



Sainte-Marie, Cockburn on the return of the protest song and power of music

BY DAVID FRIEND · FEBRUARY 2, 2017

TORONTO — Folk singer-songwriter Lindy Vopnfjord climbed into bed stunned on the night Donald Trump won the U.S. presidency, but he awoke the next morning feeling

activated.

Bristling with an urge to speak out, the Icelandic-Canadian musician wrote a series of lyrics that might've seemed alarmist at the time.

And even two weeks ago, when he finally released “Darkness is the Day” to coincide with Trump’s inauguration, some of the words didn’t resonate quite as much as they do now.

“Opinion is king, one-plus-one is three. The loudest truth is the truest, so repeat after me,” Vopnfjord sings. “It takes a little time to get the spin to unwind. It takes a little time.”

Vopnfjord is stunned by the evolution of his song’s significance.

“There’s so much that keeps feeding into the lyrics,” he says. “There was more to it than maybe even I realized.”

He’s just one of countless musicians using their voice to push against what they see as an alarming political climate. Over the past month, prominent artists have contributed a chorus of anti-Trump anthems, which started flowing out ahead of the election last November.

Tracks by Arcade Fire and Mavis Staples (“I Give You Power”), Fiona Apple (“Tiny Hands”) and the Gorillaz (“Hallelujah Money”) have stood out as recent highlights.

Before that, artists like Franz Ferdinand (“Demagogue”), Jimmy Eat World (“My Enemy”) and Amy Mann (“Can’t You Tell?”) collaborated for “30 Days, 30 Songs,” a project that counted down to election day in the hopes of drawing attention to Trump’s potential power. The campaign recently expanded to 1,000 songs that will be revealed throughout Trump’s presidency.

Listeners appear eager to hear more protest songs too.

Several anti-Trump anthems became viral hits last year, including Ledinsky’s “Donald Trump Makes Me Wanna Smoke Crack” and YG & Nipsey Hussle’s “FDT,” a rousing rap track which pairs an expletive with the president’s initials.

All of this newfound inspiration has longtime social-activist musician Buffy Sainte-Marie a bit suspicious. She questions why some artists only decided to write protest songs when there's "going to be money" in it.

But she's also not against more people speaking out.

"The art of the two-and-a-half minute song — it's such a powerful tool," she says.

"If you can say something in three minutes that somebody else had to write a 400-page book about, the book is going to be shelved. The song can live forever."

Sainte-Marie says she writes her songs with the mindset of a photographer capturing snapshots of history.

Her 1964 protest anthem "Universal Soldier" was a portrait of the Vietnam War era while "Now That the Buffalo's Gone" tackled the centuries-old plight of indigenous communities that still continues today.

She wrote "Universal Soldier" as if she was a student crafting an essay for a hypothetical professor who didn't see eye-to-eye with her perspective.

"I was determined to get an 'A-plus' out of this guy," she says.

"(I was) deliberately trying to give people a different point of view than they may have come across before."

Songwriters bringing back the protest song to fight Trump

As many citizens take to the streets to protest Donald Trump's policies, a growing number of political anthems have emerged to add a soundtrack to the activism.

Here are a few standout protest songs that lean against the new president's rise to power:

Arcade Fire and Mavis Staples - "I Give You Power"

Though it's not direct in with its target, it's pretty clear Arcade Fire was squarely focused on Donald Trump when they dropped this song on the eve of the reality show host's presidential inauguration. The band's lead singer Win Butler has long supported various social causes while Staples was a voice of the U.S. civil rights movement, which made their vocal pairing have a particular resonance. Arcade Fire says all proceeds from the song will go to the American Civil Liberties Union.

I Give You Power



THE CANADIAN PRESS 

Fellow activist songwriter Bruce Cockburn is cautious when it comes to deciding how to express his opinions through music.

With a career spanning nearly 40 years, he's found himself inspired by causes like the environment ("If a Tree Falls") and the devastation of war ("If I Had a Rocket Launcher"). But so far, the U.S. election hasn't motivated him to write anything pointed, and he says it might not.

He says he doesn't want to veer into territory where he's just spouting his political views against a backdrop of bad music.

“It’s not always obvious to put it in a song that (doesn’t simply become) a propaganda diatribe,” says Cockburn, who will receive the People’s Voice Award at the Folk Alliance International awards show in Kansas City, Mo., this month in recognition of his social and political commentary.

So many political songs just capitalize on anger, he argues, but don’t have any artistic merit. He points to 1965’s “Eve of Destruction,” a song recorded by Barry McGuire that topped the Billboard charts, as one example of a misfire.

“It was a huge hit, but a terrible song,” he says.

Cockburn suggests the track was too literal and sounds especially dated now. Many protest songs that attack their subject head-on suffer the same fate of becoming irrelevant, he adds.

Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” stands as a far superior example, he suggests, or “We Shall Overcome,” which began as a hymn in the early 1900s and evolved into an anthem of the civil rights movement.

“It had tremendous application over the years to any number of causes,” he says of the latter.

“It’s absolutely timeless.”

Listen to a Spotify playlist of recent protest songs (contains explicit lyrics)