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COMMENT: Sounds presidential: 2016's candidates are struggling with campaign songs

[Brian Ward](#), Professor in American Studies at Northumbria University, writes about songs of the US election for The Conversation.

Amid the increasingly surreal scramble for the Republican Party's presidential nomination, one of the most bizarre promises of the primary season appears to have gone relatively unnoticed. During the dispiriting slog he endured before finally [winning his home state's primary](#), Ohio Governor John Kasich [announced](#) that if elected president, he would reunite the progressive rock

band Pink Floyd.

Kasich's tongue-in-cheek pledge, combined with his claims to be a big fan of [Linkin Park and Fall Out Boy](#), calls our attention to a significant but overlooked dimension in current US politics. With mixed success, this year's main contenders have all tried to align themselves with particular songs, artists and musical styles that they believe will increase their appeal.

Choosing the music for a presidential bid is [a serious business](#). It dates back at least to the 1840 election when William Henry Harrison and his running mate John Tyler made it to the White House to the strains of Tip and Ty. Better known for its hook-line "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too", the song was written by Alexander Coffman Ross to celebrate Harrison's role in the [Battle of Tippecanoe](#) in 1811.



[Watch video on YouTube here](#)

Glossing over the inconvenient fact that at Tippecanoe Harrison lost about a quarter of his 1,000 troops in a strategically unimportant encounter with a much smaller band of poorly armed Native Americans, Ross's song set the tone for many future campaign songs, conjuring visions of decisive and effective leadership despite dubious evidence.

Yesterday's gone

When musical choices work well, they're truly powerful. In 2008, Barack Obama favoured Stevie Wonder's 1967 Motown hit [Signed, Sealed, Delivered](#), tied Obama to memories of a "good" 1960s characterised by progressive

politics and a commitment to social justice. That deep resonance helped rouse older liberals weary from decades of conservative ascendancy, and inspired a new generation by connecting them to a period when social change seemed possible – and had a soundtrack to match.

The best musical associations established on the campaign trail linger long after the election is over. Since winning the presidency for the first time in 1992, Bill Clinton has been closely associated with Fleetwood Mac's [Don't Stop](#). With its propulsive beat and forward-looking lyrics, the song captured the first baby-boomer president's youthful appeal. It made a perfect contrast to George H. Bush's 1988 dalliance with Bobby McFerrin's [Don't Worry, Be Happy](#), whose zen message was too easily read as complacency.

Unlike her husband, Hillary Clinton has struggled to find a signature song for 2016. She did [pay a Portland music agency US\\$9,000](#) for advice on what tunes to use. The result is the "Official Hillary 2016 Playlist".

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There's the no-nonsense valour of Katy Perry's Roar and Sara Bareilles' Brave; the unflappable optimism of American Authors' Best Day of My Life and Pharrell Williams' Happy; the call to social conscience of Wake up Everybody; the self-confident celebration of experience (one of Clinton's [principal selling points](#)) in Kelly Clarkson's Stronger (What Doesn't Kill You); and – one for the crucial [Latino voters](#) – Marc Anthony's uplifting Vivir Mi Vida.

Cease and desist

Donald Trump has also struggled to find an effective campaign song, although his problem seems to be settling on one that doesn't invite the threat of litigation. "The Donald" has been subject to several cease and desist requests from performers who don't want to be associated with what R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe denounced as a "[moronic charade of a campaign](#)". Stipe and his ex-bandmates were furious that their song, It's the End of the World as We Know It, was being used at Trump rallies. Adele, Aerosmith, and Neil Young have also demanded Trump stop using their music.

Undaunted, Trump unveiled his own group at a rally in Pensacola, Florida. As befits a campaign rooted in xenophobia and crude patriotism, the Freedom Girls – white, naturally – appeared in US flag-styled cheerleader costumes, harmonising about the need to "Deal from strength or get crushed every time!" They issue chilling warnings to America's foes: "Enemies of freedom, face the music. Come on boys, take them down!" to a tune lifted from George M. Cohan's World War I classic, [Over There](#).



[Watch video on YouTube here](#)

Again, such custom adaptations and toe-tapping originals have a long history. In 1920, Al Jolson wrote and recorded Harding, You're the Man for Us for Warren Harding's successful campaign. In 1948, Harry Truman campaigned to a variant of [I'm Just Wild About Harry](#). In 1960, John Kennedy marched to a bespoke version of [High Hopes](#) by Frank Sinatra – and his vanquished rival Richard Nixon took his turn in 1968 with Nixon Now (More than Ever).



[Watch video on YouTube here](#)

Donald Trump may have drawn the most flak for using music without approval, but he is not the only politician to fall foul of disgruntled artists in this election cycle. Failed candidate and hip-hop enthusiast Marco Rubio (Eminem, Tupac Shakur and NWA are his favourites) also revealed a passion for Electronic Dance Music, but producers Axwell and Ingrosso [sent him a cease-and-desist letter](#) to stop him using their track Something New.

Ted Cruz, claims he switched his affiliation from rock to hyper-patriotic country music after 9/11 because he “[didn’t like how rock music responded](#)”. Yet his campaign still used Your Hand in Mine by post-rock band Explosions in the Sky – once again, until the band and its label [complained](#) about the song’s unauthorised use in a video.

In truth, this is a legal minefield. Campaigns can sometimes get blanket agreements to use songs from music licensing organisations without the musicians being consulted, but can’t avoid the implication that the artist somehow supports that candidate.

For example, Neil Young, a supporter of Democratic Party insurgent Bernie Sanders, has no problem with Sanders using [Rockin’ in the Free World](#) at his rallies, but doesn’t want to hear it at Trump events. Sanders also turned to Simon and Garfunkel’s America for his TV ads, again to no resistance from its creators. “I like that Bernie is very upset by the gap between the rich and the poor,” [said](#) Art Garfunkel.



[Watch video on YouTube here](#)

A melancholic reflection on the search for the US's lost promise, Sanders' choice of America makes for a stark contrast with the relentlessly upbeat, optimistic, often jingoistic and sometimes bellicose songs routinely chosen by the other campaigns. But as his chances of winning the nomination [begin to fade](#), this thoughtful choice looks increasingly like an anomaly. In an election cycle characterised by bombast and insult, rather than policies and ideas, anthemic fist-pumping choruses are likely to be what matter most as America lurches towards November.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). [Read the original article](#).

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