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Music and Politics: A Potent Combination to Commercial Success?

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Music and Politics: A Potent Combination to Commercial Success?

By Veronica Martinez

Political activism was a common trait in the American popular music of the 1960's. However in the decades immediately following, a majority of musicians strayed away from these politically charged songs often called "protest music" or "protest songs." Now in a more politically and socially conscious atmosphere, musicians once again have begun to take public stances on a variety of issues. Despite controversy on this relationship between music and politics, artists should feel empowered to publically engage in politically divisive issues. Doing so will likely not result in the polarization of fans nor the reduction of the artist's overall income potential.

Musicians are humans first. They are individuals with their own identity, thoughts, feelings, and backgrounds. *Washington Post* reporter, Eugene Scott, says "When we ask performance artists to keep their work free from politics...we reduce their identities to their profession..." Musicians should not solely be seen as a source of entertainment; they should be recognized as a unique individual person. It is the artist's background and identity that makes them who they are. They create music based on their experiences, hardships, pain, love, and so many more elements that characterize the human existence. All of these aspects contribute to the music and image their fans grow to love. Taking this away dehumanizes music and eliminates the human connection which makes music so extraordinary.

Saying artists should keep personal views and/or experiences out of their music inherently goes against the primary purposes of music; self-expression and a means to share messages. Musicians create music to share with the world, we shouldn't dictate what an artist can or cannot include in their art. An analysis article by *CNN* editor, Chris Cillizza, discusses this very issue.

Cillizza says,

“...that's part of the deal you make when you listen to music: The artist gets to express himself or herself and you get to react to it. It is not the artist's job to make sure that reaction is a pleasant one. In fact, it may be the artist's job to make sure that reaction is unsettling -- or at the least thought provoking.”

The purpose of music, or any art form at that, is to express a message. Political views may be a part of that message. Some may not agree with the message of a song but the point of the song was to spread that particular message, whatever it may be. Although consumers do have the right to reject music or certain genres and songs, they do not have the right to prevent an artist from expressing a message within their own music.

Expressing political views will not significantly polarize fans nor will it significantly reduce the artist's earning potential. It is highly likely that the artist's fan base already shares similar views to the artist. In today's music industry, defining and reaching your specific target market is essential to lasting commercial success. The music industry, as well as many other industries have adopted niche marketing strategies in order to find success and cut costs in oversaturated markets. According to *Marketing-Schools.org*, niche marketing aims to reach specific groups of consumers who often share “...certain characteristics, such as demographic, hobby, occupation, or commitment to social or political causes.” Considering this, it may be safe to assume that because of this widely used marketing and branding theory, the artist's core fan base and other income opportunities will not be drastically affected by the expression of an opinion. If anything, the core fan base will strengthen due to similarities in opinions and the admirable trait of taking a stance on important issues. Any opportunities lost to an expression of opinion or values, such as sponsorships and endorsements, are actually to the benefit of the artist

as this shows that the artist and company values do not align. This alignment of values is vital to initiating a successful and meaningful partnership.

Furthermore, all change begins on an individual level. Artists should be encouraged to use their music and unique status to bring awareness and influence people to take action for causes that are important to them. For example, in the spring of 2018 Donald Glover, otherwise known as Childish Gambino, released his politically and socially charged song, “This is America,” along with an impactful music video. There were no evident negative consequences for Childish Gambino. In fact, the song reached number one in the United States shortly after its release, collected tens of millions of views, and later won a Grammy for Record of the Year; an especially notable feat for such an explicitly political song. Both the song and music video make powerful statements on racial oppression, gun violence, and how social media and the entertainment industry can distract us from these social issues. Using his platform as a multitalented and influential public figure, Donald Glover was able to bring attention and awareness to issues that are not only important to him but also relevant to a trying time in history, where political and social issues are heavily discussed throughout society. Glover, as well as other artists have the influence to potentially push people to action. Social progress begins on this individual level and music has historically played an important part of it.

As individuals, musicians should have the freedom to express themselves and their beliefs, whether that is directly through their music, through public statements, or support of specific organizations and causes. It is likely that their fan base already shares similar views and it is not probable that they will lose significant earning potential. Self-expression and a medium to spread messages are the primary purposes of music and without this individualistic human element, music loses all meaning.

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