“THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED…BUT IT WILL BE STREAMED”: SPOTIFY, PLAYLIST CURATION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Melissa Camp: "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised…But It Will Be Streamed": Spotify, Playlist Curation, and Social Justice Movements
(Under the direction of Mark Katz)

Since its launch in 2008, the Swedish-based audio streaming service Spotify has transformed how consumers experience music. During the same time, Spotify collaborated with social justice activists as a means of philanthropy and brand management. Focusing on two playlists intended to promote the Black Lives Matter movement (2013–) and support protests against the U.S. "Muslim Ban" (2017–2020), this thesis explores how Spotify's curators and artists navigate the tensions between activism and capitalism as they advocate for social justice. Drawing upon Ramón Grosfoguel's concept of subversive complicity (2003), I show how artists and curators help promote Spotify's progressive image and bottom line while utilizing the company's massive platform to draw attention to the people and causes they care most about by amplifying their messages.

To Preston
Thank you for your support along the way.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 2010s, the way in which people consumed music changed. The growing popularity of streaming platforms—such as Pandora, Apple Music, and Tidal—provided listeners instant, relatively inexpensive access to a large database of songs. Launched in the U.S. in 2011, the Swedish-based company Spotify quickly became one of the most popular platforms. Between 2016 and 2020, executives at Spotify recognized their visibility to the listening public and began using their platform to support social justice issues and equal rights. Spotify employees have designed themed playlists in support of these issues to feature artists from LGBTQ+ and communities of color. However, the platform's motivations to acquire streams of individual songs—and therefore more profit—has put these curators and performers into a precarious position as they work between Spotify's two motives of private profit and public good. Although the two are not necessarily opposed, this issue presents a tension between Spotify's corporate philanthropy, political and social influences of the consumers, and the artists and playlist curators who act as intermediaries between the former two parties.

This thesis explores how Spotify's artists and playlist curators express their agency through advocating for social justice movements while they benefit from the monetary and social protection of working with the most prominent streaming platform in the world. At the same time, Spotify relies on the labor of playlist curators and artists in order to fulfill their philanthropic goals. In this thesis, I argue that Spotify uses playlist curators and artists as a tool

to display their support of social justice movements, while playlist curators and artists also use Spotify as a tool to further their advocacy for new content and related social justice movements.

Through two case studies, this thesis shows how Spotify engaged with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (2013–) and protests against Islamophobia and immigration restrictions (2017–2020). In the first chapter, I focus on the curators' roles in creating the *Black Lives Matter* playlist in 2016. I trace the history of playlists to demonstrate how the practice of curating songs has aligned with the development of music technology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I argue that curators act as cultural generators as they share songs connected with past social justice movements while introducing new songs in support of BLM. In the second chapter, I turn to the agency of the artists associated with the *I'm with the Banned* playlist and documentary in 2017. The project featured musicians from six Arab countries paired with U.S. musicians, which provides opportunities to collaborate in a space otherwise inaccessible due to the Trump Administration's immigration policy. While the playlist exposed the Arab musicians to millions of Spotify subscribers, the documentary represented them in stereotypical ways, all of which served to reinforce traditional Western colonialist hierarchies. In both chapters, I focus on how artists and playlist curators exercise their agency within the constraints of Spotify's corporate structure. In this introduction, I begin with a discussion of Spotify's platform and its use of curated playlists, and after which I examine Spotify's corporate philanthropy in support of social justice movements. I then turn to the people behind these playlists to explore their role and agency in their work both as social justice advocates and Spotify employees.

Spotify and Its Platform

Launched in 2008 in Sweden, Spotify presented a new model for consuming music. Unlike P2P (peer-to-peer) file sharing programs, many of them operating illegally, in which listeners downloaded individual mp3s, the streaming platform allowed consumers to listen to music without downloading files and to do so legally. In 2009, cofounder and CEO Daniel Ek explained the company's vision was "to offer a legal music service, as good or better than the pirate sites, giving users access to all music in the world, for free" or an inexpensive subscription option.[1] Media theorist Jonathan Sterne described this move to streaming platforms as a new model "that support[s] a robust musical culture, one not just based on buying and selling."[2] Because of its affordability and accessibility, Spotify quickly became one of the leading streaming services in the world. By 2017, Spotify was streaming in twenty-nine countries and contained over thirty-five million tracks in their catalog for over 157 million active users, with 71 million of those paying subscribers.[3] As of 2021, Spotify has 345 million users across 178 countries.[4]Spotify is built largely on the investments of the three largest record companies in the world—Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group.

In a special issue of *American Music* on streaming platforms, guest editors Kate Galloway, K.E. Goldschmitt, and Paula Harper describe how the growth of technology has affected Spotify and its artists. Streaming platforms like Spotify "elucidate a dialectic of

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[1]Maria Eriksson, et al., *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 31.

[2] Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 28.

[3] Luis Aguiar and Joel Waldfogel, *Platforms, Promotion, and Product Discovery: Evidence from Spotify* Playlists (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2018), 1; Frederik Dhaenens and Jean Burgess, "'Press Play for Pride': The Cultural Logics of Themed Playlists on Spotify," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 6 (June 2019): 121.

[4] "Company Info," *Spotify For the Record*, accessed April 17, 2020, https://newsroom.spotify.com/company-info/.

democratization and control afforded by such technologies and platforms: on the one hand, users gain the ability to seize capacities of novel access and creative encounters with musicians and each other; on the other, profits from this labor are largely funneled to enormous media corporations."[5] Moreover, critics have noticed that Spotify collects data from individual users, without their knowledge, to identify trends in musical tastes and preferences.[6] Starting in 2013, Spotify began using this data to reprogram their platform by allowing employees, rather than algorithms, to curate playlists, to help navigate listeners among the vast array of tracks. Economists Frederik Dhaenens and Jean Burgess explain that instead of allowing algorithms to dictate what listeners would hear—for example, the *Global Top 50* playlist that takes the number of streams and generates a list of most played tracks—employees generated "'curated playlists' to affect consumers' moods, tastes, and preferences."[7] Playlists were designed to influence listeners' moods, such as uplifting *Mood Boost* playlist, or to introduce new artists, such as mixtape artists in the popular (and prestigious) hip hop playlist *Rap Caviar*. The curators lead consumers into "discovering" new music through seemingly carefully crafted music recommendations; in the process, these playlists strongly influenced the popularity of artists and songs.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, playlist curators are in charge of the most popular playlists on the platform and are part of a long history of reproducing music for public and private consumption since the 1970s. The availability of the cassette tape allowed music enthusiasts in the private and public spheres to copy and share mixtapes. Early rappers in New York, for

[5] K.E. Goldschmitt, "The Long History of the 2017 Spotify 'Fake Music' Scandal," *American Music* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 127.

[6] Eriksson, et al., *Spotify Teardown*, 13.

[7] Dhaenens and Burgess, "Press Play for Pride," 3.

example, disseminated their music and the new genre through this technology. Disco and hip hop DJs also curated setlists to energize dancers and distinguish themselves from other artists. Mixtapes and setlists persisted into the digital age, as playlists—a broader term for intentionally sequenced groups of songs—were adopted for use in new technologies. Spotify's curators, acting as a personal DJ, design playlists to uplift a listener's mood, increase productivity, or raise awareness about social justice movements. The curated playlist acts as an almost personalized playlist for the listener—the equivalent of saying a product is handmade, rather than machine-made, to enhance its uniqueness. The rise in popularity of Spotify's curated playlists has increased the importance of the people who design them.

Above all, Spotify and other streaming platforms use playlists to provide meaningful experiences for their listeners in order to maximize profit. Galloway, Goldschmitt, and Harper argue that "in the streaming music era, the goal is the acquisition of data or capital (or data-as-capital) through attention, whether devotionally given in fan or community labor or snatched through virality or strategy."[8] This model of garnering the most streams is also advantageous for musicians on Spotify. A spot on Spotify's most popular and influential playlists, such as *RapCaviar* or *Today's Top Hits*, can grant an artist an opportunity to become the next superstar, and many in the record industry have shaped their marketing, recording, and lobbying strategies to gain spots on these playlists.[9] In fact, a song's placement as #1 on Spotify's New Music Friday playlist raises its streams by about 14 million.[10] Because of the high stakes of these high-

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[8] Kate Galloway, K.E. Goldschmitt, and Harper, "Guest Editors' Introduction: Platforms, Labor, and Community in Online Listening," *American Music* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 125.

[9] Goldschmitt, "The Long History of the 2017 Spotify 'Fake Music' Scandal," 132.

[10] Luis Aguiar and Joel Waldfogel, *Platforms, Promotion, and Product Discovery*, 7.

grossing playlists, the means in which they are produced—whether by curation or algorithm—matters greatly to streaming platforms' ways of collecting streams.

Music, Social Justice, and Capitalism

In the past one hundred years, music distribution companies have utilized music and sounds as a commodity to compete within the growing U.S. capitalist system. Philosopher Robin James explains capitalism treats music not as "disruptive or critical, but a resource or raw material. Noisemaking is the means of music, cultural, and social production."[11] Although seemingly intangible, music files on streaming platforms are a commodity, and the human labor forms, places, and manages these files to contribute to this act of "noisemaking."[12] Musicologist Timothy Taylor also argues that commodifying digital music "has become a powerful means of fashioning one's self." [13] In the twenty-first century, capitalism is both an economic and social form, and consumers act as what Pierre Bourdieu calls the "new petite bourgeoisie" by promoting and perpetuating spending on goods.[14] Spotify and other streaming platforms utilize this consumerism by promoting playlists on moods, lifestyles, and trends. Music playlists not only act as an object to be "owned" but also as a type of social capital that feeds into the larger system of social media and influence. In *Spotify Teardown*, Marie Eriksson confirms this

[11] Robin James, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, and Neoliberalism* (Winchester, England: Zer0 Books, 2015), 12.

[12] In his discussion of how the music industry has changed in what materials produce sound over the past century, Kyle Devine argues that digitization of music does not equal dematerialization. He acknowledges how human labor and data farms are the cost of music production in the twenty-first century, and Spotify's business practices feed into this system. Kyle Devine, *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

[13] Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[14] See Pierre Bourdieu, *A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.

business practice: "To keep afloat, and to attract new venture capital that can cover its losses before an acquisition or IPO, Spotify has to sustain the hype around its service, framing it as a lifestyle for users and an economic opportunity for artists."[15] Spotify formulates these social aspects of the platform through curated, mood-based playlists and initiatives for social justice.

Spotify uses curated playlists to convey their corporate philanthropy. Because of the U.S. economic system's dependence on consumers, social justice movements have provided a "pull" in the system as buyers encourage businesses to invest in more progressive social change. As political scientists Michele Micheletti and Dietlind Stolle demonstrate in their article "Fashioning Social Justice Through Political Consumerism, Capitalism, and the Internet," companies respond to their audiences' sentiments by adopting platforms that appease buyers.[16] Spotify's corporate philanthropy—that is, "voluntary donations of corporate resources to charitable causes"—manifests in playlist creation and donations to social justice organizations.[17] These playlists not only show the company's solidarity with movements, but they also "sell" the messages featured in the songs. Spotify's corporate philanthropy thus functions as a feedback loop that influences more consumers to learn and understand about social movements. In 2017, Spotify's cofounder and CEO Daniel Ek "made it on *Time* magazine's list of the world's '100 most influential people' for having 'helped transform the way people listen to music and the way artists interact with fans."[18] Realizing the impact that Spotify has on the affect and sociality of its audiences, the streaming platform's employees use mood-based and themed playlists in order to

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[15] Eriksson et al, *Spotify Teardown*, 33–4.

[16] Michele Micheletti and Dietlind Stolle, "Fashioning Social Justice Through Political Consumerism, Capitalism, and the Internet," *Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5 (2008): 750.

[17] Arthur Gautier, Anne-Claire Pache, "Research on Corporate Philanthropy: A Review and Assessment," *Journal of Business Ethics* 126 (2005): 343–369.

[18] Eriksson et al, *Spotify Teardown*, 31.

connect to the social, emotional, and political sentiments of its users. Spotify uses these playlists to present their own values, such as speaking out against the Trump Administration's "Muslim Ban" or in support of BLM. Spotify's place in a capitalist system, however, complicates the altruistic intentions of its social justice initiatives when one of the company's primary goals is generating profit.

Artist and Curators' Agency

Spotify's artists and playlist curators of the *Black Lives Matter* and *I'm with the Banned* playlists exercised their agency while working between Spotify's corporate values and demands of listeners. By producing music as a form of social influence, playlist curators can advocate for new musicians and social justice movements. When examining the agency of these individuals, however, the question arises of what motivates them to work within the context of a corporate organization while expressing and advocating for their own beliefs. One answer is that music—as an act of expression of identity—allows individuals to speak up within an organization. In her book on non-governmental organizations in the East of Congo, Africanist Chérie Ndaliko Rivers discusses how art and creativity allow people to assert agency "in a powerful but nonviolent fashion" within the context of larger organizations.[19] The *I'm with the Banned* playlist and documentary, for example, shows how musicians from two different countries and backgrounds can peacefully collaborate to protest a government's immigration policy. On the other hand, these artists could not choose how Spotify represented them in the documentary. However great

[19] Chérie Ndaliko Rivers, *Necessary Noise: Music, Film, and Charitable Imperialism in the East of Congo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16.

the opportunity was for these artists, Spotify's larger motivations might cloud perceptions of their labor and agency.

Although these artists and playlist curators utilize their platforms at Spotify to advocate for social justice movements, they are still beneficiaries of Spotify's capitalist market practices. I argue that their work is an act of subversive complicity, or, as Ramón Grosfoguel defines, a form "of resistance that resignifies dominant forms of knowledge from the point of view of the non-Eurocentric rationality of subaltern subjectivities thinking from border epistemologies."[20] In other words, artists and playlist curators can simultaneously express critical opinions about politics, capitalism, and social justice while also benefiting from the monetary and social protection of working with Spotify. Cruz Medina applies the idea of subversive complicity to hip hop, examining how artists can enjoy mainstream success and even participate in U.S. government initiatives despite their criticism of politics and "the system."[21] The Arab artists in the *I'm with the Banned* project worked with Spotify and U.S. artists for social clout, exposure, and more streams of their songs. Playlist curators use the stability at their companies to support side gigs as DJs, radio personalities, or artists.[22]

In writing this thesis I am also subject to conflicting tensions. A Spotify Premium subscriber for almost ten years, I have used its platform to conduct my research and as

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[20] Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 20. Katz also describes subversive complicity as "a stance in which a traditionally marginalized or subjugated group participates within an exploitative system in order to resist or reform a hegemonic power" (Katz, *Build*, 130).

[21] Cruz Medina, "'(Who Discovered) America': Ozomatli and the Mestiz@ Rhetoric of Hip Hop," 4.

[22] Juan Gomez at Pandora, for example, is the head of curation for Afropop, but his main passion is beatmaking and DJing music in Ghana (personal communication). The current curator for Spotify's *Black Lives Matter* playlist, Keyon Harrold, Sr., is a professional trumpet player in New York who uses his money as support when he cannot find jazz gigs (Andy Kahn, "Black History Is Now: Phenomenal Black Music Spotify Playlists & More," *Jam Base*, February 20, 2021, https://www.jambase.com/article/black-history-month-phenomenal-black-music-spotify-playlists).

inspiration for this project, but also for my own musical enjoyment. I am critical of Spotify for paying a ludicrously small amount to artists, but I benefit from the affordable subscription rates that arise out of this exploitation.[23] Even if artists are paid more adequately, Spotify's drive to maximize profit can be at odds with the platform's social justice initiatives. This thesis explores these many tensions, focusing on those whose creativity and labor support Spotify's social justice programs. I examine a complex form of complicity—subversive complicity—that does not force "a choice between maintaining or compromising one's integrity, between keeping it real or selling out."[24] Playlist curators, artists, and Spotify are not at odds with one another in the fight for social justice, but there is inevitable friction as they seek to satisfy the social and economic demands of their listeners and the music industry.

[23] Ennica Jacob, "How much does Spotify pay per stream? What you'll earn per song, and how to get paid more with your music," *Business Insider*, February 24, 2021, https://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-does-spotify-pay-per-stream#:~:text=Spotify%20generally%20pays%20between%20%24.,streams%20to%20make%20a%20dollar.

[24] Katz, *Build*, 111.

CHAPTER 1: CURATING *BLACK LIVES MATTER*

On June 1, 2020, Spotify announced changes to its platform. The press release was issued just six days after a viral video showing the murder of George Floyd under the knee of Minneapolis policeman Derek Chauvin circulated throughout social media. Thousands gathered in the streets to demand justice for Floyd and other Black victims of police violence, reinvigorating the six-year-old Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.[25] The press release coincided with the internet-wide phenomenon "Blackout Tuesday," a day in which social media users produced blacked-out squares on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms to protest police brutality and raise awareness of modern-day racism.

On that day, Spotify changed the visual images of the platform to darkened headlines and logos on their flagship podcasts and playlists such as *Today's Top Hits* and *RapCaviar*. Spotify also featured the *Black History Is Now* hub—a page that advertised anti-racism playlists and included an 8-minute, 46-second track of silence "as a solemn acknowledgment for the length of time that George Floyd was suffocated."[26] Finally, Spotify executives called for a revamping of the *Black Lives Matter* playlist with new songs from the protests of June 2020, but the *Black History Is Now* hub and the *Black Lives Matter* playlist have been present on the platform since 2016. Spotify's global programming head of R&B and Soul Mjeema Pickett and her team

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[25] When I am referring to the movement, I will use the acronym BLM to distinguish the movement from the name of the playlist, which is spelled out in italics.

[26] "Spotify Stands with the Black Community in the Fight Against Racism and Injustice," *Spotify*, last modified June 17, 2020, accessed December 9, 2020, https://newsroom.spotify.com/2020-06-01/spotify-stands-with-the-black-community-in-the-fight-against-racism-and-injustice.

originally curated the *Black Lives Matter* playlist after they learned of Sandra Bland's death in a Texas jail cell.[27] For the June 2, 2020, launch, the lead curator was Ferguson-based musician Keyon Harrold, Sr. Before Blackout Tuesday, the playlist had over 45,000 subscriptions, but within two days of the press release and initiative, the subscriptions increased to nearly 450,000, peaking at over 835,000 followers.[28] Although less popular than Spotify's most favored curated playlist, *Today's Top Hits* (27 million followers), *Black Lives Matter* grew to be an influential playlist for its subscribers.

The *Black Lives Matter* playlist changed significantly since its first launch in 2016, and curators have rotated songs in and out of the playlist to fit the political climate of the BLM movement. I center this case study around two iterations of the playlist: Pickett's original playlist in 2016, and Spotify's revitalized version released on Blackout Tuesday. At the conclusion of this chapter, I also discuss where the *Black Lives Matter* playlist stands at the beginning of 2021. Because of the revolving door of songs featured on the playlist, I do not focus on the artists but rather on the agency of the curators who created and currently maintain the playlist. I also build on the scholarship of Spotify's curated playlists to determine how curators and producers shaped and marketed the *Black Lives Matter* playlist for the most financial success during June 2020, as well as the latter half of that year.[29] I argue that they have used this shift as a way to resist the

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[27] Patrick Clarke, "Spotify's 'Black Lives Matter' Playlist Sees 1000% Rise in Subscribers on 'Blackout Tuesday,'" *NME*, June 12, 2020, https://www.nme.com/news/music/spotifys-black-lives-matter-playlist-sees-1000-rise-in-subscribers-on-blackout-tuesday-2687378. Steve Knopper, "Spotify's 'Black Lives Matter' Playlist Subscribers Grew 1,000% on 'Blackout Tuesday,' *Billboard*, June 11, 2020, https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/streaming/9401063/spotify-black-lives-matter-playlist-growth-blackout-tuesday.

[28] Clarke, "Spotify's 'Black Lives Matter' Playlist Sees 1000% Rise in Subscribers on 'Blackout Tuesday,'" 2020. It is important to also note that followers do not equal number of streams, as Spotify users not subscribed the playlist could also listen to the playlist.

[29] Luis Aguiar and Joel Walfogel, *Platforms, Promotion, and Product Discover: Evidence from Spotify Playlists* (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2018); Frederik Dhaeans and Jean Burgess, "Press Play for Pride': The Cultural Logics of LGBTQ-Themed Playlists on Spotify," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 6 (June

commodification of the BLM movement, foregrounding grassroots artists and advocate for artists of color to be included on the playlist. The curators act as cultural generators of the BLM movement. Frederik Dhaenens and Jean Burgess assert that playlist curation "becomes a public, representational, and performative practice. Playlists on streaming services do cultural work."[30] By choosing the songs on the *Black Lives Matter* playlist, curators maintain the cultural associations with these social justice movements while also contributing new voices to the movement.

In this chapter, I trace the history of how Black women began many of the touchstones of the BLM movement, including Alicia Garza's naming of the movement, Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang's #TheShowMustBePaused initiative, and Pickett's curation of the *Black Lives Matter* playlist. I base my research on interviews with playlist curators at streaming platform companies, such as Pandora and Spotify. This chapter aims to draw a connection between technology's role in forming personalized song lists and the cultural genealogy of African American music for the past sixty years.

Playlist Curation

Music curation is the act of copying existing music onto a new medium, such as a cassette tape, CD, or a digital playlist. As Thurston Moore discusses in *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture*, mixtape culture began in the late 1970s as the blank cassette became cheaper and more readily available.[31] Mixtapes in the 1970s and 80s, mix CDs in the 1990s and 2000s,

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2019): 11-92-1211; Tom Johnson, "Chance the Rapper, Spotify, and Musical Categorization in the 2010s," *American Music* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 176-96; Eric Drott, "Fake Streams, Listening Bots, and Click Farms: Counterfeiting Attention in the Streaming Music Economy," *American Music* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 153–75.

[30] Dhaenens and Burgess, "'Press Play for Pride," 1193.

[31] Thurston Moore, *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2004): 9–10.

and personal digital playlist curation of the 2010s have been sources of collecting and curating songs for musicians and music enthusiasts. Curating music has served many purposes for consumers, including introducing people to new genres and styles of music. *Black Lives Matter* playlist curator Pickett, for example, began making mixtapes for her friends' dates at Clark Atlanta University.[32] Mixtapes have served as a means to preserve, distribute, and generate new music.

In the 1970s disco DJs began creating playlists (then called sets) for dancers at underground discotheques in New York. These DJs carefully chose songs related to one another in order to keep the energy going during live performances. As music scholar Tim Lawrence describes, "Operating at the vulnerable nexus of this network of dancers and moguls, DJs became the key conduits of dance culture in the 1970s thanks to their ability to pick out hot records, create fresh taste patterns, develop new turntable techniques, and compel people to dance."[33] As hip hop scholars Joseph C. Ewoodzie and Joseph Schloss discuss, curating songs to fit a setlist is also tied to the beginnings of hip hop. Bronx-based musicians DJ Kool Herc and others distributed mixtapes as material and symbolic capital among musicians throughout the New York area, and more specifically, the South Bronx.[34] As hip hop spread to the rest the United States, mixtapes served as materials of influence (or contention) between the emerging rap, hip hop, and DJing styles.

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[32] Amy X. Wang, "At Work With Mjeema Pickett, Spotify's Head of R&B and Soul," *Rolling Stone*, February 7, 2020, https://www.rollingstone.com/pro/news/spotify-mjeema-pickett-at-work-942231/.

[33] Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture 1970–1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

[34] Joseph C. Ewoodzie, Jr., *Break Beats in the Bronx: Rediscovering Hip-Hop's Early Years* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 5.

Hip hop artists and producers curated music with the idea of the live performance in mind, designing them as if they were setlists by connecting songs through beat matching—that is, transitioning from one song to another by utilizing the same tempo or beat pattern—and record scratching. By blending each song into one another through these techniques, early hip hop artists and DJs were able to also "mix" different musical styles such as funk, salsa, disco, rap, rock, and soul.[35] These mixtapes highlighted that, despite the diversity of these styles, they all belonged to the genealogy of diasporic music throughout the Black Atlantic. In the streaming era, hip hop artists have produced mixtapes on platforms such as SoundCloud and Bandcamp, as well as playlist-centered streaming services. Curators, now the "DJs" of streaming platforms, create these mixtape-style playlists for consumers to listen.

Music streaming platforms have also adopted the traditional "radio" format themed by a specific genre or mood. Curated playlists, when listened to via the "randomized" function, act in a similar way to the streaming radio service. These radio stations, as Anja Hagen describes, use metadata—that is, data that describes and gives new information—from music with which the listener is familiar to stream new music automatically.[36] Playlist curator and DJ Juan Gomez describes this type of listener as one who wants to discover music by just pressing play on an artist, song, or genre. These listeners, he said, "just sit back and allow the algorithm or the people who are behind those stations and playlists to dictate what their listening experience will be like."[37] Simply by pressing play, listeners can discover new artists in a similar way as the

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[35] Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 24.

[36] Anja Nylund Hagen, "The Playlist Experience: Personal Playlists in Music Streaming Services," *Popular Music and Society* 38 (2015): 634.

[37] Juan Gomez, interview.

mixtape—by hearing unfamiliar songs in between popular artists.[38] Some participants who frequently listen to these radio stations believe that “mood, feelings, temper, memories, or biographical history” serve as the most efficient means for consuming music.[39] Some of these playlists use these “moods” to garner emotions for social justice, such as the *Black Lives Matter* playlist on Spotify. Users can tune into the curated playlist, much like a mood-based radio, to discover new artists and genres in order to listen to the emotions and themes of the BLM movement.

Additionally, DJs and curators have unified their mixtape playlists through ordering the featured songs. Gomez, for example, views his playlist curatorship as a DJ set by “introducing [unfamiliar] music sandwiched between songs that people are more familiar with,” such as Beyoncé or Drake. He continued, “That’s an opportunity to show some love to the emerging artist or a song that I feel passionate about or invested in some way.”[40] Gomez alludes to the role of the DJ as the arbiter between the music and the listener, in which the DJ enacts the genealogy of black music and advocates for new voices.[41] The first ten songs on the *Black Lives Matter* playlist, for example, show a similar flow between known and unknown songs in a list (Figure 1.1, see Table 1.1 for the complete list).

[38] Nancy Baym also confirms that this type of discovery is possible through listening to dedicated genre-specific radio stations. A way to express the multiplicity of identities within the disembodied space of the internet, users can turn on certain “mood” playlists to reflect their own experiences and views on a certain day. Nancy Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 2nd ed (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2018), 12.

[39] Hagen, “The Playlist Experience: Personal Playlists in Music Streaming Services,” 639.

[40] Juan Gomez, interview.

[41] Here, I am referring to Nina Sun Eidsheim’s concept of the thick event in her monograph *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

TITLE		ARTIST	ALBUM
One Time Comin'	EXPLICIT	YG	Red Friday
Black America Again		Common, Stevie...	Black America A...
Alright	EXPLICIT	Kendrick Lamar	To Pimp A Butter...
Fight The Power		Public Enemy	Fear Of A Black ...
The Revolution Will Not Be Televised		Gil Scott-Heron	Pieces of a Man
Say It Loud - I'm Black And I'm Proud		James Brown	20 All-Time Gre...
Living For The City		Stevie Wonder	Innervisions
Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)		Marvin Gaye	What's Going O...
Wake Up Everybody (feat. Teddy Pender...		Harold Melvin & ...	Wake Up Everyb...
Might Not Be OK (feat. Big K...	EXPLICIT	Kenneth Whalu...	Broken Land

Figure 1.1. The first ten songs of the original 2016 *Black Lives Matter* playlist.

In the first ten songs of the *Black Lives Matter* playlist, curators included songs from past social justice movements interlaced with contemporary hip hop songs associated with the BLM movement. Its presentation in this order on the playlist allows the listener to connect historical artists—such as Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, or James Brown—to contemporary artists—such as Kendrick Lamar, Common, or YG. Although these two groups represent different genres and generations, both have created music that shares many affinities that the curator actively constructs by drawing the listener’s ear to connections of social justice themes from the different eras. Thus, the listener hears the connecting themes of racial and social injustices between the decades. The goal of the playlist, then, is to serve as a bridge between social justice movements of the past and the contemporary work of BLM.

The Origin of the Black Lives Matter Movement and Playlist

When Spotify created the *Black Lives Matter* playlist in 2016, the social movement had been alive since July 2013 when Florida native George Zimmerman was found not guilty in the murder of Trayvon Martin. The widespread attention on the case sparked debate about prejudice, police violence, and unequal treatment during the "New Jim Crow Era"—a term coined by law scholar Michelle Alexander who describes how racism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has shaped law enforcement and the criminal justice system in the US.[42] After the trial, civil rights activist Alicia Garza coined the phrase "Black Lives Matter" in an open letter post on Facebook. Garza wrote, "We don't deserve to be killed with impunity. We need to love ourselves and fight for a world where Black lives matter. Black people, I love you. I love us. We matter. Our lives matter."[43] Since Garza's post, the BLM social movement grew as more Black victims gained attention on social media. Similar to the BLM movement, #SayHerName raised awareness for Black female and trans women who have also suffered from police brutality. As the movement grew, Garza joined activists Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi in founding the Black Lives Matter Network Foundation, a multi-chapter organization that serves as a loose network of activists throughout the country.[44]

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[42] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2nd ed. (New York: The New Press, 2012).

[43] Rachel Hartigan, "She co-founded Black Lives Matter. Here's Why She's so Hopeful for the Future," *National Geographic*, July 8, 2020, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/07/alicia-garza-co-founded-black-lives-matter-why-future-hopeful/#close.

[44] For more information on the history of the Black Lives Matter movement, see Lucia Abbamonte's *"Black Lives Matter": Cross-Media Resonance and the Iconic Turn of Language* (2018), Christopher J. Lebron's *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (2017), and Barbara Ransby's *Making All Black Lives Matter: Reimagining Freedom in the Twenty-First Century* (2018).

In a later blog post with the *Feminist Wire*, Garza reflected on how the viral letter affected Facebook users and essentially spurred the Black Lives Matter movement, yet she criticized how the movement had been co-opted by other groups such as All Lives Matter, Migrant Lives Matter, and Women's Lives Matter. The new movements, she argued, had "completely erased the origins of their work—rooted in the labor and love of queer Black women." She continued by pushing into corporations' commodification of BLM, citing examples of an episode of Law & Order: SVU and a famous Pepsi commercial featuring social media influencer Kendall Jenner. She concluded by quoting cultural strategist Leonie Annor-Owiredu by asking, "As brands all over the world are taking a stand, the virtual protest leaves consumers asking these three questions; where were you then, why now, and for how long will you take a stand?"[45]

Although Garza does not directly name Spotify or other music streaming platforms in her criticism, the charge remains firm in her assessment of U.S. corporations' commodification of the BLM movement, especially on Blackout Tuesday. Similar to the celebrations of Pride Month in the U.S., when companies' social media account logos suddenly feature prominent rainbows, hundreds of corporations spoke out in support of the BLM movement (See Figure 1.2).[46] Spotify's participation in Blackout Tuesday and statement honoring victims of police brutality was not an exception to the norm. Yet as these corporations adopted Black Lives Matter ideals to varying degrees of altruism, employees of color and playlist curators have been caught in the crossfire of the politics of their companies and their products they release as cultural generators.

[45] Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement," *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, https://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/.

[46] Dhaenens and Burgess, "'Press Play for Pride.'"

Juan Gomez stated that he feels this pressure from his streaming company and listeners, but he combats this potential critique of disingenuous sponsorship with making sure that his playlists and radio stations provide an "authentic" experience for his listeners to understand a particular genre or social movement.[47] Likewise, the *Black Lives Matter* playlist provides a similar experience for listeners—whether or not familiar with the movement—to understand the music, artists, and themes echoed from BLM protests.

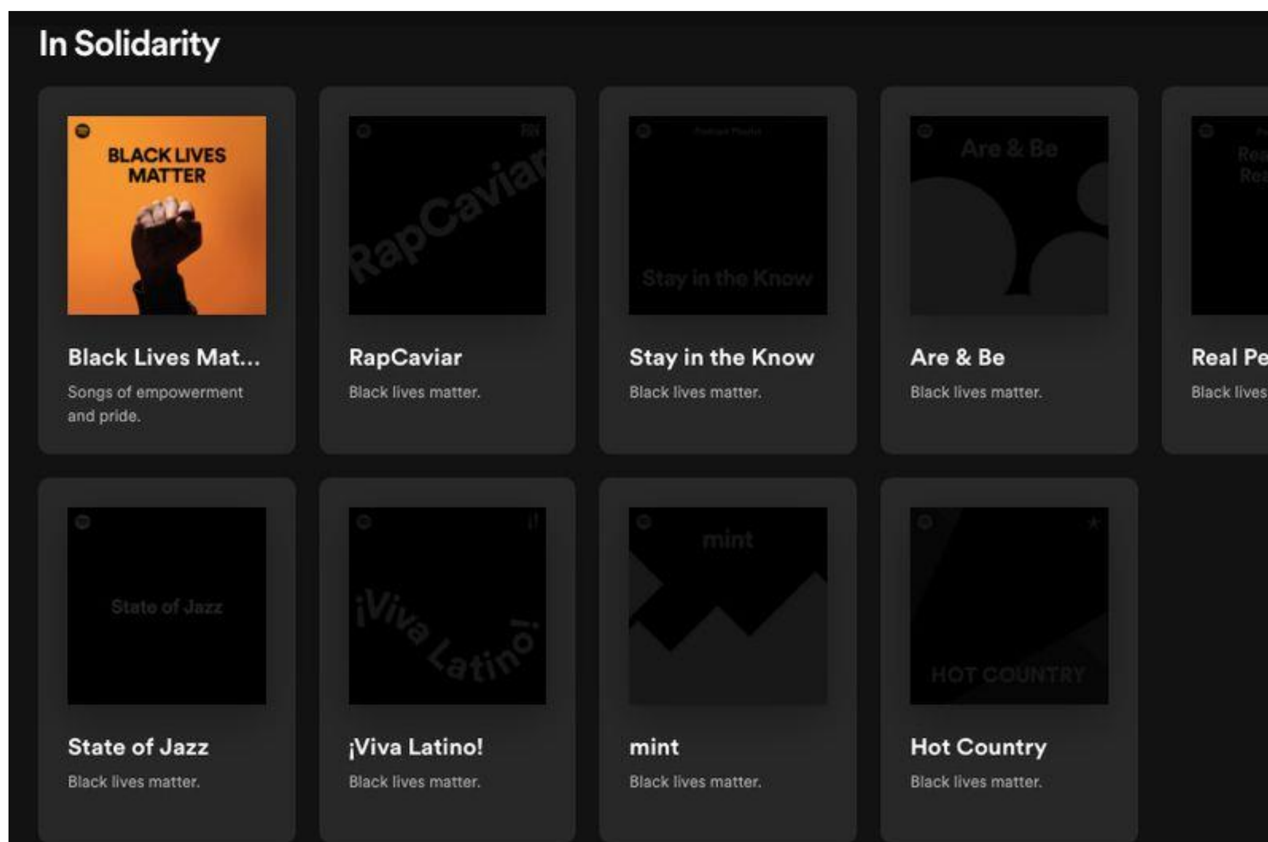

Figure 1.2. Spotify's changed platform on June 2, 2020.

The sonic atmosphere of BLM protests are just as striking as the visual demonstrations and have provided a multi-sensory experience that companies, such as Spotify, have adopted for

[47] Juan Gomez, interview.

their platforms. Songs like J. Cole's "Be Free" (2014), The Game's "Don't Shoot" (2014), Janelle Monáe's "Hell You Talmbout" (2015), Usher's "Chains" (2015), Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" (2015), and others provided a thematic soundscape for the protests.[48] Although these songs represent artists from different styles, the themes and upbeat tempos (each between 80 and 130 beats per minute) have united people, fueled emotions, and inspired chants at BLM protests. As music scholars Fernando Orejuela, Stephanie Shonekan, and others have explored in *Black Lives Matter & Music* (2018), the music of the movement has been an inspiration for participants, scholars, and supporters who have utilized song lyrics and beats to fuel BLM events. Additionally, hip hop artists, affected by the tragedies and inspired by the protests, continued to record songs to fuel the soundscape, sparking hits such as Anderson.Paak's "Lockdown" (2020) and H.E.R.'s "I Can't Breathe" (2020). This new flood of activist music-making heralded a new period of social justice activism in hip hop music.[49]

Since its inception in 2016, the *Black Lives Matter* has included songs of shared lyrical themes, similar genres and styles, and support of gender identities. The 2016 *Black Lives Matter* playlist originally curated by Pickett and her team features forty-seven songs by Black artists within a fifty-year period (See Table 1.1). As curator Pickett later recalled in an interview on Essence magazine's podcast *Yes, Girl!*, her team used the formation of the playlist to express their identities and emotional responses to Sandra Bland's death. She explains:

> We started [the playlist] right after the death of Sandra Bland. And it was, "how could we not?" We were at work, we couldn't concentrate, and the best thing we could think about to do was music. Listening to music, listening to the songs that resonated with us. Whether it was a protest song like "Alright" or "Black Butterfly" by Denise Williams, it was songs that soothed us, and it resonated with

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[48] Fernando Orejuela, "Introduction," in *Black Lives Matter & Music*, ed. Fernando Orejuela and Stephanie Shonekan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 3.

[49] Orejuela, *Black Lives Matter & Music*, 10.

> how we were feeling. We made it collaborative—people just put their songs in, and we ended up just liking the body of work and covered the emotions we were feeling. We thought that the users would agree. It was a therapeutic process, really. That's really how it started. It was a slow build. It started in 2015. We featured it a few times. Up until [July 2020], it had like 40,000 followers. Now it has like 850,000. You know, now that is letting us know that music is powerful and is healing people.[50]

Pickett's assessment of the growth in popularity for the playlist coincides with Spotify's press announcement and Blackout Tuesday efforts. The growth in the playlist's followers is a testament to both the growing popularity of these activist songs and Spotify's allowance of such a playlist to exist. As Pickett described, the team curated the playlist in a nontraditional way by mimicking a mixtape featuring songs from past and contemporary BLM protests. To Pickett, the *Black Lives Matter* playlist's goal was not to garner the most streams or to feature the next hottest performer but was instead a reflection of her and her team's reactions to tragedies and their agency within Spotify's guise to create a different, identity-centered playlist.

Song Title	Artists	Year Released
One Time Comin'	YG	2016
Black America Again	Common, Stevie Wonder	2016
Alright	Kendrick Lamar	2015
Fight the Power	Public Enemy	1989
The Revolution Will Not Be Televised	Gil Scott-Heron	1971
Say It Loud – I'm Black And I'm Proud	James Brown	1968
Living For The City	Stevie Wonder	1973
Inner City Blues	Marvin Gaye	1971
Wake Up Everybody	Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes, feat. Teddy Pendergrass	1975
Might Not Be Ok	Kenneth Whalum, Big K.R.I.T.	2016

[50] Mjeema Pickett, "A Playlist Pick-Me-Up with Spotify Queen Mjeema Pickett!," interview by Cori Murray and Charli Penn, *Yes, Girl!*, Essence Magazine, July 2, 2020, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/playlist-pick-me-up-spotify-playlist-queen-mjeema-pickett/id1207010495?i=1000481924506.

Hang on in There	John Legend, The Roots	2010
The Charade	D’Angelo	2013
Black Gold	Esperanza Spalding, Algebra Blessett, Lionel Loueke	2012
UMI Says	Mos Def	1999
No Peace	Jalen Santoy	2016
No Justice	Ty Dolla $ign, Big TC	2016
Police Get Away Wit Murder	YG	2016
Chains	Usher, Nas, Bibi Bourelly	2015
K.O.S. (Determination)	Black Star, Vinia Mojica	1998
Forgive Them Father	Ms. Lauryn Hill	1998
Take a Look Around	Bilal, BJ The Chicago Kid, Kindred the Family Soul	2011
Nobody Wins A War	Raheem DeVaughn, Jill Scott, Bilal, Anthony Hamilton	2010
I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free	Nina Simone	1967
Peace on Earth	Rachelle Ferell	1992
Redemption Song	Bob Marley & The Wailers	1980
What’s Going On	Marvin Gaye	1971
Keep Ya Head Up	2Pac	1993
Don’t Shoot	Yo Gotti, 2 Chains, Shea Diamond	2014
Don’t Die	Killer Mike	2012
Nu Africa	CyHi The Prynce	2016
16 Shots	VIC MENSA	2016
Black Fist	David Banner, Tito Lo	2016
Diallo	Wyclef Jean, Youssou N’Dour, Mb2	2000
These Are Our Heroes	Nas	2004
True To The Game	Ice Cube	1991
White America	Eminem	2002
99 Problems	JAY-Z	2003
I Want to Be Free (That’s the Truth)	Too $hort	1992
Propaganda	Dead Prez	2000
Time’s A Wastin	Erykah Badu	2000
N.*.*.*.*.*. (The Slave and the Master)	Nas	2008
January 28th	J. Cole	2014
I Am Somebody	Santana, will.i.am	2016
My Petition	Jill Scott	2004
A Change Is Gonna Come	Sam Cooke	1964
Baltimore	Nina Simone	1978

Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)	Marvin Gaye	1971

Table 1.1. The original *Black Lives Matter* playlist created in 2016.

The repetition of lyrics throughout the playlist point out the prevalence of themes from the BLM movement. Much of the songs revolve around grief, genealogy of slavery, and racial inequity in the United States (See Table 1.2). Lyrics such as “chains” (occurs 31 times) and “slavery” (10 times) recall the collective experience that African Americans have faced since the country’s inception—from slavery beginning in 1619 to the oppressive segregation of the twentieth century to mass incarceration in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Violence appears most often in the playlist, with lyrics such as “cops”/“police” (24 times), “guns”/“shooting” /“shoot” (47 times), and “die”/“death” /“dead” (42 times) dominating the songs on the playlist, emphasizing the obsession of the penultimate moment of death for Black men within the BLM movement. Musicologist Imani Moseley describes this focus on the visible moment of death as “a need to place the image at the forefront of the conversation around police brutality.”[51] Yet for all of the emphasis on grieving death, however, the playlist emphasizes positivity and hope for change. These words—“hope” (17 times), “peace (34 times), “pride”/“proud” (39 times), “love” (57 times), and “fight” (48)—point to the movement’s end goal of equity and justice, as well as drawing on the peaceful protests of the Civil Rights Movement.

[51] Imani Danielle Moseley, “Say Her Name: Invocation, Remembrance, and Gendered Trauma in Black Lives Matter,” in *Performing Commemoration: Musical Reenactment and the Politics of Trauma*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Michael A. Figueroa (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 151.

Lyrical Theme	Number of Times Mentioned in Playlist
"Chains"	31
"Slavery"	10
"Cops"/"Police"	24
"Guns"/"Shoot" /"Shooting"	47
"Die" / "Death" / "Dead"	42
"Hope"	17
"Peace"	34
"Pride"/"Proud"	39
"Love"	57
"Fight"	48

Table 1.2. The number of occurrences of lyrical themes in the *Black Lives Matter* playlist.

Although the *Black Lives Matter* playlist span a fifty-year period, the number of songs from each decade reveals the playlist curators' intentions of showing the historicity of social justice movements in the U.S. The playlist (See Table 1.1) includes three songs the 1960s, seven from the 1970s, two from the 1980s, seven from the 1990s, eight from the 2000s, and nineteen from the 2010s. Unsurprisingly, the decade most represented, the 2010s, demonstrates how playlist curators not only wished to include songs most prevalent in the BLM movement, such as Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" (2015), but also to introduce listeners to newer songs with similar themes. In fact, eight songs on the playlist were released within four months of the playlist's launch. Thus, the playlist is not only a response to the ongoing songs associated with BLM, but

also a cultural generator to give rise to new, unfamiliar artists and effectively change the soundscape of the movement.

The strong presence of music from the 1970s and 1990s indicates that the playlist curators wished to evoke emotions and themes from earlier periods of U.S. protests. Artists on the playlist from the 1970s, such as Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder, elicit themes from the post-Civil Rights Movement era, while the gangster rap artists Public Enemy and 2Pac recall the soundscape of the 1992 Rodney King riots in Los Angeles. Despite coming from different decades and social movements, however, the songs share a common theme of police brutality. Stevie Wonder's 1973 hit "Living For The City," for example, describes a young African American man who escapes the racism of the South for New York, only to be suddenly interrupted and arrested by the police. Although Wonder recorded the song forty years before Trayvon Martin's death, the playlist curators included "Living For The City" to indicate that police violence against Black and Brown people since before the BLM movement began. The inclusion of late 1980s and early 90s rap artists indicates an allusion to a similar time when artists were pushing the boundaries of hip hop to discuss matters surrounding race in Los Angeles, New York, and other urban cities.

The playlist's sonic elements further connect the twenty-first century songs to the past through instruments that signify funk and jazz. Several entries feature horns and stereophonic synthesizers reminiscent of the 1970s bands. For example, John Legend and The Roots' "Hang on in There" features a prominent counterpoint line in the bells with a funk wa-wa guitar timbre and accompanying male chorus to Legend's lyrics. Two songs earlier, Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes' "Wake Up Everybody" demonstrates a similar baritone voice along with a similar accompaniment. Esperanza Spalding's "Black Gold" feature jazz horn lines similar to those in

the Nina Simone tunes ("Baltimore" and "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free"). The horns, synth organs, and wa-wa guitars signify funk and jazz idioms that again call back to the older songs on the playlist that have shaped previous movements. Musicologist Griffin Woodworth argues that these synthesized sounds from the 1970s featured both familiar and otherworldly sounds connected to the collective feeling of alienation. Funk musicians used the power of the synthesizer technology to raise awareness of Black empowerment movements.[52] Legend and The Roots' song "Hang On In There" draws on synthesizers and the funk genre to convey the values of the BLM movement in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, Pickett and her team connected the themes of the songs through the samples and cross-references throughout the playlist. For example, 2Pac's "Keep Ya Head Up" references Marvin Gaye, specifically his 1971 album *What's Going On?* ("Ayo, I remember Marvin Gaye used to sing to me/He had me feelin' like black was the thing to be"). The playlist features three songs from Gaye's album, including "Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)," "What's Going On?," and "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)." In Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," member Chuck D references James Brown's hit "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" ("'Cause I'm Black and I'm proud/I'm ready and hyped plus I'm amped"). Brown's voice appears again as a sample in "Black America Again," the second song on the playlist, from a speech given in 1968. Common distorts and interrupts Brown's voice through frequent "record scratches" to temporally distance the speech from the rest of the song. The playlist illustrates a long history of artists combatting racism in the twentieth century.

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[52] Griffin Woodworth, "Synthesizers as Social Protest in Early-1970s Funk," in *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, ed. Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 248.

Although the playlist was a reaction to Bland's death, the playlist only features seven women and only two songs that specifically speak her name ("Black Fist" by David Banner and "Black America Again" by Common and Stevie Wonder). This aspect of the playlist, as Pickett mentions in her interview with *Essence*, was a weakness that reflected the BLM movement's lack of attention on Black women's deaths. Furthermore, as Moseley discusses, this sonic invisibility of women in the playlist reveals the ways in which deaths of Black people are prioritized. Songs about Black male death, Moseley argues, essentializes "not only the victims but also black maleness as bloody vessels that can only be understood in and through death."[53] The absence unfortunately highlights how Pickett and her team created the playlist after Bland's death, she was as absent from it as she was in popular discourse in 2016. In subsequent iterations of the playlist, the names of female victims arise from the new crop of songs that were added to the playlist.

Black Lives Matter After George Floyd

The Black Lives Matter movement reawakened on May 25, 2020, when witnesses recorded George Floyd's murder outside of a Minneapolis convenience store. Although news of police violence was prevalent on the internet since the beginning of 2020 (including the recent deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor), the brutality of the video and the stark image of a White police officer kneeling on a Black man's neck served as a metaphor for the hundreds of years of systemic racism in America. Frustrated from the country's failure in handling the COVID-19 pandemic, high unemployment numbers, and a lack of progress surrounding the BLM movement, thousands of U.S. residents took to the streets to protest and demand justice. In the face of backlash from police officers, police sympathizers, and the president of the United

[53] Moseley, "Say Her Name: Invocation, Remembrance, and Gendered Trauma in Black Lives Matter," 150.

States, these marches continued throughout the summer of 2020 in all major U.S. cities—all streamed (or televised) live through protesters' social media profiles for those at home to watch. Among those posting on social media about their involvement in the protests, celebrities and artists seized upon the opportunity to express their opinions. Popular artists including Halsey, YUNGBLUD, Mod Sun, Machine Gun Kelly, Ariana Grande, and Ross Lynch also took part in the in-person protests with the rest of the crowds in New York and Los Angeles.[54] These artists showed their support by posting their experiences on Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok by posting pictures of themselves to their feeds and daily stories. Other celebrities and artists posted receipts showing how much they donated to Black Lives Matter and the Minnesota Bail Fund to help those who had been incarcerated for protesting. Moreover, artists began calling out companies' silences on the deaths of Floyd, Arbery, and Taylor, forcing a reckoning for companies to face white supremacy in corporate America.[55] The protests soon became a worldwide phenomenon as people around the world—including London, Paris, Berlin, and Johannesburg—joined in protests against their own countries' racial injustices.[56] Spotify, a platform with listenership around the world, capitalized on the watershed moment of worldwide protests to redesign their platform in solidarity with the BLM movement.

To support the BLM protesters' calls for justice against Floyd's deaths, on June 2, 2020,

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[54] Rachel Dowd, "Spotify's George Floyd Tribute Only Needed One Track to Stand in Solidarity," *Alternative Press*, June 3, 2020, https://www.altpress.com/news/spotify-george-floyd-playlist-silent-track/.

[55] Will Meyer, "Many of the Same Companies That Say 'Black Lives Matter' are Involved with the Systems that Continue to Oppress Black Americans," *Business Insider*, August 22, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/corporations-companies-black-lives-matter-invest-police-racism-inequality-2020-7.

[56] Aleem Maqbool, "Black Lives Matter: From Social Media Post to Global Movement," *BBC News*, July 10, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53273381.

The music industry and social media platforms developed a trend called #TheShowMustBePaused, later known as #BlackOutTuesday. Two Black Atlanta music executives Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang asked for a day of pause in observance of the BLM protests in a statement: "The music industry is a multi-billion dollar industry. An industry that has profited predominantly from Black art. Our mission is to hold the industry at large…accountable."[57] Apple Music was the most visible streaming platform to use the #TheShowMustBePaused hashtag, as they completely shut off their music streaming with the exception of songs related to the BLM movement. The platform prominently displayed a black box with a statement of solidarity (See Figure 1.3):

> In steadfast support of the Black voices that define music, creativity, and culture, we use ours. This moment calls upon us all to speak and act against racism and injustice of all kinds. We stand in solidarity with Black communities everywhere. #TheShowMustBePaused #BlackLivesMatter.[58]

In addition to support from Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube, major record labels also participated in the movement, including Warner Music Group, Sony, BMG, Columbia, and Island. Once social media platforms realized the effectiveness of #TheShowMustBePaused, executives commandeered the hashtag and rebranded it as #BlackOutTuesday, which encouraged users on Facebook and Instagram to post black boxes on profiles and timelines to support the BLM movement.[59] Users posted these black boxes as a way to mute themselves in the discourse of racial injustices in America. Although the act was criticized as "performative wokeness" and

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[57] "Blackout Tuesday: Music Industry Grinds to a Halt in Solidarity," Billboard news, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fvbfhFvHwQ.

[58] Kamaron Leach, "Apple Music Pauses Browse Feature in Support of #BlackOutTuesday," *Bloomberg News,* June 2, 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-02/apple-music-pauses-browse-feature-in-support-of-blackouttuesday.

[59] Joe Coscarelli, "#BlackoutTuesday: A Music Industry Protest Becomes a Social Media Moment," *New York Times*, June 2, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/arts/music/what-blackout-tuesday.html.

unproductive, many social media platforms utilized the movement as a way to rebrand their companies' visual platforms and mission statements in support of the BLM movement.[60]

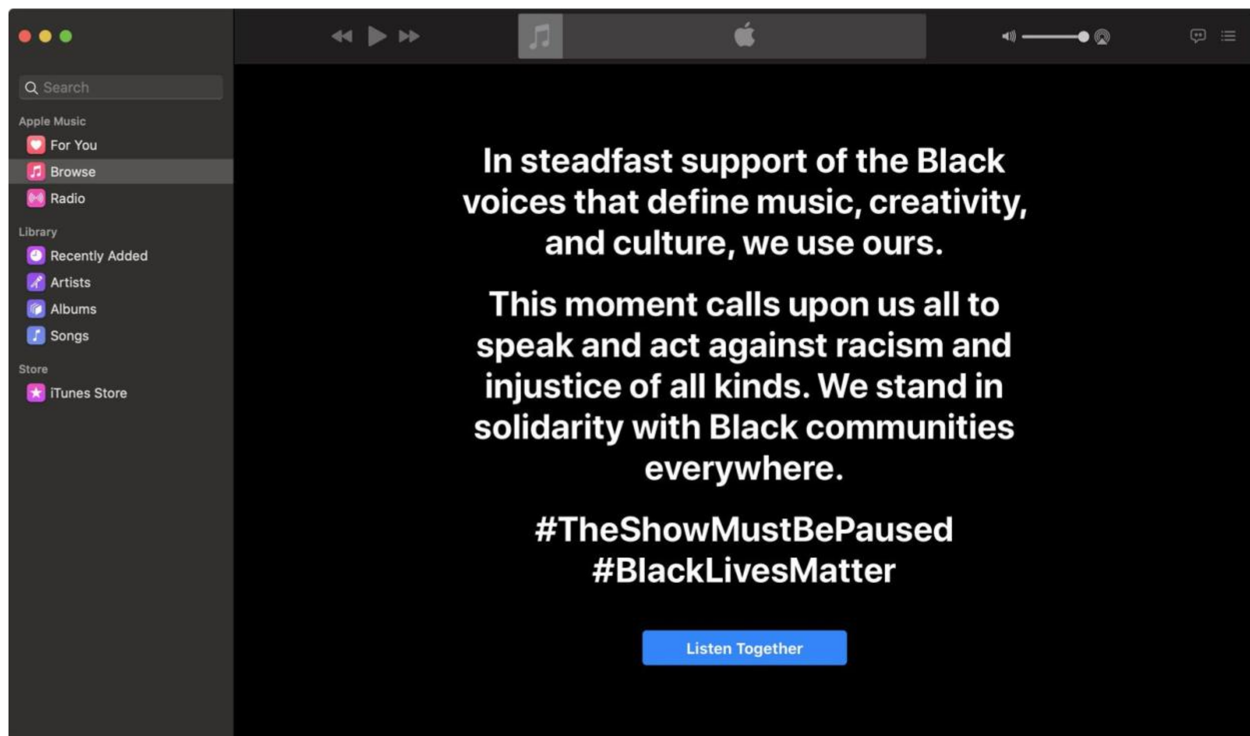

Figure 1.3. Apple Music's statement and platform on June 2, 2020.

As stated in the introduction of this chapter, Spotify's work in the BLM movement centered around the #BlackOutTuesday initiative, rather than #TheShowMustBePaused. In their press release, Spotify issued a special statement on their stance on the BLM movement and #BlackOutTuesday. It read:

> We have also encouraged all employees around the world to observe Black Out [sic] Tuesday by taking time to reflect and educate themselves. We have shared resources on what it means to be an effective ally to the Black community, and Spotifiers will have access to trained mental health providers. Additionally, Spotify will match financial donations made by employees to organizations focused on the fight against racism; injustice; inequity; and driving meaningful

[60] Erin Dowell and Marlette Jackson, "'Woke-Washing' Your Company Won't Cut It," *Harvard Business Review*, July 27, 2020, https://hbr.org/2020/07/woke-washing-your-company-wont-cut-it.

> change. Following Black Out Tuesday, we will also come together as a global community for a facilitated discussion about racial injustice.[61]

Although a Swedish-based company, Spotify recognized the protests occurring throughout the world, rather than just in the U.S., and appealed to their globalized audience in their statement. Furthermore, the company emphasized advocacy and education with respect to racism, injustice, and inequity in the revamped *Black Lives Matter* playlist, *Black History Is Now* hub, and podcasts as a tool to support the BLM movement and generate new cultural material for users to consume.

The updated *Black Lives Matter* playlist expanded to fifty-six songs and featured more contemporary artists associated with the movement (See Table 1.3). The playlist's opening song changed from Common's "Black America Again" to James Brown's "Say It Loud – I'm Black And I'm Proud," yet this change was the extent to which the playlist catered to music of the Civil Rights Movement.[62] Unlike the original 2016 version of *Black Lives Matter*, the June 2 *Black Lives Matter* playlist focused more on contemporary songs. The connection between the playlist, therefore, was less an emphasis on music from the Civil Rights Movement and more focused on the protests surrounding BLM. For example, one track on the playlist, JAG's "Kaepernick Effect," references the NFL's termination of quarterback Colin Kaepernick's career in 2017 for kneeling during the national anthem. By 2020, the BLM movement had existed for nearly a decade, and artists familiar and sympathetic to the movement's cause were already producing songs in reference to events and other artists. Curators included these songs that alluded to major tragedies and events of the 2010s to educate audiences unfamiliar with the BLM movement.

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[61] "Spotify Stands with the Black Community in the Fight Against Racism and Injustice."

[62] Curators reduced the number of tracks from Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* album, but they kept the featured Civil Rights Artists, including Nina Simone, Sam Cooke, Stevie Wonder, and Gil Scott-Heron.

Thus, by including new material in the playlist, curators were both educating and generating content for users to understand the tenants of BLM.

Song Title	Artist	Date Released
Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud	James Brown	1968
Alright	Kendrick Lamar	2015
This is America	Childish Gambino	2018
Don’t Shoot	Shea Diamond	2014
Don’t Die	Killer Mike	2012
S.O.T.L. (Silence of the Lambs)	Ludacris, Lil Wayne	2020
16 Shots	VIC MENSA	2016
Mad	Solange, Lil Wayne	2016
Keep Ya Head Up	2Pac	1993
O-o-h Child	The Five Starsteps	1970
Wake Up Everybody	Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes	1975
Little Ghetto Boy	Donny Hathaway	1972
Kings	Kosine, Idris Elba	2020
Might Not Be Ok	Kenneth Whalum, Big K.R.I.T.	2016
U Will Know	B.M.U. (Black Men United)	2015
Love’s in Need of Love Today	Stevie Wonder	1976
Black Gold	Esperanza Spalding, Algebra Blessett, Lionel Loueke	2012
Optimistic	Sounds of Blackness	1991
Let Love Lead	Terrian	2020
Time’s A Wastin	Erykah Badu	2000
Hang on in There	John Legend, The Roots	2010
The Revolution Will Not Be Televised	Gil Scott-Heron	1971
Revolution	Kirk Franklin, The Family	1998
Baltimore	Nina Simone	1978
Freedom (feat. Kendrick Lamar)	Kendrick Lamar, Beyoncé	2018
Black Man	Quavo, T.I., Meek Mill, Rara	2016
MIDDLE CHILD	J. Cole	2019
A lot	21 Savage	2018
Grinding All My Life	Nipsey Hussle	2017
Fight the Power	Public Enemy	1989
FOR MY PEOPLE	Joey Bada$$	2017
Black	A$AP Ferg, Buddy	2018
Black Is Beautiful	Chronixx	2017

MY POWER	Nija, Beyoncé, Busiswa, Yemi Alade, Tierra Whack, Moonchild Sanelly, DJ Lag	2020
Guarding The Gates	Ms. Lauryn Hill	2019
Stereotypes	Black Violin	2017
Tribe	Jidenna	2019
Self	Noname	2018
Strength Courage & Wisdom	India.Arie	2001
Blk Girl Soldier	Jamila Woods	2016
Black America Again	Common, Stevie Wonder	2016
True to the Game	Ice Cube	1991
FDT	YG, Nipsey Hussle	2016
N****** vs. The Police	Richard Pryor	1974
Fuck Tha Police	N.W.A.	1988
Living For the City	Stevie Wonder	1973
Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)	Marvin Gaye	1971
The Charade	D'Angelo	2014
Kapernick Effect	JAG	2018
No Peace	Jalen Santoy	2016
No Justice (feat. Big TC)	Ty Dolla $ign, Big TC	2016
Police Get Away Wit Murder	YG	2016
Chains by Film The Future	Nas, Usher, Bibi Bourelly	2015
I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free	Nina Simone	1967
Redemption Song	Bob Marley & The Wallers	1980
A Change Is Gonna Come	Sam Cooke	1963

Table 1.3. The *Black Lives Matter* playlist as of June 2, 2020.

The shift to feature more contemporary songs changed the recurring sonic elements throughout the playlist. One change was the overall average tempos of the songs. Compared to the original playlist's average tempo of 110 bpm, songs on the June 2 playlist after 2010 had an average tempo of 86 bpm. These slower tempos reflect the solemn themes of the contemporary songs, such as mourning the losses of victims to police violence or a general sense of ennui with the US justice system. The trap style dominates most of the newly added tracks, signifying a new age of hip hop and a distancing from the likes of Public Enemy and 2Pac. The addition of new artists increased the diversity of genres represented on the playlist. For example, classical music

duo Black Violin's "Stereotypes" features dueling violins over a trap beat. The piece ends with one of the members speaking about the prejudices he faces in Western classical music traditions. The inclusion of such tracks on the playlist demonstrates how BLM's themes of antiracism have dispersed throughout the music community—not just in the hip hop realm.

For the June 2 update, curators added more Black women performers to the playlist. Joining Nina Simone and Ms. Lauryn Hill to the playlist were Beyoncé ("Freedom [feat. Kendrick Lamar])," "MY POWER [feat. Nija, Busiswa, Yemi Alade, Tierra Whack, Moonchild Sanelly, DJ Lag]"), Solange Knowles ("Mad [feat. Lil Wayne]"), Jamila Woods ("Black Grl Soldier"), and India.Arie ("Strength, Wisdom, & Courage"). This inclusion addressed the original playlist's lack of representation of Black women, despite Pickett's initial curation of the playlist after hearing of Sandra Bland's death. Similar to the playlist's exclusion of women musicians, the BLM movement focused mainly on victimhood of Black men at the hands of police. As Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins have noted, discourse on critical race theory has largely ignored the violence against Black women.[63] Yet as BLM protests became more visible during the Summer of 2020 on social media, many noticed how BIPOC victims, such as Breonna Taylor, had not received the same advocacy for justice as Black male victims. The addition of women of color, whose songs express Black women empowerment, on the playlist provides a space for this visibility within the BLM discourse.

Many of the new songs on the *Black Lives Matter* playlist were from viral videos on Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. As musicologist Paula Harper has demonstrated, virality on the

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[63] For a comprehensive overview of the concept of violence against BIPOC women, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–99. Patricia Hill Collins provides a more contemporary account of intersectionality in the twenty-first century in Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

internet involves a feedback loop cycle in what she calls “viral participation.” In order for a video, post, or picture to “go viral” on the internet, it must garner attention by a large group of viewers, which then becomes transduced into physical action. Social media users retweet, repost, or transfer the original video for a new audience.[64] In the summer of 2020, one of the most important social media platforms that provided the most influence for the BLM movement was TikTok. Users—mostly younger people under the age of 30—post short videos up to one minute of viral dance routines, memes, and humorous skits, but during the protests of May and June 2020, they posted compilation videos overdubbed with Childish Gambino’s “This is America” (2018), a song critiquing gun violence and racial injustices in the US.[65] Before the George Floyd protests, “This is America” had become a symbol for Black cynicism in America, but the renewed application of the song to viral videos in 2020 gave the song a new meaning. Curators included “This is America” for the June 2 revitalization of the *Black Lives Matter* playlist because of its associations with the contemporary protests and antiracist, antiestablishment themes. By applying the song from its contexts of the TikTok videos onto the playlist, curators were participating in the feedback loop of virality.

On June 2, 2020, Spotify’s relaunch of the *Black Lives Matter* playlist reflected the new emotions and themes of the globalized movement surrounding the George Floyd protests in the

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[64] Paula Harper, “*BEYONCÉ*: Viral Techniques and the Visual Album,” *Popular Music and Society* 42 (2019): 61-81.

[65] For examples, see Candy Ken (@candyken), “#BLACKLIVESMATTER IF UR QUIET UR PART OF THE PROBLEM NO #JUSTICE NO #PEACE NO #RACIST #POLICE,” TikTok video, June 8, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@candyken/video/6836133806580321541?sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6933600784328803845&is_from_webapp=v1&is_copy_url=0. Edgar Delave (@edgar.delave), “#fyp #blm #seattle #icantbreathe,” TikTok video, May 31, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@edgar.delave/video/6832893736050117894?sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6933600784328803845&is_from_webapp=v1&is_copy_url=0. Celeste Aguilar (@celestaguilar), “This is America.,” TikTok video, May 31, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@celesteaguilar/video/6832854357457849605?sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6933600784328803845&is_from_webapp=v1&is_copy_url=0.

summer of 2020. Adding more contemporary songs increased the representation of artists, genres, and styles on the playlist, but it took away from the playlist's original connections to previous social justice movements. The songs on the playlist instead reference events from the start of the movement, such as victims of police violence or notable figures who have actively fought for antiracism. The new playlist's direction orients to the present and future, rather than the past, as curators search for new sounds and songs to continue advocating for antiracism and themes of the BLM movement. This hope for the future is echoed in the final song of the playlist, Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" (1964), where he sings, "It's been a long/A long time comin', but I know/A change gon' come/Oh yes it will."

Conclusion

As of early 2021, the *Black Lives Matter* playlist continued to be an influential and popular playlist for Spotify users. The playlist updated weekly to include more up-and-coming artists whose songs amplified the message of the movement. A note at the top of the playlist encouraged listeners to support Color of Change, an online antiracist organization that supports smaller campaigns dedicated to antiracism (See Figure 1.4). Moreover, Spotify prominently acknowledged the labor of the playlist's curators, first Mjeema Pickett and later Keyon Harrold Sr.

Figure 1.4. The Interface of the *Black Lives Matter* playlist as of March 2021.

Curators for Spotify's *Black Lives Matter* playlist have connected past themes from the Civil Rights Movement to contemporary social injustices. Their advocacy for new artists and invocation of artists from the past is a testament to how different genres and styles of music have championed social justice themes in America. The curators' act of pulling together songs from public spaces of protests for the private consumption of the listener reflects the genealogy of music curation practices since the first mixtapes and DJ sets of the 1970s. After Blackout Tuesday in June 2020, curators advocated for new voices to the movement and added more contemporary songs. BLM playlist curators, as cultural generators, are doing work that is historically resonant with earlier practices but also breaks from the past. They use music to call out and oppose injustice by giving listeners music they want to hear and introducing them to artists they didn't know they needed to hear. These practices are reminiscent of disco and hip hop DJs and Civil Rights Era activists did, but the *Black Lives Matter* playlist is promoted by a

hugely profitable corporation. What does this tell us? One possible answer is to say that it illuminates the growing influence, culturally and economically, not just of Black culture but of the voices of Black activists, while at the same time revealing the continuing precarity of Black activists, who must sometimes enter into uneasy alliances in order to make their voices heard.

CHAPTER 2: *I'M WITH THE BANNED*: STREAMING PLATFORMS, BORDERS, AND ARABIC MUSIC DURING THE TRAVEL BAN

On January 27, 2017, President Trump issued Executive Order 13769, which restricted travel from seven Muslim-majority countries to the United States. The act perpetuated Anti-Muslim and Anti-Arab sentiments, as well as inhibited cultural exchange of musicians from the affected countries to U.S. audiences. As Trump closed the United States' borders to these people, media streaming platforms persisted in keeping theirs open. Six months after the ban, Swedish-based company Spotify released a documentary and playlist titled *I'm with the Banned* that not only protested Trump's immigration policy, but it also highlighted six Arab musicians from six of the banned countries: Sufyvn, a dentist and experimental beatmaker from Sudan; Moh Flow, a Syrian hip hop singer; Methal, a Yemeni singer-songwriter; Waayaha Cusub, a female-led hip hop group from Somalia; Kasra V, an Iranian-born London-based nightclub DJ; and Ahmed Fakroun, a decorated Libyan star from the 1970s and 80s. Collaborating with fellow U.S. musicians, these artists recorded and starred in Spotify's playlist and documentary that uplifted musicians affected by the travel ban. Since its release, the *I'm with the Banned* playlist has been streamed over 11 million times with over 22,000 followers (as of May 2021).[66] Although the full documentary—once viewable on the app at the beginning of the playlist—has since been taken

[66] Spencer Hansen, "Spotify—I'm with the Banned." *Spencer Hansen, Creative Director*, n.d. https://spencerhansen.com/SPOTIFY-I-m-with-the-Banned.

down, a series of shorter episodes from the original film are available on YouTube.[67] Nevertheless, in 2017, the documentary was nominated for a Daytime Emmy, and four of the songs from the playlist have made Spotify's *Global Top 50* playlist. To the producers at Spotify, the playlist was successful in conveying their political opposition against the travel ban.

Recent scholarship criticizing Spotify's intentions of compensating their musicians and heeding to corporate record companies (Aguiar and Walfogel 2018; Johansson, Werner, and Aker 2018; Dhaenens and Burgess 2019; Eriksson, et. al 2019;) complicates the notion of whether the Swedish company's intentions in curating playlist were truly altruistic. In this chapter, I offer a preliminary exploration of how and why the playlist *I'm with the Banned* was formed, situating it within the political context of 2016–2017 and the corporate context of Spotify's growing curated playlist collection. Through introducing the musicians and interpreting their respective representations in the films and songs in the playlist, I argue how the *I'm with the Banned* playlist provided a space in which artists could meet beyond the seemingly impenetrable borders of the US—albeit complicated due to the corporate motives of Spotify's streaming platform.

In this discussion of borders, I build upon existing scholarship on nationalism and cultural diplomacy. A pioneer of studying nationalism, Benedict Anderson analyzes nation-states as being "cultural phenomena" whose communities are "distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."[68] Positing this ideology in Trump's America, then, the travel ban essentially created a border between "us" and "them."

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[67] At the inception of this project, the documentary was available on Spotify. Around the beginning of April 2020, however, I noticed that the video had been taken down and transferred to YouTube. To my knowledge, the thirty-minute documentary does not exist on the internet. The episodes on YouTube are about four to five minutes in length and have been viewed over 20,000 times.

[68] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed., (London: Verso, 1991), 5-6.

Such racist official nationalism, as Anderson describes, fueled the Trump Administration's immigration policy in his designing of laws, such as Executive Order 13769, aimed to supposedly protect the United States. Although Anderson provides an analysis of how nationalism and imagined borders are formed, this chapter addresses what happens when music is created outside of these boundaries. In his monograph describing hip hop diplomacy after 9/11, musicologist Mark Katz addresses issues associated with cross-cultural, transnational, and meaningful collaborations. Katz asserts that what brings musicians together is a sense of "solidarity" among participants to "discover shared challenges and pleasures" such as "making a career as an artist."[69] The overall positive message of the Spotify documentary presents a sense of global universalism—that is, the idea that all humans equally suffer or rejoice together—to the overall project; art, creativity, and productive collaboration can overcome all obstacles, such as the travel ban. After a discussion of the documentary and its participants, I later return to this idea and Spotify's role in implementing the ideology of global universalism within its corporate context.

Background: Spotify's Navigation of Trump's America

Seven days after he took the oath of office on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, Trump signed Executive Order 13769 titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," or more colloquially, the "travel ban" or "Muslim ban." The order immediately suspended the entry of foreign nationals from six countries deemed to be a "terroristic" threat for ninety days, a suspension of the Syrian refugee program for 120 days, and a suspension of all

[69] Mark Katz, *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 166.

refugee programs for an indefinite amount of time.[70] During the ban, the Trump administration intended to reform the entire immigration system by implementing more background checks using invasive computer database information and security application questions. As legal scholar Kaila Randolph states, the ban was a blatant act of direct institutionalized racism, or "a formal law that is restrictive based on race, color, nationality, ethnicity, or descent."[71] After the executive order was enacted, opposers took action to stop the restrictions. Images and videos of protests circulated in media and news cycles throughout the country as "airport attorneys" attempted to assist foreign nationals stuck in customs.[72] Legally, the first ban faced backlash from several district courts, resulting in subsequent months of courts and the Trump administration engaging in battle over the travel ban.

Trump's executive order was not the first law to control immigration into the United States, a country whose economy was once driven by the capturing and enslavement of West Africans. Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which limited Asian immigration to the U.S. west coast, multiple pieces of legislation controlled the ebb and flow of immigration into the United States throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century.[73] One exception was the Immigration Act of 1965, an act that lifted restrictions of all foreign nationals, leading to an influx of Arab immigrants entering the country. Along with other communities previously

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[70] Donald Trump, Executive Order, "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States," *Federal Register* 82, no. 20 (February 1, 2017): 8977; Shoba Sivaprasad Wadhia, *Banned: Immigration Enforcement in the Time of Trump* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 11.

[71] Kaila Randolph, "Executive Order 13769 and America's Longstanding Practice of Institutionalized Racial Discrimination Towards Refugees and Asylum Seekers," *Stetson Law Review* 47, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 33.

[72] Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael D. Shear, *Border Wars: Inside Trump's Assault on Immigration* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019): 13.

[73] Randolph, "Executive Order 13769 and America's Longstanding Practice of Institutionalized Racial Discrimination Towards Refugees and Asylum Seekers," 43.

thought of as "undesirable," Arab immigrants benefitted from the civil rights policy changes of the 1950s and 60s.[74] This tolerance changed on September 11, 2001 when members of the terrorist group al-Qaeda attacked the U.S., spurring an endless war in Afghanistan and invasion of Iraq in 2003. Since 2001, Arab citizens in the *mahjar* (diaspora) and the Arab world have been the subject of the West's increasing campaign to eliminate what they deemed to be Islamic extremist terrorism. Such foreign policy practices have taken a large toll on Arab musicians wishing to become internationally recognized. With the accessibility of streaming platforms such as Spotify, Arab musicians, however, have found an opportunity to have their voice heard.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, curated playlists have effectively taken over the streaming platform. All of the twenty-five most-followed playlists are curated rather than algorithmic.[75] Instead of relying on streaming numbers to designate which songs belong on a certain playlist, Spotify curators thus have to test the songs to see whether or not they might be received well. In other words, by the time a song appears on the platform's most followed playlist, *Today's Top Hits*, it has been "so relentlessly tested that it almost can't fail."[76] These tests correspond to the data from numbers of streams that playlist curators, producers, and executives receive in order to determine which market and who is listening to their music.[77] Consequently, these playlists feature the most popular genres and styles in the music market, which then causes a feedback

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[74] Anne K. Rasmussen, "The Music of Arab Americans Aesthetics and Performance in a New Land," in *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998), 139.

[75] Aguiar and Waldfogel, *Platforms, Promotion, and Product Discovery,* 6.

[76] Dhaenens and Burgess, "Press Play for Pride," 5.

[77] Gomez alluded to this data collecting in our discussions by stating, "Remember that they are a data company first—not a music company." Juan Gomez, personal interview, January 20, 2020.

loop of producing and reproducing the same style—as well as messages, whether they be political or benign—in their playlists.

During 2016 and 2017, Spotify began to curate playlists that provided social and political commentary in response to the Trump Administration's conservative policies. The first of these were the #PressPlayForPride playlists released in June 2016, which commemorated the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, and celebrated North American Pride month. Donning rainbows and showcasing playlists with uplifting songs, Spotify's image appeared in June 2016 to be supportive of LGBTQ+ members through these discretionary playlists. The positive songs reverberating from the playlist give the message of support and recognition for the community, and Spotify's message would hopefully be transmitted throughout Pride celebrations across America.

Riding on the success of Pride 2016, curators at Spotify decided to produce a playlist against the perceived threats of refugee programs based on ideas circulated by Trump as a part of his presidential campaign and later carried into office, and conservative Western agendas. The playlist *Standing with Refugees*, which has since been taken down, contained songs by popular refugee artists such as Freddie Mercury, Regina Spektor, and M.I.A. along with lesser known artists such as Somali-Canadian K'naan. Taking the same positive approach as the #PressPlayForPride, the playlist contained uplifting songs such as "We Are the Champions" by Queen and "Better" by Regina Spektor. While some reviewers of the playlist praised the Swedish company for helping refugee voices be heard, the playlist was largely criticized for being in poor taste.[78] If "Standing with Refugees" was truly positioned toward welcoming refugees and giving a voice to those who were oppressed by war, argued the critics, then the

[78] Melia Robinson, "Spotify's New Refugee-Themed Playlist is Being Criticized by Some People for Being in Bad Taste," *Business Insider*, January 30, 2017, https://www.businessinsider.com/spotify-the-refugee-playlist-2017-1.

playlist needed to provide a different tone than that of #PressPlayForPride—a playlist celebrating people's already-expressed freedom. *Standing with Refugees* led Spotify employee Spencer Hansen to curate a playlist and produce a documentary that had a political message of global universalism and acceptance, but they wanted songs with lyrics that were tasteful and as subversive to conservative policies as the playlists themselves.

The *I'm with the Banned* Playlist and Documentary Project

The *I'm with the Banned* project, headed by creative directors Daniel Kaufman and Spencer Hansen, aimed at championing Arab musicians affected by the travel ban. Backed by their largest investor, Sony BMG, as well as the non-profit organization I Stand With Immigrants, the project involved artists under contract with Sony to be paired with up-and-coming Arab artists from each of the six countries. Along with the playlist, Kaufman and Hansen insisted on a documentary highlighting the artists and their stories. Producers of the songs, The Stereotypes and Doc McKinney, worked closely with the artists and songwriters, Clarence Coffee Jr. and E. Kidd Bogart, to produce the six songs for the playlist. Of Sony's clients, hip hop artists such as BJ the Chicago Kid, Pusha T, K. Flay, and Desiigner agreed to the project, as well as alt-rock band X Ambassadors. Each U.S. artist was paired to an Arab artist whose style was similar to theirs, and they worked together to design a song. Although the documentary features the six original collaborative songs, the playlist also contains solo works by all of the musicians who participated in the project.

Because of the travel restrictions to the U.S., Spotify producers had to find a location to which both the Arab and U.S. musicians could travel. Situated on Lake Ontario, Toronto seemed to be an ideal place to collaborate because of Canada's more relaxed immigration policy. The

recording studio chosen, Cherry Beach Sound, had been a famous crossroads for many international collaborations, including Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars, as well as an important studio for famous Toronto-based pop musicians, such as Justin Bieber and Drake. This neutral space outside of the U.S. borders exists beyond the boundaries of each musicians' nation-states. Furthermore, the space of the studio is symbolic cypher, a common meeting-place where hip hop musicians meet and collaborate on musical works.[79] The documentary mainly focuses on the studio as a collaborative space created out of nothing, visually cast in the middle of a vast dark void (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Promotional shot of *I'm with the Banned* Documentary and Playlist.

[79] Katz, *Build*, 5.

Of the twelve musicians featured on the playlist, seven are hip hop artists, two associate themselves with alt-rock, two are Europop-inspired house DJs, and one is a jazz musician. The well-rounded, yet largely hip hop focused, playlist reflected the genres that were present on the *Global Top 50* at the time. When asked for the reasons for why certain musicians were selected for the playlist, a spokesperson for Spotify said, "We wanted to identify artists that had an appetite for Western audience growth, aimed to make music and tour in the U.S. in the future and had a unique story to tell."[80] In this quote, the spokesperson acknowledges the need for the marketability of these artists on the playlist. Choosing artists with compelling backgrounds as well as songs that could easily fit into the *Global Top 50* was the solution to ensuring the success of the playlist.

Born in Khartoum, Sudan, Sufyvn (Sufyan Ali) is a dentist-turned musician who incorporates Nubian/North Sudanese elements into his experimental music. A beatmaker and producer, he found stride in recording traditional Sudanese instruments to digitally sample and manipulate the sounds of acoustic music.[81] Upon being requested to participate in the playlist for Spotify, however, Sufyvn realized that his Sudanese passport would prove difficult to travel to Canada, and throughout the documentary, Sufyvn is trapped in a hotel in Cairo, Egypt, and attempting to produce his track with BJ the Chicago Kid. The arduous nature of the collaboration was made obvious as BJ the Chicago Kid continually tried to connect with the Sudanese musician. In one scene, BJ and Sufyvn are discussing the track over a skype call, but Sufyvn, distorted and pixelated on screen, can barely be understood. "This connection sucks so bad, man.

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[80] John Bonnazzo, "Spotify is Resisting Trump's Travel Ban by Empowering Muslim Artists," *The New York Observer*, July 6, 2017.

[81] "This Sudan-Based Beat Maker is Single-Handedly Inventing Nubian Electronic Music," *Vogue Magazine*, July 25, 2017, https://www.vogue.com/article/sufyvn-sudanese-beat-maker-producer.

It was chopping up really bad. The last thing I heard is reduce the reverb a little bit," BJ states, frustrated at the process of editing the track.[82] Background noise overwhelms the shot as if the producers are audibly showing the dissonance and distance of these two musicians collaborating nearly six thousand miles apart. By the end of the two-week collaboration, Sufyvn's visa was finally approved to travel to Toronto, and he finished the track at Cherry Beach Sound studio. At the end of the documentary, Sufyvn highlights the troubles of working remotely, stating, "There was definitely a common ground between us. Everything was trying to stop us from making music together, but we wouldn't let it stop us."[83]

"Thinkin' Bout You (Sleepless in Cairo)" demonstrates the frustration of long-distance collaboration faced by Sufyvn and BJ. When the track begins in the documentary, an unknown musician sits at the piano playing the chords, while Sufyvn sits at the other edge of the studio, in the dark, apparently listening to the combined diegetic/non-diegetic music. In the mix of the music, Sufyvn's Nubian drums take over the existing beat. A low pass filter unveils a buildup to the introduction of the song, revealing BJ singing alone in the studio, framed in the window of the studio door and surrounded by blackness. Sufyvn then appears in another shot, through the window on the other side of the studio, surrounded by the same blackness (See Figure 2.2).

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[82] Spotify, "I'm with the Banned: Sufyvn feat. BJ the Chicago Kid," YouTube Video, 4:28, July 25, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHLAmWHR_z4.

[83] Spotify, "I'm with the Banned: Sufyvn feat. BJ the Chicago Kid."

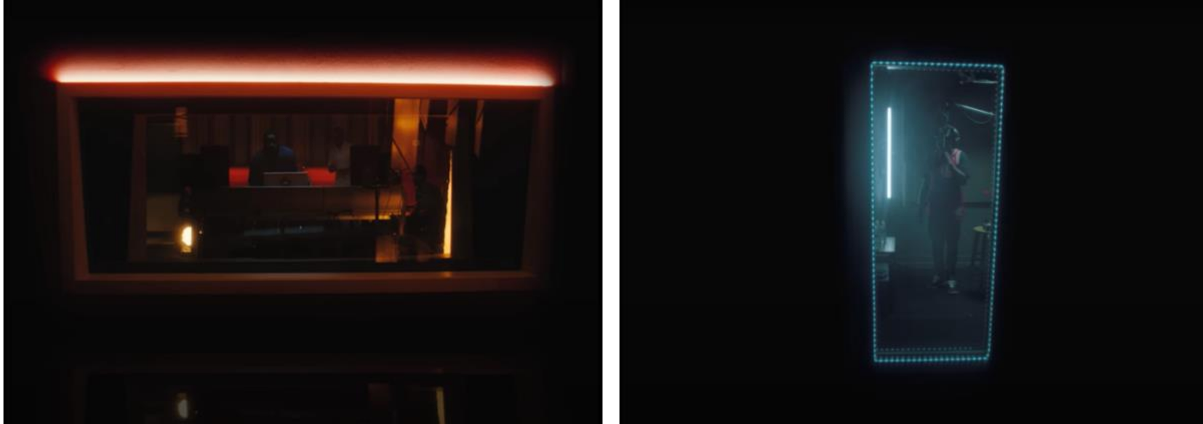

Figure 2.2. Back-to-Back shots of Sufyvn in the studio and BJ the Chicago Kid on the other side of the glass, each surrounded by the "void."

The visual effect of both BJ and Sufyvn separated by darkness is again a testament to the pair's remote collaboration. Furthermore, the song's lyrics highlight Sufyvn in Cairo, stuck between living his dream as a musician and his Sudanese background. The song's lyrics tell the story of a narrator wishing to be with their lover yet cannot get back to them ("Feels like they're holding me as a prisoner/Only thing in my head, baby, is us laying together/Laying right here in my bed"). Although the unrequited love theme persists through the song, another interpretation, alluding to the U.S. immigration process, exists. BJ sings the melody over Sufyvn's Nubian-inspired beats, voicing the frustration of the Sudanese producer's inability to cross the border of America—or, in the case of producing the song, Canada. It is unclear who the original songwriter is, and therefore how much of an influence Spotify's hired songwriters had on the lyrics, but Spotify's overall message against restrictive immigration policy persists.

Similar to Sufyvn and BJ the Chicago Kid's style of music in their track on the playlist, Moh Flow and Pusha T's primary source of inspiration for "Options" was 1990s R&B. Despite his family's largely nomadic childhood due to war, Moh Flow, a Syrian-born hip hop artist

currently living in Dubai, claims his music and Syrian heritage were the two main constants in his life. "[My brother and I] were born in Syria and we feel deeply Syrian. We may have Syrian passports, but we live the same dreams just like any other artist that lives anywhere," Moh Flow says in a voice over of his opening shot of the documentary, also citing his biggest influences as 2Pac and The Outlawz's 1999 album *Still I Rise*.[84] Before recording for the *I'm with the Banned* playlist, Moh Flow had been experiencing a successful career throughout the Arab and Western World. His 2016 music video "2 Free," for example, features the artist driving around downtown Los Angeles in a classic red Ford Mustang. Moh Flow's Western influence would prove to mesh well with Pusha T's driving, forceful lyrics.

In the documentary, as Pusha T enters the studio, he turns his back to the camera and shows off the message on his jacket, "Human made." In an edit to the film, a red box traces the word "Human," pointing to the overall message of the documentary, highlighting the universal humanity of these immigrant musicians (See Figure 2.3). After a brief conversation where both Pusha T and Moh Flow laud 1990s R&B, the two record their respective lyrical tracks in "Options." Before the documentary shows the process of the two artists laying down their tracks, a brief soundbite of Pusha T appears over a video of a tape cassette playing (an allusion to the 90s influence), where the rapper describes music as an "ultimate connector of people and it knows no boundaries."[85] Again Pusha T's comments point to Spotify's position that music, in its "universalism," can open borders and provide a safe space for all musicians to gather and create.

[84] Spotify, "I'm with the Banned: Moh Flow feat. Pusha T," YouTube Video, 3:20, July 6, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhm5ZLiqXTA.

[85] Spotify, "I'm with the Banned: Moh Flow feat. Pusha T."

Figure 2.3. An outlined "Human" on the back of Pusha T's jacket.

Despite this "universal" message that both Moh Flow and Pusha T speak in the documentary, however, the style of their song, "Options," is influenced by U.S. popular music. The lyrics, primarily sung by Moh Flow with one verse by Pusha T, references typical themes of 90s and contemporary hip hop culture. Moh Flow's lyrics revolve around a one-night stand with one girl among his many "options" for partners, while Pusha T brags about his material wealth and briefly references contemporary trap with ad libs, such as off-beat, hi-hat rolls and 808-bass. Its lack of political message leads the listener to question the artists' motifs about the overall playlist's message of standing with musicians in banned countries.

If "Options" is apolitical, Somali hip hop group Waayaha Cusub compensates for it in their activism. The members of Waayaha Cusub founded the group when they were teenagers in Kenya because of their displacement from endless war in the region. At the end of the Somali War in 1991, the government, controlled by extremist group Al-Shabaab, has ruled the country. Because of Waayaha Cusub's blatant disregard for this extremism in the messages of their songs, the Somali government pinned the hip hop group as spies, took members of the hip hop group hostage, and shot one of the members—as told by Mohamud, one of the lead members of the group, in the documentary. Since their banishment from the country, the group spent time in refugee camps before being granted asylum in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Waayaha Cusub, meaning "New Era," has travelled around Africa and the Western world discouraging acts of extremism to children in schools, and prior to the travel ban, the group has worked with children in the Somali community of Minneapolis.[86] Headed by Mohamud's wife, Falis Abdi Mohamud, the group performs songs on subjects that include AIDS, circumcision, women's rights, and love. Holding on to their religion of Islam, the group believes that the positive power of hip hop can uplift listeners from the dangers of extremism. Mohamud speaks of his religion and the power of music in the documentary stating, "I want to believe that all humans [can be as] one. So that is, that's the way God created human beings."[87] Mohamud's sentiment of tying Islam to humanism and hip hop is reminiscent of Katz's observation about Muslin hip hop artists:

> Whether artists see hip hop and Islam as intertwined or parallel, they find ways to maintain their identities both as artists and as Muslims. This balancing act, which often demands deep self-reflection and difficult compromise, reveals these artists as complicated, thoughtful, passionate, and often conflicted people, and

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[86] Jenna Ross, "Somali Hip-Hop Group Brings Anti-Terrorism Message to Minneapolis, St. Cloud," *Star Tribune*, October 21, 2016, https://www.startribune.com/somali-hip-hop-group-brings-anti-extremist-message-to-minneapolis-st-cloud/397512101/.

[87] Spotify, "I'm with the Banned: Waayaha Cusub feat. Desiigner," YouTube Video, 4:57, July 6, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euZ7EHB9jKE.

> demonstrates just how contingent—on culture, history, geography, and personal and family values—the relationship between hip hop and Islam really is.[88]

Katz's statement on bridging hip hop musicians' styles to their identity relates to the way in which the members of Waayaha Cusub approach their message with similar intentions of connecting who they are to their religion.

Although the group consists of six members, only three appear in the documentary to record with Desiigner. When the hip hop artist greets the group, he comments on their chemistry by exclaiming, "It just feels like a family." According to his attitude in the documentary, Desiigner enjoys the group's proposed song "Durbaan Ka li Tuma" ("Give me a shout"), although stating that it "needs a little gangster added to it."[89] As a result of their collaboration, the song retains much of the original style of Waayaha Cusub, with the exception of a verse rapped by Desiigner. Spoken entirely in Somali, the group's lyrics surround the love between the two main vocalists—Mohamud and Falis—and their struggle to stay together while on the run from the Somali regime. In her verses, Falis sings about healing and inspiring ("Medicine is for you/Come with me/I care about you"), fulfilling a motherly and female role in the narrative.[90] Mohamud's verse revolves around his banishment from Somalia, almost referring to an unrequited love with his homeland ("Docna was arrested/We left the country/don't resist/no rest in Mogadishu"). Desiigner's verse, occurring between the two messages of the lovers, is almost like an intrusion on their intimacy, as the English lyrics and "gangster" themes—as the artist describes—seem to be off-putting from the rest of the song. Yet despite this dissonance,

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[88] Katz, *Build*, 155.

[89] Spotify, "I'm with the Banned: Waayaha Cusub feat. Desiigner," YouTube Video, 4:57, July 6, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euZ7EHB9jKE.

[90] A note about translation: Because the lyrics are originally in Somali, I had a difficult time translating to English. I consulted a couple of translations (two pages on *Genius* lyrics), and both had conflicting messages.

Desiigner provides the one and only blunt message against the U.S. government: "Askin' for a replay, cause the funky sound/I'm tryna break the country, y'all, cause my country's wild." In this instance, the two artists come together to criticize the acts of their respective governments.

Perhaps what is most obvious in Waayaha Cusub's political message in the documentary is how the group foregrounds their female lead singer as a strong and talented woman, rather than as the submissive wife Western audiences might expect. Concerned about representation of the women musicians of the documentary, producers ran the risk of committing an existing trope in Western media—presenting Arab women as "imperiled" and needing to be saved from the seemingly oppressive regime of Islam. Historian Evelyn Alsultany describes this phenomenon in her monograph *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11* by arguing that U.S. and other Western news media use "politics of pity" to persuade audiences to feel sorry for oppressed women and justify acts of war on Muslim countries to save them.[91] In the case of Falis, the lead singer of Waayaha Cusub, however, Spotify characterizes her as a strong woman who has risen above her situation as a refugee. Her husband extols her as the most talented woman in hip hop, and one scene shows Desiigner gazing upon Falis while she sings, awed by her voice and talent. Yet not all of the women Spotify portrays in the documentary could be perceived as strong. Contrasted to a picture of Falis standing headstrong is Methal, a Yemeni singer-songwriter whose insecurity appears through her shy stance (See Figure 2.4).

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[91] Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 87.

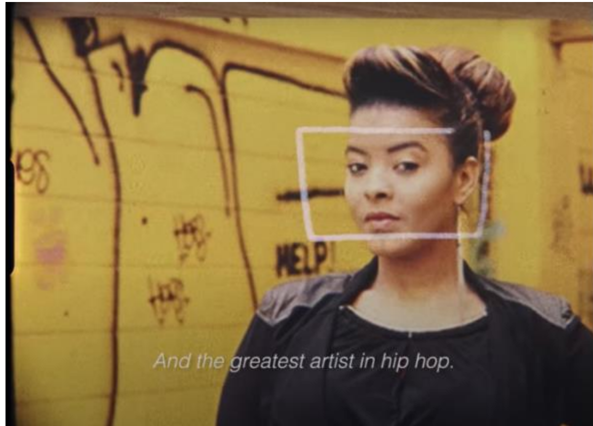

Figure 2.4. In the first picture, Falis (lead vocalist of Waayaha Cusub) stands proudly, while in the second picture, Methal stands with her head hanging, arms crossed.

Although her body language suggests that she is unconfident, Methal's has traced her career by bravely standing up against the Yemeni government. During the Arab Spring of 2011, Methal began to perform in public using musical instruments she illegally bought in the mail. In an interview, Methal spoke of her obstacles as a woman singer-songwriter that she faced "external and internal pressures to quit."[92] She explains further in the documentary, "I used to get people telling me, 'Go to hell,' 'If you don't quit bad things will happen.' One said that he wants to burn me in gas." As Methal recalls these memories, she winces on screen.[93] After receiving such threats, Methal left Yemen on a refugee boat to Djibouti, and then travelled to Istanbul, Turkey.[94] In the documentary, Methal recalls feeling free by finally realizing how beautiful the stars are while on the deck of the refugee boat. As she is describing this story in the documentary, the black void where Methal is framed around suddenly becomes full of stars,

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[92] Najat Mohd, "Methal is Breaking Barriers for Middle Eastern Female Musicians," *Women's Media Center*, August 13, 2018, https://www.womensmediacenter.com/fbomb/methal-is-breaking-barriers-for-middle-eastern-female-musicians.

[93] Spotify, "I'm with the Banned: Methal feat. X Ambassadors," YouTube Video, 4:15, July 6, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZT6KgOtvTw&t=195s.

[94] Spotify, "I'm with the Banned: Methal feat. X Ambassadors."

symbolizing hope for the young artist. Through the Canadian refugee program, the singer-songwriter now lives in Montreal, Canada, where she hopes to raise enough funds to eventually attend a North American university.[95] Despite her portrayal in the documentary as someone who is shy and unconfident, Methal's bravery shines as a refugee fleeing death threats from her country.

Methal's pairing with Sam Harris, leader of the alt-rock band X Ambassadors, in the song "Cycles" seems like a perfect collaboration. Upon meeting the band, Methal tells the members how she and her friends would gather in her hometown kitchen to listen to X Ambassadors to drown out the noise of bombing. After explaining this, the camera cuts to Methal singing the melody of "Cycles" quietly and helplessly to herself in the black void. The shot of Methal and Harris sitting in the studio appears again, where lead singer Sam Harris offers his condolences and sympathy for her. The "void" shot then appears with Harris singing the same song unaccompanied, as if showing his support. Although Harris cannot directly relate to Methal's refugee situation, he offers his empathy toward desperately wanting to leave his hometown in pursuit of his music career. Methal's standing up to her government and travelling across the world seems to be overshadowed by the portrayal of Harris, a white cis-male attempting to rescue her and reducing her troubles by comparing those to his ambition of becoming a rock star. Nevertheless, Harris shows a significant amount of respect toward the young artist and is more complimentary of her work than any other U.S. musician in the documentary.

In Methal's song "Cycles," the two artists sing a duet in a similar style to X Ambassadors. The lyrics, she explains in the documentary, are about a toxic relationship between two people who cannot seem to break a cycle of breaking up and getting back together, or, as she

[95] Mohd, "Methal is Breaking Barriers for Middle Easter Female Musicians."

compares, “basically my relationship with my country.”[96] Indeed, the cyclical form and lyrics of the chorus musically allude to the text (“Oh, I’m runnin’, runnin’, runnin’/Oh, I’m runnin’, runnin’, runnin’,/In cycles, in cycles, in cycles”). Moreover, at the end of the chorus, the melody ends on the fifth scale degree, E, over the dominant of the key of A minor. As the last note of the chorus, and of the song itself, the E withholds any sort of conclusion to the possibility of ending the cycle of toxicity. Perhaps Methal is commenting on the endless civil war in Yemen and the lack of any belief of how and when the conflict will end. Along with this commentary, the song itself resembles the style of an X Ambassador song. Like their hit “Renegades” (2015), “Cycles” contains a heavy backbeat with piped-in clapping. A group of people sing the chorus in unison, again alluding to the alt-indie style of the 2010s, performed by bands such as The Lumineers or Mumford & Sons. Although the Yemeni’s message in her lyrics suggests the authenticity of her songwriter-style, the influence of X Ambassador’s alt-rock style seems to overwhelm the entirety of the song. The documentary’s representation of Methal’s work with X Ambassadors, much like the other collaborations, seems to work in perfect harmony.

Although the documentary shows four of the six musicians featured on the playlist, Iranian producer and DJ Kasra V and Libyan pop musician Ahmed Fakroun also collaborated with U.S. musicians and contributed to the Spotify playlist. No justification has been said as to why these musicians were left out of the documentary, and the reasons could be anything from neglecting the artists to the groups simply not wanting to be filmed. A possible explanation however, for leaving Kasra V and Fakroun out of the documentary might lie in how and why the playlists were curated. As demonstrated in the previous section, the artists who were featured in the documentary performed their songs in English and/or followed in step with popular U.S.

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[96] Spotify, “I’m with the Banned: Methal feat. X Ambassadors.”

styles. Although the two musicians left out of the documentary also incorporate aspects of Western styles of music, an exploration of their collaborations still provide fodder for the company's overall theme of uplifting Arab musicians oppressed by the travel ban.

Although Kasra V does not appear in the documentary, he and his collaborative partner, K. Flay, star in the trailer.[97] As advertised on YouTube, the trailer features previews of the documentary while Kasra V and K. Flay's "Justify You" plays. One shot of Kasra V shows him spinning as a DJ in a London nightclub while another shot shows K. Flay singing her track at Cherry Beach Sound studio. At the time of the documentary, Kasra V was the producer and radio DJ currently resides in London, where he performed music reminiscent of Iran's illegal rave scene.[98] K. Flay, on the other hand, is an up-and-coming hip hop artist from Illinois whose music often takes on a political tone. When asked to perform in a collaboration with Kasra V to protest the travel ban, K. Flay thought it was an opportunity to portray her political beliefs. In an interview with *The Drum*, she expressed, "It's important for me to stand up as an American and say, 'I don't believe in this.' Being a part of this project not only gave me the opportunity to show support for those who has been banned, but to make music in a wild and beautiful collaborative environment."[99] The only U.S. woman featured on the playlist, her lyrics and vocality in "Justify You" stand out among the tracks.

Similar to "Cycles," Kasra V and K. Flay's track is about being in an unhealthy relationship. The frequent shifts between half tempo and a double-time shuffle house beat

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[97] Due to the removal of the documentary on Spotify, this error could exist because when the company switched the documentary to a YouTube series, producers might have erased Kasra V's involvement in the program.

[98] April Claire Welsh, "Kasra V's Dreamy Techno is a Salute to Iran's Illegal Rave Scene," *FACT Magazine*, October 19, 2016, https://www.factmag.com/2016/10/19/kasra-v-iran-rave-the-window-ep/.

[99] Lisa Lacy, "Spotify's 'I'm with the Banned' Unites Artists in Solidarity Against Trump's Travel Ban," *The Drum,* July 7, 2017, https://www.thedrum.com/news/2017/07/07/spotify-s-i-m-with-the-banned-unites-artists-solidarity-against-the-travel-ban.

illustrate how the singer is losing her mind to justify being with her romantic partner. The lyrics clearly demonstrate the singer's distraught emotions of confusion ("I thought that love was supposed to lift me up/But lately I'm a mess") and anger ("I wanna learn to end the cycle/Wanna cut through all the chains/I wanna burn down every title/Wish you never knew my name, yeah"). Although neither artist has directly spoken on any hidden message in the song—nor is it clear that either artist actually wrote the song—applying the same interpretation as Methal's "Cycles" leads to a similar conclusion. Literally wanting to end a "cycle," Kasra V and K. Flay comment on the political regime changes between Iran and the US as well as the countries' everchanging foreign policy between each other. In this collaboration, the two artists join together to relay a message to their respective governments, urging them that their cycles of hot and cold diplomacy have taken a toll on their citizens.

The eldest of the Arab musicians on the playlist, Fakroun was born in 1953 in Benghazi, Libya, and attended school in England. After graduation in the 1970s, his band recorded hit singles such as "Awedney (Promise me)" and "Nojourn Layl (Night Stars)" and also toured around the United Kingdom and Europe. In the band, Fakroun's talent extended beyond being lead vocalist, also playing the saz, mandol, darbouka, guitar, bass guitar, and keyboards. His Europop and French art rock style of music have captivated audiences in the Middle East and Arab diaspora—as demonstrated with his five albums and his 41,000 monthly Spotify listeners.[100] Fakroun currently resides in Paris, where he records in his home studio. Dr. Lonnie Smith, Fakroun's collaborator for the playlist, is a prolific jazz musician from New York who has performed alongside George Benson and Lou Donaldson as well as recorded seventeen solo

[100] Rob Garratt, "Mixtape Revivalism: Classic Middle Eastern Music Finds a New Audience Online," *The National*, February 8, 2017.

albums with Blue Note records. In their partnership for their song, Fakroun and Dr. Lonnie Smith each convey a message of hope, instead of anger.

Fakroun and Dr. Lonnie Smith's collaborative song "Salam" contains lyrics that certainly fit the criteria for being subversive toward the travel ban. Under the message of peace in the lyrics, Dr. Lonnie Smith includes a recurring backtrack reminiscent of 1980s Europop—a tribute to Fakroun's prime with his band. Sung entirely in Arabic, the song's chorus surrounds the theme of "salaam," or peace, in its imagery: "Rich for love and peace/And wipe the tears of my eyes/The olive branch returns."[101] Contrary to other artists' messages of rage or confusion toward the travel ban policies, Fakroun instead turns to a more positive tone, as if attempting to show Arabs are truly peaceful and not the "terrorist" image as the West portrays. By 2017, Fakroun's hometown of Benghazi had been the center of controversy in U.S. politics, due to the attack on the U.S. consulate by the Islamic militant group Ansar al-Sharia in 2012. Since then, Trump and conservative media outlets have described Benghazi as a center of Muslim terrorism in the Middle East. By emphasizing peace in the lyrics of his song, Fakroun urges listeners to the playlist to reconsider preconceived notions of Arabs and Libyans.

Conclusion

The *I'm With The Banned* documentary and playlist reveal how extremism in the Arab world and restrictive immigration policies in the West have affected Arab musicians' fights for their successful music careers. Overall, the documentary seeks to emphasize these differences through their representations of the musicians. Although the six songs are stylistically distinct, they mostly resemble Western genres such as hip hop, R&B, and rock. The songs' lyrical themes

[101] "Ghenni lel'houb wi'salam/Wa mseh damaat lâyoun/… Yerjaâ fermil zeytoun."

of toxic relationships, unrequited love, and peace are wide-ranging, but the artists came together to protest the U.S. government's restrictive travel ban. These subversive messages against extremist governments, terrorism, and institutional racism permeate throughout the documentary and playlist.

Delivered by the artists themselves, the overall positive message in the documentary and playlist is that music appears to be a universal connection between cultures beyond the imagined borders of nation-states. Yet by analyzing Spotify's role as the unifier of cultures, I argue that the playlist is a product of cultural imperialism. Moreover, the role that other companies had in the project reveals self-serving corporate motivations rather than altruism. A link at the end of the playlist leads listeners to a page on iamanimmigrant.com, home of the nonprofit initiative *I Stand With Immigrants*. The organization is funded through the group FWD.us, a lobbyist group founded by tech giants such as Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, YouTube Co-founder Steve Chen, and Bill Gates.[102] Both *I Stand With Immigrants* and FWD.us primarily focus on changing the existing immigration policy enacted by Trump's travel ban and Southern border wall. Spotify's production of the playlist, fueled by the record companies' influence and the money of FWD.us, clouds the idea that these twelve musicians had freedom with their collaborations.

At the top of the *I'm with the Banned* playlist on the Spotify app, the words "We stand with artists from the nations of the travel ban." While this sentence appears to be a statement of solidarity, the "we" subject implies a difference, or otherness, separate from the artists. The issue at hand is that the artists involved in the project were not equals; the U.S. artists, contracted

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[102] "Moving America Forward," FWD.us, https://www.fwd.us/; "When People Can't Travel, Music Will," *I Am an Immigrant,* Iamanimmigrant.com/Spotify. Both programs champion immigrants and work toward more peaceful immigration reform through fundraising campaigns and lobbying with key politicians in Washington, DC.

through Sony, had more cultural and monetary capital than the Arab musicians. Although the playlist was formed outside of the restrictive travel ban, the musicians' agency was still constrained—in one way or another—by the streaming service. This agency carries into the curation of the playlist as well. Producers, curators, and directors of the playlist have an obligation to convey Spotify's agenda while also conveying the humanity of this grassroots movement. The goal of *I'm with the Banned* playlist prompts listeners to focus on the Arab musicians highlighted in the documentary and playlist, to reflect on Western perspectives of the Arab world, and to explore avenues of transnational, musical collaboration outside of both the borders of the nation-state and the free market system. At the same time, the playlist, like *Black Lives Matter*, is also directing consumers' focus away from the Spotify's inequitable compensation of artists and its problematic corporate alliances. Both playlists introduce listeners to new, underappreciated artists, but in inviting customers to admire the good work that activist music can do in the world, Spotify is asking them to accept or look away from their less admirable practices that perpetuate a long history of corporate exploitation of artists of color.

CONCLUSION

Although the *Black Lives Matter* and *I'm with the Banned* playlists remain on Spotify's platform as pf this writing (April 2021), the politics surrounding their respective social movements have shifted. On the first day of his presidency in 2021, Joe Biden rescinded the policy known as the "Muslim ban." By that time, the *Washington Post* had reported that the policy was widely unpopular after United States residents saw protesters, media outlets, and politicians declaring it "un-American."[103] Although the "Muslim ban" is no longer in effect, Islamophobia endures in the United States. *I'm with the Banned* maintains about 22,000 followers, and its visibility on the platform continues to raise awareness of xenophobic immigration policies.

The Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) artists from the *I'm with the Banned* project have also seen an increase in followers, but only to a certain extent. As of this writing (April 2021), their monthly listeners are low compared to their U.S. collaborators.[104] Although monthly listenership on Spotify is an indicator of one artist's popularity compared to the other, I argue

[103] Nazita Lajevardi, Kassra AR Oskooii, and Loren Collingwood. "Biden Reverses Trump 'Muslim Ban.' Americans Support the Decision." *Washington Post*, January 27, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/27/biden-reversed-trumps-muslim-ban-americans-support-that-decision/.

[104] As of April 2021, the follower are numbers of monthly listeners of each MENA artist and their respective collaborators: Sufyvn (5,775) vs. BJ The Chicago Kid (1,679,674); Moh Flow (37,713) vs. Pusha T (3,552,631); Kasra V (1,530) vs. K Flay (3,445,435); Methal (15,687) vs. X Ambassadors (11,339,922); Waayaha Cusub (1,238) vs. Desiigner (5,898,946); Ahmed Fakroun (56,129) vs. Dr. Lonnie Smith (397,759). This information can be accessed through Spotify's platform on individual artists' pages.

that this difference in follower count led Spotify to represent the MENA artists in a stereotypical way or to assimilate their musical styles into sonically Western songs. Spotify's capitalist motivations might have prioritized the sounds of the U.S. musicians, rather than a more collaborative sound. These representations manifested in how women, such as Methal, were portrayed in the documentary and also how the contributions of musicians, such as Sufyvn's drumming in "Thinkin' Bout You" were hidden in the final mix of the song. While Spotify utilized the project to attempt to make a statement against racist immigration policies such as the "Muslim ban," the platform's goal of gaining capital from its mostly Western audience affected the ways in which the collaborators were portrayed. Although the MENA artists have not spoken against Spotify since the release of the documentary and playlist, some have vocalized their discontent with their fight against biases on social media. Moh Flow's newest single, *F the Algorithm* (2021), for example, alludes to how racist algorithms have affected how his music is distributed.[105] Despite their efforts to join with Spotify's project of *I'm with the Banned*, these six Arab artists continue to struggle in their fight against systemic racism on social media.

Since June 2, 2020, the *Black Lives Matter* playlist has continued to have a strong following, and it maintains the themes of the original playlist. At the beginning of 2021, the playlist had over 700,000 followers.[106] At the top of the page on the platform, the playlist states that it continues to support and celebrate "songs of empowerment and pride." The new playlist curator, Keyon Harrold Sr., has replaced many of the original songs with more up-to-date

[105] Moh Flow (@mohflowmusic), "Yesterday we broke the marginalization my IG has been going thru. Moral of the story is, social is the only way anybody is getting thru the clutter. If an artist can't convert a like, to a comment, to a save, to a share, to a stream, to a song purchase, to a live show ticket purchase, to a merch purchase we might as well quit. I urge you to do what you can for anybody you know around you that's investing in something, whatever it may be. We as Arabs ESPECIALLY live a life of uncertainty, we need that one thing to have for sure. That's us supporting us. Thanks for coming to my TED talk. I'm molham and I love y'all," Instagram photo, February 2, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CKqoNGgDzvf/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

[106] On March 18, Spotify listed the follow count as 737,128.

anthems such as Tobe Nwigwe's "I Need You To (Breonna Taylor)" (2020)—a song that urges law enforcement in Kentucky to arrest the police officers who shot Breonna Taylor in March 2020. These songs advocate for justice for the victims of police violence and other hate crimes since George Floyd's death in May 2020. Furthermore, Harrold has maintained the tradition of featuring songs from the Civil Rights Movement, including Stevie Wonder's "Love's in Need of Love Today" (1976) and Bob Marley & The Wailers' "Get Up, Stand Up" (1973). The eclectic curation of songs from multiple decades and genres demonstrates how the playlist's themes of social justice and antiracism are not a new phenomenon that arose from the beginning of the BLM movement in 2013.

Although *Black Lives Matter* is a popular playlist on the platform, many users and celebrities have criticized Spotify's advocacy for the playlist without contributing real change to help BLM. Artists such as Kehlani, Lil Nas X, Tegan and Sara, Jack Antonoff, and Will Wiesenfeld openly criticized the platform for its "empty" performativity and called for Spotify to "open their purses" to contribute money to organizations (See Figure 3.1). In response, on June 17, 2020—fifteen days after the rerelease of the playlist—Spotify announced:

> Spotify will contribute up to $10 million to organizations that are focused on the fight against racism, injustice, and inequity around the world as part of the aforementioned employee match. If we do not disperse the full $10M over the next year via an employee match, we will donate the remainder of the funds to organizations focused on the fight, including those supported by employees through this effort. Spotify employees can choose to support 501(c)(3) organizations in the U.S. or local equivalent organizations in other markets around the world."[107]

According to a memo from CEO Daniel Ek, $10 million of the donation went to social justice organizations, while the remaining $1 million was donated to advertising agencies to help raise

[107] "Spotify Stands with the Black Community in the Fight Against Racism and Injustice."

awareness of antiracist issues.[108] Spotify's donation did not eliminate all of the concerns with the company's practices of compensating musicians for streams, but it was a way to begin financially support the movements.

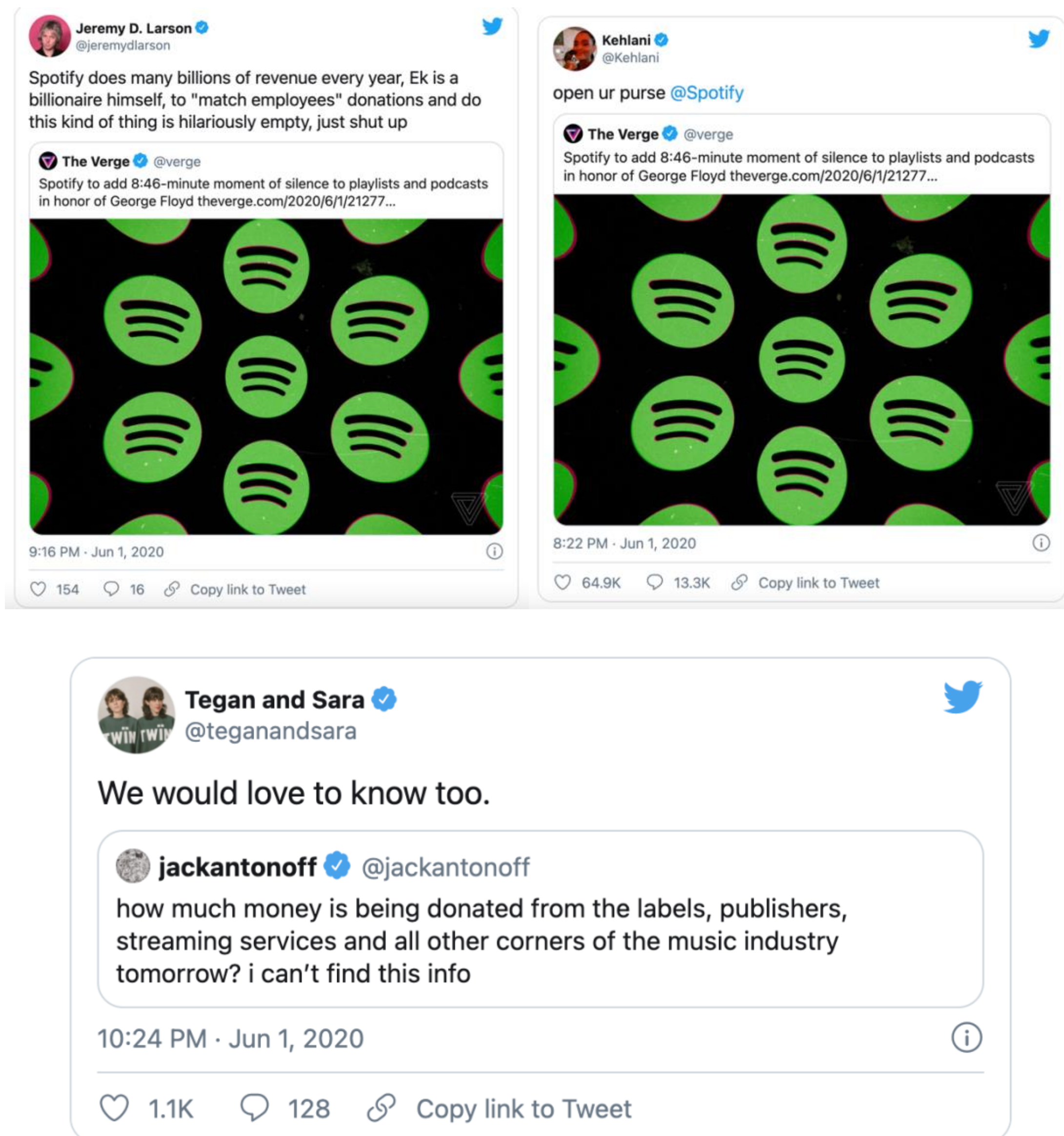

Figure 3.1. Tweets by musicians criticizing Spotify.[109]

[108] Espeso, "Spotify Pledges $11M to Tackle Racism," *Bloomberg*, June 3, 2020, https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/spotify-pledges-11m-to-tackle-racism-8211-bloomberg-58917234.

[109] Jared Richards, "'Hilariously Empty': Spotify Criticized for Honouring George Floyd with 8.46 Moment of Silence," *Junkee Music*, June 2, 2020, https://junkee.com/spotify-black-lives-matter-silence/256088.

Through an exploration of the playlists *I'm with the Banned* and *Black Lives Matter*, this thesis has shown how Spotify's curators and artists have used their agency, labor, and voices to advocate for social justice movements. In order to expand their audiences, they engage in a form of subversive complicity that leads them, as Mark Katz states, not only to "fight the power" but also to "collaborate with it" to get their messages across to the listening public.[110] The curators and artists benefit from the relationship, yet they are bound by the power and pull of the overriding capitalist system in which Spotify operates. This cloud of influence and capital reveals the reality that contemporary grassroots social movements face as they collaborate with corporations, governments, and NGOs. In working with and within Spotify, the curators and artists behind the playlists and documentary humanize this massive, multinational company and promote its bottom line of monetary gain. In return, they get access to Spotify's platform, allowing them to draw attention to the people and causes they most care about, using music to amplify their messages.

[110] Mark Katz, *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 130.

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