressive on the surface with its gay male characters and its wedding scene carousal featuring people in drag dancing to Madonna. A series like this may even grasp, as Madonna had at Washington Square Park, that America is an extremely chauvinist, sexist, misogynist country. But while its representative conceits recognize a limited queer subjectivity, the series falls into a ‘queer sexism’ that prioritizes queerness from a male, white, bourgeois perspective. Just as Madonna’s brand of radical feminism succumbed to an essentialist view that privileged a white, bourgeois subjectivity, the audiovisual afterlife of her music suggests a symbol that aligns itself with feminist and queer causes, all the while capturing a limited perspective which in turn upholds the status quo, shying away from truly radical interrogations into race, gender, and class.

Higher Ground: The Political Arc of Stevie Wonder

On her 69th birthday, Hillary Clinton was a mere two weeks from becoming America’s first female president. Riding a propitious wave of polling numbers, she stopped by Power 105.1’s *The Breakfast Club*—the legendary hip-hop radio talk show—with hopes of

¹¹⁷ hooks, “Madonna,” 31.

¹¹⁸ Holtzman, Dinah Elizabeth. “Hysteria and the Multimedia Art of Lady Gaga and James Franco.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 1 (2015) 21, quoted in Canavan and McCamley, “The Passing of the Postmodern,” 227.

consolidating her support amongst African American voters. Clinton joined Charlamagne the God, DJ Envy, and Angela Yee to discuss a host of hot-button issues.¹¹⁹ She also took to the airwaves to address her love for dancing, her endorsement from Jay-Z, and several recent memes that likened her style to that of rap legends. Midway through the interview, Stevie Wonder was welcomed on as a surprise guest. If his custom-tailored “Clinton” letterman's jacket didn't get his point across, Wonder proclaimed his support for Hillary, reasoning “Truth be it told, I think we as men, we have had our chance to work it out. It's time to let a woman do it.” At the interview's end, Wonder broke out his harpejji, and serenaded the Democratic Presidential candidate with a rendition of “Happy Birthday,” his 1981 single, originally written as a part of the campaign to make Martin Luther King Jr. 's birthday a national holiday. Clinton, in her trademark blue pantsuit, rocked back and forth with glee, a politician's grin plastered across her face as the hosts joined Wonder in the chorus. Stevie ended the show by promising to perform at the White House after she was sworn in, a place which by now had become familiar grounds for the legendary musician.

According to Craig Werner, the Stevie Wonder of the 1960s and 70s—who was so vital to the African American freedom movement—entered a new phase following the release of 1976's *Songs in the Key of Life*. Though Wonder's later music pulsated with glimpses of cultural relevance, he had to Werner become “a cultural monument to be invoked as needed, for the King holiday or after 9/11 or at the Obama inauguration.”¹²⁰ His status as a political icon reached its apotheosis, just a month after Obama took office, when he was awarded the Library of Congress' Gershwin Award for Popular song. Obama took the gala as an opportunity to usher Wonder into

¹¹⁹ Lozano, Kevin. “Hillary Clinton on ‘The Breakfast Club’: Stevie Wonder Sings ‘Happy Birthday,’ Clinton Jokes about Death Row Records Meme.” *Pitchfork*. Pitchfork, October 26, 2016. <https://pitchfork.com/news/69320-hillary-clinton-on-the-breakfast-club-stevie-wonder-sings-happy-birthday-clinton-jokes-about-death-row-records-meme/>.

¹²⁰ Werner, Craig. “‘Heaven Help Us All’: Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson, and the Meaning(s) of Motown in the Age of Obama.” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 49, no. 4 (2010): 482.

his own mythology, saying that his music was “the soundtrack of my youth” and “part of the essence of our [his and Michelle’s] courtship.”¹²¹ In celebrating Stevie Wonder’s importance to “the rich and dissonant sounds of the *American* experience,” Obama capitalized on the universality of Wonder’s music, much like Berry Gordy once had, when he emphasized Motown’s crossover potential, through which Black artists would submerge their specificity in favor of a mass-marketable appeal. The Obama administration encapsulated a paradigmatic shift in the legacy of soul music, where, for the first time, the soul stars of the Civil Rights/Black Power era became enshrined in the mainstream political apparatus of the Democratic Party. In effect, artists like Wonder had become cherished as ideal figures presented by marketing departments to ensure electoral success. “We count on *them* to lead us to the promised land.” Werner continues, “That wasn’t what the freedom movement or the gospel impulse had been about.”¹²² What it was about were the collective actions of ordinary black people and their white allies—who had been left behind in the predominating mythos of twenty-first century liberalism. The Stevie Wonder who delivered banalities at the White House had become a symbol of liberal uplift, stripped of the invigorating power that made him one of the most imaginative musicians of the twentieth century, one whose Blackness had certainly once overshadowed his Americaness.

Stevie Wonder’s evolution from child phenom to soul icon to political monument ought to be viewed in light of the epochal shift from the soul to post-soul era. First discovered by Motown executive Berry Gordy at the age of eleven, Little Stevie Wonder—as he was then known—rose to fame proceeding his single “Fingertips, Part 2,” which infused blues harmonica, gospel call-and-response, and the soulful R&B sensibilities of Ray Charles.¹²³ Dropping the

¹²¹ Ibid, 483.

¹²² Ibid, 484.

¹²³ Royster, Francesca T. *Sounding Like a No-No? Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 69.

‘Little’ from his name, Stevie Wonder co-wrote “Uptight (Everything’s Alright)” in 1965, which established him as a particular treasure among Motown’s already stacked roster of talent. Throughout the latter half of the 1960s, with the rise of Motown, Stax, and Atlantic Records, “soul” became a ubiquitous, if enigmatic term in the pop lexicon. Emily Lordi elaborates: “Shaped as it was by claims to ‘know it when you see it,’ soul discourse also emphasized black people’s capacity to not only create but also *apprehend* soulful expression.”¹²⁴ Resonant with the communal teachings of the Black Arts Movement, “soul” became an essential black characteristic, wherein resilience could be channeled through sonic expression. Lordi writes, “The theory of soul established a hermeneutic for understanding the artfulness of black life and, in doing so, performed a function akin to that of the Black Aesthetic.”¹²⁵ Absorbed into the Black Power movement of the late-1960s, the Black Aesthetic meant a host of different things within African American communities. Whether relishing black pride, engaging one’s political voice, or establishing mutual community support, Black Power captured the revolutionary undercurrent of a generation. As common as it’s become to attribute the shortcomings of the soul era to the mass-marketization¹²⁶ of Black Power through commodification of cultural symbols, Lordi finds that historians have often overlooked the concurrence of queer and women’s voices coalescing in Black communities, which were gaining momentum around the time of the Black Power era’s demise. Critics like Audre Lorde and Angela Davis condemned many of the most outspoken leaders of such movements, who often advanced heterosexist, misogynist views, creating an essentialized blackness that revolved around normative forms of masculinity.¹²⁷ What had begun as a catalyst to the mobilization of both individual and collective empowerment, had devolved

¹²⁴ Lordi, Emily J. *The Meaning of Soul: Black Music and Resilience Since the 1960s*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 26.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 26.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 38.

into a paradigm which privileged black masculinity, and “recast the prior generation’s vision of black collectivity as a roadblock to personal freedom.”¹²⁸ Consequently, post-soul critique has emerged as a way of reconfiguring and eventually ‘troubling’ blackness.

In *Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, Bertram Ashe looks to “a hybrid, fluid, elastic, cultural mullattoesque sense of Black identity” that is captured through the work of so many post-soul artists.¹²⁹ Ashe proposes ‘blaxporation’ as a method of ‘troubling’ an essentialized black identity that ossified during the soul era. Through assessing blackness as an identity that is “constantly in flux,” post-soul artists can avoid the trappings that limited the Black Power movement of their predecessors. Born in 1950, Stevie Wonder straddled the generational divide of the soul and post-soul generations. After his emergence in the Motown’s “crossover” hit parade of the late 60s, Wonder’s early-mid 70s output saw him aligning with the predominant ethos of the Black Power era. With *Innervisions*, *Talking Book*, and *Songs in the Key of Life*, Wonder’s sonic and political innovations allowed him “to use pop music as a space for teaching, for opening up how black people think about themselves, and their relationship to the rest of the world.”¹³⁰ This reflective mode of blackness bridged the soul and post-soul eras; and Wonder, who was only in his mid-20s at the time, emerged as a figure more than capable of troubling blackness. Craig Werner may have deemed *Key of Life* as a turning point in Wonder’s career—his last moment truly in tune with the cultural pulse of the time. Francesca T. Royster argues otherwise, looking to Wonder’s often-overlooked follow-up, 1979’s *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants*, as an artistic milestone of the post-soul era. With his long hair, airy falsetto, loose fitting clothing and gentle demeanor, Wonder had long eluded essentialist notions of black masculinity. In the ‘blaxporation’ of *Secret Life of Plants*, Royster finds Wonder in tune with the

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ashe, Bertram D. “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction.” *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 614.

¹³⁰ Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No*, 66.

postliberationist, Post-soul moment of the late-70s. “What Stevie Wonder models in his work,” she writes, “are the limits of these past conceptualizations of black male genius, by centering empathy, and the transcendence of the historical, social, and even physiological constraints on one’s body through openness to others’, through music.”¹³¹ Though the album was a commercial disappointment, its multicultural and otherworldly influences drew Wonder’s imaginative political and cultural politics more poignantly into focus.

Before Obama had even announced his candidacy, Wonder had already become something of a staple in the liberal political sphere. Following his prominent appearance in 1985’s “We Are the World,” Wonder’s cultural ubiquity continued well into the 2000s, performing his soul era anthems for nostalgic audiences at benefit concerts such as A Tribute to Heroes or Live 8. With many of his soul-era contemporaries either dead or forgotten, Wonder has become something of a de facto symbol for the era, lending his timeless genius to the societal occasion, or political campaign. “Higher Ground,” and “Signed Sealed Delivered (I’m Yours),” in particular, have in time found their way into the political realm, becoming mainstays of Obama and Clinton campaigns—the former has even become the namesake for the Obama’s production company, founded in 2018. And despite the fact that he hasn’t recorded a new studio album since 2005, Wonder’s classics have managed to maintain an unrelenting relevance through their widespread use in television soundtracks. His songs have been licensed out to popular shows ranging from *Atlanta* to *American Idol*, *Scandal* to *Skins*, and everything in between. But sheared from their context, the music of Wonder’s mind has dispersed into disembodied fragments of an idealized moment in history. Towards political ends, they have come to represent individual uplift, conjuring a nostalgic vision of the civil rights movement, all the while obscuring Wonder’s more radical ‘troubling’ of blackness. It is through these soundtracks that

¹³¹ Ibid, 84.

Wonder's audiovisual afterlife has been cemented, and with it, his place on the pantheon of liberal icons; albeit one drained of its original aura and limitless imagination.

The Audiovisual Afterlife of Stevie Wonder

When it was released in 2016, HBO's *Vinyl* branded itself as the music drama to end all music dramas. Under the auspices of executive producers Martin Scorsese and Mick Jagger, it was bound to be a sure-fire hit. The show followed Bobby Cannavale as Richie Finestra, a record executive in the sex-crazed and drug-fueled New York of the 1970s. Prone as it was to over-stylization and clumsy cliches, the series became a prime opportunity for a production team of Baby Boomers to inject a younger generation with a soundtrack full of their most cherished music. Its pilot alone featured 50-odd songs from the classic rock and soul era and beyond, shelling out its gargantuan music licensing budget on tracks by Led Zeppelin, Otis Redding, Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, and James Brown. Unlike *Stranger Things*, however, *Vinyl's* brand of retromania failed to gain traction and was dropped after one season. The record business fantasy of drugs, sex, and rock and roll proved to be too myopic a lens through which to comprehend the cultural climate of the whole decade.

It was almost inevitable that Stevie Wonder's "Higher Ground" would feature in the show's soundtrack at some point. Wonder's 1973 hit off *Innervisions* was a high point on an album that Royster said, "featured warnings for the post-civil-rights generation of urban dwellers about the temptations and despair of the city."¹³² Over an infectiously funky bassline, Wonder alludes to anti-Black violence and the Vietnam War, singing "powers keep on lying/while your people keep on dying." The chorus celebrates Wonder's joy in getting a second chance at life

¹³² Ibid, 66.

through his faith, “I’m so glad that I know more than I knew then/ Going to keep on trying/ ‘Til I reach my highest ground.” By the track’s end, it’s clear that the music and lyrics are heavily imbued with the gospel impulse, embracing a faith in god and reincarnation. “God is gonna show you highest ground/ He’s the only friend you’ll have around,” Wonder sings in the outro. The verse/chorus dichotomy of “Higher Ground” fuses the blues and gospel impulses essential in the African American tradition that propels soul music. As Werner explains, both are grounded in personal catharsis and communal connection, but “where the blues endures, gospel transcends.”¹³³ That ecstatic joy of transcendence from the world’s ills radiates through the song’s kinetic groove, which has made “Higher Ground” one of the lasting anthems of the post-civil-rights era.

In Vinyl’s second episode “Yesterday Once More,” we find Richie alone in his office. He’s casually dressed in a Black Sabbath ‘73 Tour t-shirt, smoking a cigarette, and watching the Watergate trials on his rabbit-eared television set. Jamie, an ambitious A&R assistant, enters for a chat. Looking for ways to get ahead, she warily asks Richie if he’s looking for her to ‘suck his dick.’ He admits that he’d be lying if it didn’t cross his mind, but suggests that there is one thing she can do for him. As he holds up a vial of cocaine, the legendary keyboard intro of “Higher Ground” enters the soundtrack. Jamie pulls a bag of coke out from her bra and hands it to Richie with a lingering glance, leaving his office as the full instrumentation breaks into effect. Strutting over to the receptionist’s desk, Jamie bends down to speak to her and the song fades for a moment. Fully empowered, she confronts the receptionist, insisting that if she ever rats her out again, she’ll “kick her in her fucking cunt.” “Higher Ground” fades back in as Stevie sings “Cause it won’t be too long.”

¹³³ Werner, “Heaven Help Us All,” 471.

Much in the way that *Mad Men* used a ‘nostalgic imaginary’ that represented the era as both alluring and repellent,¹³⁴ *Vinyl* situates the workplace as a site for female empowerment—another critical site of post-civil rights reform in the 1970s. Far from a demure Peggy Olson type, Jamie doesn’t play by the rules; she bluntly addresses the reality of sexual favors and boldly affirms her sexuality through physical confidence and vulgar language. As a nostalgic device, *Vinyl* uses Jamie’s character to build counter-memories that draw continuities from past to present, and promote social change in the future.¹³⁵ By soundtracking the scene with “Higher Ground,” however, the show misses the essence of the song, transposing a soul classic steeped in cathartic transcendence into a scene about individual redemption. Jamie’s social resistance may resonate as a progressive assertiveness in the post-Me-Too era, but in effect, it instills “Higher Ground” with an audiovisual afterlife that prioritizes hegemonic ambition over communal ascendancy.

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Stevie Wonder’s “Signed, Sealed, Delivered I’m Yours” has been used everywhere from *How I Met Your Mother*, to *Medium* to *Scandal* to soundtrack grand achievements. Whether the triumph is personal, romantic, or political, the song has turned into a sort of trope of joyous celebrations on film and television. Showtime’s 2022 series *The First Lady* shows the song’s trajectory first hand, while displaying both the affective and politicized ways that soundtracks are transmitted across American culture. The series dramatizes the lives of American First Ladies Michelle Obama, Betty Ford, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Decentering the president, and instead, honing in on the lives of first ladies, the show invokes screened counter-memories—or moments

¹³⁴ Pierson “Politics of Nostalgia,” 139.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 145.

that George Lipsitz implies re-examine history “to determine and highlight moments of excluded historical memory.”¹³⁶ As a biopic, *The First Lady* nevertheless faces the inescapable pull of history associated with its filmic genre. “The genre’s charge,” Dennis Bingham writes, “...is to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology, one way or another, and to show why he or she belongs there.”¹³⁷ Though it is laudable for its showcasing of the highs and lows of a political life, from a female perspective, *The First Lady* lends itself to a narrative style, prevalent in the genre, that further enshrouds its subjects in the great American myth of self-invention.

In *The Obama Effect* uses an multidisciplinary approach to explore the categorical effectiveness of the 2008 Obama campaign. Robert Spicer attributes Obama’s unprecedented political popularity to Walter Lippman’s concept of the ‘symbolic personality,’ whereby political figures are transformed from “human beings into images, messages, ideas consumed by multiple publics.”¹³⁸ The iconicity of the Obama campaign tapped into post-soul aesthetic—apropos for his generation—forgoing the ‘raised-clenched-fist, say-it-loud, I’m-black-I’m proud’ conception of blackness of the 1960s and 1970s. As fellow icons of the post-soul generation, Oprah Winfrey and Stevie Wonder each played a pivotal role in Obama’s ascendancy, throwing their own symbolic personalities behind the monumental campaign. Rebecca A. Kuehl sees such celebrity endorsements in light of anthropologist Grant McCracken’s marketing theory of ‘meaning transfer’, through which “the endorsement process depends upon the symbolic properties of the

¹³⁶ Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages : Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 199, quoted in Pierson, “Politics of Nostalgia,” 145.

¹³⁷ Bingham, Dennis. *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 10.

¹³⁸ Spicer, Robert. “The Obama Mass: Barack Obama, Image, and Fear of the Crowd.” In *The Obama Effect Multidisciplinary Renderings of the 2008 Campaign*, edited by Heather E Harris, Kimberly R. Moffitt and Catherine R. Squires. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 194.

celebrity endorser.”¹³⁹ From there, the properties which reside in the celebrity endorser are transferred upon the good, and subsequently, from the good to the consumer. Obama’s brilliant twist on this effect came through his incorporation of a sonic element of ‘meaning transfer,’ when he took on Wonder’s “Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I’m Yours)” as an unofficial theme song, which in particular, has featured ubiquitously at Obama rallies, convention appearances, and inaugurations, inevitably making it synonymous with the Obama brand and its legacy.

“Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I’m Yours)” appears twice in *The First Lady*. The first is at the end of the series’ third episode “Please Allow Me,” when the 1970 hit cues as Michelle’s brother Craig walks her down the aisle to tie the knot with Barack in 1992. The montage that follows jumps across time to the 1948 and 1905 weddings of Betty and Eleanor, respectively. At once, the soundtracking choice plays on the song’s motif as a celebratory romantic anthem in film and television, while also tacitly linking it with the Obama’s own appropriation of its symbolism. Washed in cinematic lighting, and peppered with giddy shots of kissing couples, the montage paints a rather idealized vision of marriage, and in the process, uses its historical foundation to further establish the mythologies of America’s first families. The second time the song appears, it’s become absorbed entirely within the political realm. Following an intimate exchange between Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton, Michelle takes the stage at a 2016 Clinton/Kane rally. The handheld camera and gymnasium lighting signal a realistic effect that breaks from the filmic grandeur of the earlier montage. “Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I’m Yours)” plays over the PA speakers, as fans and supporters eagerly await Michelle’s speech. Moved into the diegetic space of the scene, the song acquires an almost spectral quality. No longer the rousing ode to romance, it returns as a ghost from 2008 and 2012, and 1970 before that. Born as

¹³⁹ Kuehl, Rebecca A. “Oprah and Obama: Theorizing Celebrity Endorsement in U.S. Politics..” In *The Obama Effect: Multidisciplinary Renderings of the 2008 Campaign*, edited by Heather E Harris, Kimberly R. Moffitt and Catherine R. Squires (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 184.

a spirited Motown-era ode to love, regret, and redemption, the song has undergone several afterlives of its own, eventually becoming a nostalgic signifier of the hope and change promised through the Obama campaign.

Over the years, Stevie Wonder's impact has born heavily into the transmedial mythology of the Obama family. From getting a shoutout in Barack's memoir *Dreams From My Father* to featuring as a conversation piece in the Barack-Michelle romantic biopic *Southside With You*, Wonder's music has become imbricated into a political dynasty that has embraced its own nostalgic notions of social progress and uplift.¹⁴⁰ As Craig Werner mentions, "A big part of Obama's success came from his ability to preach Stevie Wonder's vision back to life. Small wonder his stump speech became a pop song."¹⁴¹ Obama's inclination toward the gospel impulse allowed him to transmit rhetorical elements of the soul era into a post-soul world. Like Wonder and Motown before him, his strategy precipitated a crossover appeal, bridging race and politics, all the while shedding the threatening aura associated with black masculinity in the Black Power era. Yet, the more radical reverberations of Wonder's 'blaxporation' period are lost in the audiovisual afterlives of his music. Future generations are now left to view him in light of his recent stature as a liberal political monument, as the Wonder we see and hear on television resides firmly and comfortably as a nostalgic remnant of the 1960s and 1970s, preaching yesterday's gospels to today's ears.

¹⁴⁰ Adams, Sam. "Stevie Wonder and the Obamas: A Love Story." *Slate Magazine*. Slate, December 21, 2016. <https://slate.com/culture/2016/12/stevie-wonder-and-the-obamas-a-love-story.html>.

¹⁴¹ Werner, "Heaven Help Us All," 480.

Conclusion

Following Barack Obama's speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, "Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)" was promptly cued up. The song resounded live over the PA at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia, soundtracking a joyous moment where delegates and spectators danced and swayed and sang-along, ostensibly reliving the merriment of 2008. One could easily have been forgiven for thinking that Obama himself was running for a third term. Onstage, Obama basked in a standing ovation for a whole minute before eventually calling up Hillary Clinton, the party's candidate, to share the stage with him. In hindsight, the scene plays with bitter irony: Two of the most prominent Baby Boomer politicians in the country, a Black man and a white woman, uniting before an adoring audience to the progressive sound of 1970; while just a week earlier, a different crowd—one with more red hats—gathered to cheer on their candidate as he finished his speech in Cleveland. The track that cued on the Quicken Loans Arena's PA was also from 1970: Free's "All Right Now," a bluesy rock song about a slick talking man trying to seduce a skeptical woman—a metaphor that rather suited the occasion.

Both scenes invoke the collective memory and mass nostalgia that Svetlana Boym sees as "a kind of nationwide midlife crisis," wherein, "many are longing for the time of their childhood and youth, projecting personal affective memories onto the larger historical picture and partaking collectively in a selective forgetting."¹⁴² Boym's assessment of the cultural climate in the post-Soviet states in *The Future of Nostalgia* recalls a Deidian sense of hauntology, whereby an affective longing for lost futures reverberates in the present air. Redirected westward, the resonance of Boym's collective nostalgia remains an equally incisive indictment of American culture in the twenty-first century, where political authenticity resides in a manipulation of

¹⁴² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 58.

nostalgic affective triggers, on both the left and the right, with each side beckoning to make the country great *again*.

Incorporating hip figures into political campaigns may have once signaled an enticement to a burgeoning youth culture that had come to play a pivotal role in the nation's political arena, yet in the twenty-first century, such endorsements bear the nostalgic mark of a generation that pines for its *own* youth more than anything else. The 'retromania' which has presided over American culture in the twenty-first century has evoked a hauntology of its own, which Ahlberg, Hietanen, and Soila witness as being as relevant to late capitalist times as it was ever was to the foreclosed futures in post-Soviet Europe.¹⁴³ The ahistorical imposition of symbols of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s adhere to a twenty-first century retro aesthetic that has infiltrated consumer life, simulating a virtual history, which produces "an affective *excess of meaning* that consumers desperately cling to; temporal pieces of flotsam offering glimpses of past futures."¹⁴⁴ Such notions of 'past futures' can be gleaned through the hip figures that the Democratic Party has brandished as the very embodiments of American progressivism. Through television, a nostalgic medium par excellence, the music of Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, and Stevie Wonder has transmitted a spectral presence across American culture, resulting in the proliferation of audiovisual afterlives, which shore up essentialist aspects of twentieth century progressivism, and trade in nostalgic visions of a bygone future.

Suturing the scenic context with the sonic qualities of the music, audiovisual afterlives instigate deep affective responses in the viewer which carry along residual political implications. In the scenes and montages that make up the soundtrack to liberal nostalgia, the content generally signal towards the liberatory and empowering, establishing an aural equivalent to

¹⁴³ Ahlberg, Hietanen, and Soila, "The Haunting Specter," 166.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 168.

Laura Mulvey's conception of the 'afterimage,' which evokes "the lasting nature of the image left on the eye by the impact of the real."¹⁴⁵ Though in audiovisual afterlives, anachronistic temporalities produce an excess of meaning that may bely the intention of the artist and leave their symbolic thrust open to interpretation. For a period piece like *Show Me A Hero*, the symbolic value of Bruce Springsteen may lie in a collective memory of him as an archetypal working-class hero; while in a contemporary setting, such as *Billions*, the sound of 'The Boss' may reappear in a chic SoHo loft as a totem of hegemonic masculinity. When *Stranger Things* conjures an 80s version of Madonna, it's as a teenage idol, inspiring adolescent women with her playful femininity; but when the "Queen of Pop" is celebrated on *Happy Endings*, it's the 2010s, and "Like a Virgin" is soundtracking a moment of queer jouissance, if only through a heteronormative lens. And then there's Stevie Wonder, who as the bridge between the soul and post-soul eras, witnessed his music travel from intimate publics to mass crossover audiences with regularity. So when "Higher Ground" is used in a 70s setting in a show like *Vinyl*, it's only natural that Wonder's gospel-tinged anthem is reappropriated to spark a diegetic moment of feminist ascent. *The First Lady* goes further than any of the aforementioned shows in experimenting with multiple story arcs and anachronistic timelines. When "Signed, Sealed, Delivered (I'm Yours)" wedding hops from 1992 to 1948 to 1905, it tenderly summons the song's afterlife as a romantic trope in film and television, but by the time the song reappears in 2016, it carries a hauntological quality that emits nostalgic traces of 2008—issuing forth from the Obamas' own youthful yearnings for change. These moments of audiovisual nostalgia exhibit a mediated process whereby personal and collective memory are projected on a historical scale, enabling the sort of collective nostalgia that has come to haunt the public imagination.

¹⁴⁵ Mulvey, Laura. *Afterimages: On Cinema, Women and Changing Times*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), 15.

But if all of this collective nostalgia takes a progressive stance, why is it that the party of the Clintons and Obamas has become so maligned in spite of its association with hip figures in popular culture? Jeffrey T. Nealon tracks it down to a cultural fragmentation in twenty-first century culture spurred by the internet, with its abundance of subcultures and its technological shift away from mainstream taste-making institutions. In effect, the defiant ‘No!’ that had once defined artistic authenticity has become the very logic of today’s ‘mass individuality’ in an era where negation has become ‘the house style of American neoliberalism.’ “This contentless sense of authenticity,” Nealon writes, “has become the primary biopolitical territory of contemporary American subject-formation, one that has ironically come down to use through the late twentieth-century counterculture of American rock, rap, punk, and other mass alternative musics.”¹⁴⁶ When the countercultural symbols of the twentieth century have been naturalized into mainstream culture, it’s only fitting that the opposition will take heed. The aestheticization of political life has thus endured into the twenty-first century, although this time, the semiotic distinctions are hardly so black and white. Nealon traces the evolution of American right-wing culture that has subsequently moved from the Moral Majority to the Tea Party to the Alt-Right movement of the Trump era. “These days,” he writes, “even Nazi sympathizers want to brand themselves as ‘alternative,’ authentic individualists saying no to mainstream culture.”¹⁴⁷

As the twenty-first century ambles on, the Democratic Party’s cultural platform has become even more stridently intertwined with the mainstream, prompting negation not only from an Alt-Right—posturing as an avant-garde—but also from the Left. In 2016 and 2020, the outpouring of support for Bernie Sanders from artists and musicians was staggering. Those “feeling the Bern” were a diverse coalition, including provocateurs of the visual arts like Nan

¹⁴⁶ Nealon, *I’m Not Like Everybody Else*, 58-59.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 61.

Goldin and Kara Walker,¹⁴⁸ indie rock acts such as Sonic Youth and Vampire Weekend, rappers Noname, Anderson Paak and Killer Mike, and even pop megastars like Miley Cyrus, Ariana Grande, and Cardi B.¹⁴⁹ Culling from the mainstream, alternative, and avant-garde, Sanders' eclectic list of endorsements speaks to cultural and political horizons that have not yet been represented by the Democratic Party. In a twenty-first century, where young progressive Americans are more concerned with issues of their time, such as climate change, income inequality, radical police reform, LGBTQ+ freedoms, gun restrictions, collective bargaining and abortion rights, it is becoming less and less effectual to rely on the nostalgic appeal of twentieth century triumphs. Cultural platforms require a constant engagement with differences, as Barry Shank argues, "the political force of music derives from its capacity to combine relations of difference into experiences of beauty."¹⁵⁰ Nostalgic forms of representation, through their appropriation of signifiers, tend to essentialize experience into a homogenized collective memory, foreclosing difference and centering past ideals of progress. Citing musicologist Georgina Born, Shank imagines music's capacity "not only to *'reproduce*, reinforce, actualize, or memorialize *extant* sociocultural identities...[but also to] prefigure, crystallize, or potentialize *emergent*, *real* forms of sociocultural identity of alliance."¹⁵¹ That impulse towards prefiguration is what's been lost in the dense network of mediated nostalgia that has thus far dominated American culture in the twenty-first century. In order to forestall the 'slow cancellation of the future,' new methods of channeling the political force of musical beauty are required; methods that don't rely on formal nostalgia to recapitulate past generation's ideals of progress.

¹⁴⁸ Bishara, Hakim. "Nan Goldin and Kara Walker among 665 Artists to Endorse Bernie Sanders." *Hyperallergic*, February 26, 2020. <https://hyperallergic.com/544487/artists-endorse-bernie-sanders/>.

¹⁴⁹ Terry, Josh. "Bernie Sanders Is Getting a Ton of Endorsements from Musicians." *VICE*, January 29, 2020. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3a8k59/bernie-sanders-is-getting-a-ton-of-endorsements-from-musicians>.

¹⁵⁰ Shank, *The Political Force*, 16.

¹⁵¹ Born, Georgina, and David Hesmondhalgh. *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 35, quoted in Shank, *The Political Force*, 17.

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