**Campaign Music 101 in the Music History Classroom**

Teaching Music History Conference

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**Activity One:** **Analyze Candidate Walk-on Music**

*Introduction: The Function of Walk-on Music*

Since 1789’s “Follow Washington,” presidential candidates have drawn on the emotional power of music to connect with and persuade the public. Music is one of the most effective forms of propaganda, so much so that Plato recommended the government keep strict control of music, lest the public be led astray. In contemporary U.S. politics, campaigns often seek to associate their candidate with the emotional effects and/or lyrical message of one particular song, which becomes an icon for the campaign. It is a way for potential voters to remember the most important aspects of the candidate’s character and/or platform. In public settings, candidates often use music to both set the tone of the event and to define their persona for their audiences. While the words may not be audible to everyone, musical characteristics such as tempo, rhythm, vocal timbre, melodic contour, textural density, and instrumentation can help to define the candidate’s character and message.

*Lesson Objectives*

1. Identify the ways different musical characteristics can induce different emotional states.
2. Analyze the ways candidates draw on associations of genre to construct their presidential “persona.”
3. Describe how the interaction of music and staging creates meaning for potential voters in presidential campaigns.

*Walk-on Music: The Nominating Conventions*

The presidential nominating conventions make good subjects for class discussion for several reasons: 1. The candidates use a variety of techniques, including music, theatre, and oratory to distill their message and make it comprehensible to the public in a short amount of time. 2. The nominating conventions also set the tone for the campaign that follows.

*Activity Prompt*

From George Washington’s time to today, presidential candidates have sought to define their message and their persona through their musical selections. At the RNC, for example, Donald J. Trump entered the stage to Queen’s “We are the Champions,” while Clinton consistently used Rachel Platten’s “Fight Song” not only at the DNC, but throughout the campaign as well.

After viewing the two videos of the candidates taking the stage at their respective conventions, pose the following questions to the class:

1. What does each song communicate about the candidate?
2. What musical characteristics (melody, tempo, rhythm, instrumentation, vocal timbre) help to cement the candidate’s message and persona?
3. What role does genre play in defining these two candidates?
4. How does the staging affect the message of the song?

**Activity Two: Analyze a Parody Campaign Song**

*Introduction: The Function of Parody in Campaigning*

Parody, “an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect,” is found in many different mediums, including but not limited to poetry, literature, plays, comedy, music, and politics. The term “parody” also has a unique meaning in specifically musical contexts. A musical parody graphs a new text onto a preexisting tune. The songs investigated here fit both the general and musical definitions of parody. Such treatment of music has a long history in electoral politics. In the 19th century, supporters would pen new texts about a candidate and circulate these lyrics in small songbooks called “songsters.” The books would also include the titles of the popular tunes to be used with the new text. The added advantage is that the crowd already knows the tune, so it is easy to sing along. Since the advent of YouTube and the development of accessible and affordable video and audio editing tools, campaign-themed music parodies have experienced a resurgence online. Many 21st-century campaign parodies include visuals, which typically feature remixed video footage or images of the candidates, music video-style narratives, or cartoon-like characters. While official playlists offer insight into how the candidates used music as a medium for political communication and identity formation, an investigation of user-generated music posted on YouTube shows how the public engaged with candidates and the political process through their own musical acts.

*Lesson Objectives*

1. Define parody and investigate how it operates within campaign contexts.
2. Analyze the text and images in a parody and discuss how such cultural artifacts work to construct the image of a presidential candidates.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of a parody’s communication strategy.

*Analyze a Parody: “Country Songs!”*

“Country Songs!” is a good subject for a class discussion on parody for several reasons: 1. It playfully engages with stereotypes regarding masculinity, American identity, and music genre; 2. It responds to a specific campaign narrative that generated copious discussion and controversy.

*Activity Prompt*

In an interview with *CBS This Morning* on March 24, 2015, the day after announcing his presidential candidacy, Ted Cruz made the following statement:

*I grew up listening to classic rock and I’ll tell you sort of an odd story. My music taste changed on 9/11 and it’s a very strange, I actually intellectually find this very curious, but on 9/11, I didn’t like how rock music responded. And country music, collectively, the way they responded, it resonated with me and I have to say it just is a gut level, I had an emotional reaction that says ‘these are my people,’ and so ever since 2001 I listen to country music, but I’m an odd country music fan because I didn’t listen to it prior to 2000.*

After viewing “Country Songs!” pose the following questions to the class:

1. How would you describe this parody’s communicative strategy? (Is the parody’s message ironic, sincere, or contradictory? What type of language does the parody use? To what audience demographic is it directed?)
2. What assumptions do the real Ted Cruz and the “reel” Ted Cruz make about the genres rock ‘n’ roll and country?
3. How is American identity both musically and visually constructed in “Country Songs!”?
4. What is Garth Brooks’ song about? What connotations might this song project onto Cruz’s candidacy?

**Further Resources for Teaching Walk-On Music and Parody in the Classroom**

*General List of Questions to Guide Students through the Analysis of Walk on Music*

1. What does music communicate that cannot be communicated through speech?
2. What musical characteristics make for good walk-on songs?
3. What is a “persona”? What is the purpose of a “persona”? How can music shape a “persona”?
4. Is the music meant to paint a picture of the candidate, or of the party? Or is it just to “pump up” the crowd?
5. How do we evaluate the effectiveness of walk-on (or walk-off) music?
6. Clinton fairly consistently used “Fight Song,” while Trump’s choices were more varied. What are the advantages and disadvantages of both strategies?
7. What are the histories of the various songs candidate’s use? How does that affect how audiences hear the music?
8. What effects do the visual/theatrical elements have? Does the length of the walk-on music affect its meaning? Trump’s moment came early in the convention, when he was introducing his wife Melania, while Clinton waited until her acceptance speech to make her big entrance. What are the advantages and disadvantages of both strategies?
9. What role does gender play in how candidates portray themselves to the public through music? What would happen if Trump used a song with a female vocalist, or Clinton used a song with a male vocalist?
10. Is it ethical for candidates to use songs against the wishes of the artist (note: in most cases it is *legal*)? Does the artist supporting the song’s use strengthen the campaign?

*Selected Examples of Walk-on Music Available on YouTube*

1. Hillary Clinton, “Fight Song,” Rachel Platten (2015), DNC, July 28, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjk2971df7A>.
2. Trump, “We Are the Champions,” Queen (1977), RNC, July 18, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAHc8cOJf-w>.
3. Trump, “Do You Hear the People Sing,” from *Les Misérables* (1987) September 16, 2016, Miami, FL. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdEFAdYFzmw.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdEFAdYFzmw)
4. Trump, “Right Now,” Van Halen (1991), February 22, 2016. Las Vegas, NV. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALU9176kT9s>.
5. Trump, “God Bless the USA,” Lee Greenwood (1984), September 19, 2016, Ft. Myers, FL. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHvcZzMf3uw>.
6. Trump, “Parachutes” from *Air Force One* (1997), November 8, 2016, New York, NY. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYsWWAAuYAE>.
7. Clinton, “Brave,” Sara Bareilles (2013), June 7, 2016, Brooklyn, NY. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i42_mJ0J_Wk>.
8. Clinton (with Joe Biden), “The Rising,” Bruce Springsteen, August 15, 2016, Scranton, PA. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V730KZwTkmU>.

*General List of Questions to Guide Students through the Analysis of Parody Campaign Songs*

1. Which art form is the best suited to offer political commentary? (e.g., literature, poetry, sculpture, painting, music, song, dance, theater, video, etc.) Why do you think so?
2. How do different artistic mediums communicate differently?
3. How would you describe this parody’s communicative strategy? (Is the parody’s message ironic, sincere, or contradictory? What type of language does the parody use? To what audience demographic is it directed? How do you know?)
4. What is the relationship between text and image in this parody?
5. What is the history of the popular tune used in the parody? (In other words, who is the artist, what cultural significance does the song hold, and what topic does its original text explore?) What connotations or character traits might the song project onto the candidate?
6. In the 19th century, parodies were sung by the crowds who attended political rallies and speeches. In the present day, the public rarely sings parodies in live campaign contexts, but rather passively views them on sites such as YouTube. What are the advantages and disadvantages of more modern media in spreading political music to listeners?
7. How do you evaluate a parody’s effectiveness? What makes it worthy of a viewer’s attention?

*Selected List of Parodies Available on YouTube*

1. “Hillary Clinton 2016 Election Parody Song: Emails, Benghazi and Bill” (set to the tune of Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive,” Katy Perry’s “Dark Horse,” Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin,’” and O.P.P.’s “Naughty by Nature”). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_OOrWQs33E>.
2. “You’re a Mean One, Mr. Trump” (set to the tune of “You’re A Mean One, Mr. Grinch” by Thurl Ravenscroft). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9-5DJhBh6M&t=1s>.
3. “Chelsea’s Mom”(set to the tune of “Stacy’s Mom” by Fountains of Wayne). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRdyQjSHcJE>.
4. “Oh, That Donald!” (set to the tune of “Oh, Susanna!”). <https://www.electionsongs.com/track/1057701/oh-that-donald?feature_id=295635>.
5. “Delete It!” (set to the tune of “Beat It!” by Michael Jackson). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHDGuRs9gvg&feature=share>.
6. “HAMILTRUMP” (set to the tune of “Alexander Hamilton” from *Hamilton* by Lin-Manuel Miranda). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUI9u3azLUg&feature=share>.
7. “Do You Wanna Build a Wall?” (set to the tune of “Do You Wanna Build a Snowman?” from *Frozen* by Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GVN17U3Vg34>.
8. “Trump-Pence” (set to the tune of “Feed the Birds” from *Mary Poppins* by Robert B. Sherman and Richard M. Sherman). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G19s4OmvFw8>.
9. “The Official Donald Trump Jam” or “Freedom’s Call” (set to the tune of “Over There” by George M. Cohan). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPRfP_TEQ-g>.
10. Untitled parody of “The Official Donald Trump Jam” (performed on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UOKh00-GuY&feature=share>.
11. “Anything You Can Do” (set to the tune of “Anything You Can Do” from *Annie Get Your Gun* by Irving Berlin. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xv1np1f8xlc>.
12. “Country Songs!” (set to the tune of Garth Brooks’ “Friends in Low Places”). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9m_PaIlfVQ&feature=share>.
13. “We Will Bern You!” (set to the tune of Queen’s “We Will Rock You”). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eahykEwoduE>.
14. “I Am Rodham” (set to the tune of Helen Reddy’s “I am Woman”). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p36WMXgBMhE>.
15. “The Hillary Song” (set to the tune of Maroon 5’s “Sugar”). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7SEgceOKK4&feature=share>.
16. “Jeb is Ready, He’s My Brother” (set to the tune of The Hollies’ “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother”). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UydF6MK2E-M&feature=share>.
17. “All About That Bern” (set to the tune of Meghan Trainor’s “All About That Bass”). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1VTPhrnPrw>.

Notes:

“Parody,” Oxford Living Dictionaries, Oxford University Press.

You can access the above list of parodies as well as other examples on Trax on the Trail’s Pinterest Board “Parody Trax”:<https://www.pinterest.com/traxonthetrail/parody-trax/> and Spotify playlist “Parody Campaign Songs”:<https://play.spotify.com/user/1233425005/playlist/1G7VSZVTx2CNaydYNtt4w5>. This document with hypertext links is available at Trax on the Trail.

**Best Practices**

* Frame the discussion as exploration rather than debate
* Distinguish between “politics” and “government”
* Remind students that understanding a position does not mean agreeing with it
* Make sure the discussion is balanced
  + (to a point)
* Do not ask for opinions
* Treat material like film or music video
* Prepare pivot questions
* Use humor to defuse tension

TRAX ON THE TRAIL WEBSITE CONTENTS

**Essays**

Bañagale, Ryan Raul. “[30 Days, 30 Songs: ‘Puncturing that inflated horror of an ego](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/30-days-30-songs-%E2%80%9Cpuncturing-inflated-horror-ego%E2%80%9D).’” Trax on the Trail,

October 17, 2016.

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Trail, January 8, 2016.

Christiansen, Paul. “[Musical Yearning in Bernie Sanders’s Presidential Primary Ad ‘America](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/musical-yearning-bernie-sanders%E2%80%99s-presidential-primary-ad-%E2%80%9Camerica%E2%80%9D).’” Trax on the

Trail, February 2, 2016.

Deaville, James. “[Un-conventional Music](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/un-conventional-music).” Trax on the Trail, November 25, 2016.

Dewberry, David R. and Jonathan Millen. “[Hillary Clinton’s 2016 Presidential Campaign Spotify Playlist](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/hillary-clinton%E2%80%99s-2016-presidential-campaign-spotify-playlist).”

Trax on the Trail, May 25, 2016.

Graber, Naomi. “[The President Takes the Stage: On Theatre and Safe Spaces for Politicians](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/president-takes-stage-theatre-and-safe-spaces-politicians).” Trax on the

Trail, December 8, 2016.

\_\_\_\_\_. “[Seeing Double: Presidential Parodies and the Art of the Musical](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/seeing-double-presidential-parodies-and-art-musical).” Trax on the Trail, July 21,

2016.

\_\_\_\_\_. “[Staging the Nation](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/staging-nation).” Trax on the Trail, March 31, 2016.

\_\_\_\_\_. “[Terror at the Townhall](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/snowths-mahna-mahna-baby-johnny-michael-myers-final-girl-join-debate).” Trax on the Trail, October 19, 2016.

Hung, Eric. “[The Clinton-Trump Debate: A Dirty Dancing Fantasy](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/snowths-mahna-mahna-baby-johnny-michael-myers-final-girl-join-debate).” Trax on the Trail, October 19, 2016.

Kasper, Eric T. and Benjamin S. Schoening, “[The Unwelcome Use of Musical Artists and Their Songs by](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/unwelcome-use-musical-artists-and-their-songs-presidential-candidates)

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[Political Opponents](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/trump-bump-2016-user-generated-campaign-music-about-donald-trump-and-his-political-opponents).” Trax on the Trail, February 20, 2016.

Saffle, Michael. “The Trump Bump II: Satire, Remix Culture, and User-generated Campaign Musical Posts.”

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Shaw, Rebecca. “[Belva Lockwood for President, 1884: A Woman in a Man’s World](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/belva-lockwood-president-1884-woman-man%E2%80%99s-world-0).” Trax on the Trail, July

7, 2016.

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**Interviews**

“[On the Inside Trax: John Balduzzi, Political Consultant](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/inside-trax-john-balduzzi-political-consultant).” Trax on the Trail, March 15, 2016.

“[On the Inside Trax: Kraig Moss, A Modern Day Troubadour for Trump](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/inside-trax-kraig-moss-modern-day-troubadour-trump).” Trax on the Trail, September 2,

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“[On the Inside Trax: Stuart Schimler, Founder, American Pioneer Music](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/inside-trax-stuart-schimler-founder-american-pioneer-music).” Trax on the Trail, September 20,

2016.

**Educational Materials**

[Rock & Roll to the White House](https://www.rockhall.com/learn/education/digital-classroom/traxonthetrail)

*Course unit on rock and electoral politics created in collaboration with the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*

Kassie Kelly, Dana Gorzelany-Mostak, Leah Branstetter, Mandy Smith, Kathryn Metz, and Deanna

Nebel

[Popular Music in U.S. Presidential Commercials](http://traxonthetrail.com/teachers)

*Course unit on analyzing popular music in campaign ads*

Joanne Love

[The History of Presidential Campaign Music](http://traxonthetrail.com/teachers)

*Lecture notes and slides*

Eric T. Kasper and Benjamin S. Schoening

**Podcasts**

Trax on the Trail Podcast Series in collaboration with WRGC 88.3

Trax on the Trail Podcast, Pt. 1 “[Super Tuesday Edition](https://soundcloud.com/wrgc/trax-on-the-trail-super-tuesday-inaugural-edition-full-episode),” featuring Dana Gorzelany-Mostak and James

Deaville WRGC 88.3FM (aired March 1, 2016)

Trax on the Trail Podcast, Pt. 2 “[The Candidate Takes the Mic](https://soundcloud.com/wrgc/trax-on-the-trail-podcast-the-candidate-takes-the-mic-complete-episode),” featuring Brian Barone, James Deaville,

Cannon McClain, and Dana Gorzelany-Mostak WRGC 88.3FM (aired April 26, 2016)

Trax on the Trail Podcast, Pt. 3 “[Parodying the Presidency](https://soundcloud.com/wrgc/trax-on-the-trail-parodying-the-preseidency-full-episode),” featuring Christianna Barnard, Dana Gorzelany-

Mostak, and Sarah Kitts WRGC 88.3FM (aired June 9, 2016)

Trax on the Trail Podcast, Pt. 4 “[The Candidates Take On Broadway](https://soundcloud.com/wrgc/trax-on-the-trail-ep-4-the-candidates-take-on-broadway-full-episode),” featuring Naomi Graber, Elissa

Harbert, James Deaville, Dana Gorzelany-Mostak, and Sarah Kitts WRGC 88.3FM (aired July 25, 2016)

Trax on the Trail Podcast, Pt. 5 “[The Soundtrack of Populism](https://soundcloud.com/wrgc/trax-on-the-trail-the-soundtrack-of-political-populism-full-episode),” featuring Justin Patch, Matthew Jordan,

Dana Gorzelany-Mostak, James Deaville, and Cannon McClain WRGC 88.3FM (aired September 22, 2016)

Trax on the Trail Podcast, Pt. 6 “[The Empire Strikes Trax](https://soundcloud.com/wrgc/trax-on-the-trail-ep-7-the-empire-strikes-trax-full-episode),” featuring Dana Gorzelany-Mostak, Cannon

McClain, Sarah Kitts, and Aly “Sam” Campbell (aired November 9, 2017)

Trax in the Classroom Podcast Series

(in collaboration with Dr. Emily Ansari and Western University)

Gleason-Mercier, Caroline. “[An Unknown Legacy: The 1840 Election and Political Campaign Songs](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/unknown-legacy-1840-election-and-political-campaign-songs).” Trax

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Jackson, Gary. “[Saddam Hussein Will Always Love You?](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/saddam-hussein-will-always-love-you)” Trax on the Trail, May 5 2016.

Pasqualini, Nikki. “[Vote for Change: John Kerry Will Not Surrender](http://traxonthetrail.com/article/vote-change-john-kerry-will-not-surrender).” Trax on the Trail, January 21, 2016.

**Research Resources**

[Trail Trax](http://traxonthetrail.com/trax-filter) (A campaign music database containing over 8000 tracked instances of music on the 2016

presidential campaign trail)

[Campaign Music Bibliography](http://traxonthetrail.com/bibliography) (A database containing bibliographic data for over 1,300 articles on the topic

of campaign music)

SCHOLARLY SOURCES ON CAMPAIGN MUSIC IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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FORTHCOMING SCHOLARLY SOURCES ON CAMPAIGN MUSIC IN 2016

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[www.traxonthetrail.com](http://www.traxonthetrail.com)

TRAX ON THE TRAIL:

An Interactive Campaign Music Website for Educators, Scholars, and the Public

Trax on the Trail, a website devoted to the study of American presidential campaign music, launched at Georgia College in December of 2015. The website’s forty-member interdisciplinary team includes students as well as academic experts from the fields of political science, musicology, sociology, history, communications, media studies, and ethnomusicology, across the U.S. and Canada. Trax on the Trail has published thirty essays that address multiple facets of the 2016 campaign soundscape. With public education and outreach as its goal, Trax collaborated with WRGC 88.3 radio to create a podcast series, and with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland to produce a course unit on intersections between rock music and presidential politics. Undergraduate students played an integral role in the design, development, and maintenance of the website’s campaign music research database, a resource that is now widely utilized by journalists, students, scholars, and educators. Trax on the Trail has been cited by various media outlets, including the BBC, *The Guardian*, Slate, *The Boston Herald*, Elite Daily, and *Variety*. The Trax team has presented their work in conferences, classrooms, and community spaces across the country and will contribute to a forthcoming special issue of *American Music* dedicated the music and the 2016 election.