

South Dakota State University

Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange

Schultz-Werth Award Papers

Van D. and Barbara B. Fishback Honors College

4-2020

Protest Music and Public Discourse: How P!NK Uses “Dear Mr. President” to Create Conversation

Olivia R. Knippling
South Dakota State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/schultz-werth>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#), and the [Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Knippling, Olivia R., "Protest Music and Public Discourse: How P!NK Uses “Dear Mr. President” to Create Conversation" (2020). *Schultz-Werth Award Papers*. 4.
<https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/schultz-werth/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Van D. and Barbara B. Fishback Honors College at Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Schultz-Werth Award Papers by an authorized administrator of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact michael.biondo@sdstate.edu.

Protest music and public discourse:

How P!NK uses “Dear Mr. President” to create conversation

Olivia R. Knippling

South Dakota State University

Abstract

In this paper, I explore the rhetorical devices of the popular artist P!NK during a live performance of her song “Dear Mr. President,” from 2007. Using the method of rhetorical descriptive analysis I answer the research question: How does P!NK combine rhetorical and musical strategies in “Dear Mr. President” to encourage public discourse? The findings indicate that P!NK crafted a unique protest song which effectively uses both rhetorical and musical devices to appeal to her audiences’ emotions and encourages participation in public discourse. The research has applied implications in the present-day intersection of pop culture and politics, as well as theoretical implications for music as communication, public discourse, and for protest music as a genre.

Keywords: Protest music, political music, public discourse, communication, pop culture

Alecia Moore, or as she's better known by her stage name P!NK, has been identified as a boundary pusher from the first days of her musical career. Her song "Dear Mr. President" released in 2006 on the album "I'm Not Dead" took pushing boundaries to a new level, even for her. The song is specific and withholds nothing in her criticism of then-president George W. Bush. "Dear Mr. President" has had a resurgence of popularity since the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, with fans even asking the artist if she planned to rewrite a version for the new president in 2017 (Crowley, 2017). The fact that the song and the artist still have relevance nearly fourteen years after its release make it worthy of rhetorical study. For my research, I analyze a live performance of the song at Wembley Arena in London from 2007. In this paper, I use contextual analysis to identify challenges related to the audience, rhetor, and purpose of the rhetorical act. I then perform a descriptive analysis of P!NK's performance of the song at Wembley Arena in 2007. And finally, I conclude by offering my evaluation of "Dear Mr. President" as well as offering implications and alternatives for the rhetorical act, and ultimately answering my research question: How does P!NK combine rhetorical and musical strategies in "Dear Mr. President" to encourage public discourse?

Historical Context

P!NK's release of her album "I'm Not Dead" in 2006, featuring "Dear Mr. President," was timely. Bush's approval ratings had been steadily declining for several years as the conflict in Iraq was not resolved and American deaths continued. Bush's administration failed to respond effectively to Hurricane Katrina and people were growing frustrated with his foreign policy and "War on Terror" (PEW Research Center, 2008). When "Dear Mr. President" was released, Bush's ratings were in the 35-40% range, and they continued to drop after, reaching an all-time low of 24% in December of 2008. Public support for Bush was already plummeting, and P!NK

was using her platform as a popular artist to chime in on a global dislike for the president and his policies.

Audience

P!NK, like every rhetor, faces the challenge of trying to appeal to a diverse audience with unique experiences, challenges, lifestyles, etc. One critic noted that her audience consisted mainly of teen girls and their chaperones with gay couples and assorted hipsters being mixed into the group, but she also noted the importance of the diversity with her on stage, saying that her band and supporting singers are a “racially and gender-mixed quintet” (Nichols, 2002). This highlights that P!NK appealed to a diverse audience, and especially marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ community, women, and racial minorities. By including diversity on stage with her, P!NK seemed to appeal both intentionally and unintentionally to a wide group of people.

P!NK’s personal background also includes factors that her audience could relate to, and she allows people into her life through the personal and complicated subjects she sings about. One example is appealing to people with separated parents and difficult home lives when she sings about such “her own messed up family” (Anderman, 2006). She also draws in military families on the same album as “Dear Mr. President,” when she records a song called “I Have Seen the Rain” with her Veteran father about his experience in the Vietnam War. This helped her relate with many in her audience who had veteran family members or even family currently serving in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, which Bush initiated after 9/11. Coming from a blue-collar family and being a rebel child who had many run ins with authority was also a relatable aspect of P!NK’s person (Udovitch, 2002). She was seen as a “scrappy underdog who’s going to follow her heart, and a troubled kid determined not to be a victim anymore” which

many of her fans resonated with (Cromelin, 2006). Overall, P!NK's personal background and her willingness to include it in her music helped a diverse audience relate to her.

P!NK was known for incorporating a wide variety of genres, and therefore inviting a broader and more diverse audience, into her music. She has been compared to Joan Jett (Pareles, 2006), Beyoncé (Kot, 2006), and Madonna (Nichols, 2002) among others. Nichols, like many other music critics, acknowledged that P!NK “nimblely slipped from crunchy rock to swinging soul-pop” and that she even performs classics from famous artists well (2002). While P!NK did an excellent job of being welcoming and uniting a diverse audience, she would have been constrained by the concept of inertia, or motivating her audience to act beyond just listening to her music or attending her concerts. For some, this may have been especially true given the political nature of “Dear Mr. President,” because some people couldn't see past her role as a musician. The idea that artists like P!NK should “shut up and sing” and stick to a role as entertainers was prevalent for some (Anderson, 2005, 306; Pareles, 2006). Some of P!NK's audience might have been upset at her for taking on a political anthem, and therefore might not have listened to the song in the first place. If they did listen to it, they may have only done so for the song's entertainment purposes.

P!NK's album “I'm Not Dead” was received relatively well by her audience. It received a Metacritic rating of 70/100 (Metacritic, 2006) and an AllMusic rating of 4.5/5 stars and was rated 4/5 by users. Stephen Thomas Erlewine believed it to be the strongest album P!NK had produced up to its release date. He attributed that to the fact that she sounds liberated in the album, producing music that was risky due to its diversity in subject matter and style (AllMusic, 2006). “Dear Mr. President” was seen as an especially bold choice from the album, and it was met with both positive and negative criticism. Some felt that P!NK's choice of lyrics did less to

instill “empathy and compassion” and were instead pretentious and judgmental (Pareles, 2006). However, most critics had generally positive things to say about the song, such as Greg Kot, who writes that the song “builds from a modest invitation... into the kind of awkward, generic complaint that gives protest songs a bad name... but when the lyrics get specific, Pink hits the bull’s-eye” (2006). Fans and critics alike felt that the move to include issues of gay and women’s rights in the song was a powerful stance and was met with much enthusiasm in her live performances (Cromelin, 2006; Kot, 2006). It also showcases her potential for social influence as a rallying force for groups of people subjected to discrimination. Overall, the song “Dear Mr. President” and the album “I’m Not Dead” were seen as another bold move from the artist who had continued to show that, regardless of what people had to say about I, she would continue creating the music she was passionate about.

Rhetor

P!NK had a prior ethos as an edgy, pop punk artist by the time she performed “Dear Mr. President” at Wembley Arena in 2007. Her reputation consisted of a host of catch phrases regarding her rowdy and rebellious songs and demeanor. Gundersen describes her as a “wild child, a sassy and stubborn chick-rock belter with big appetites and little tolerance for boredom” and a “rowdy rocker” with “rude charm” and at times a “feral nature” (2003). Anderman describes P!NK more positively, saying the artist “has an actual personality” in a sea of singers who seem to all blend together. She goes on by emphasizing “she’s cheeky and funny and blunt,” and describing her as “fearless,” having a “supernatural energy” (2003). P!NK has also been described as a “misfit” (Nichols, 2002) and as a “bundle of contradictions” (Pareles, 2006). It seems that in general, she was a rather polarizing figure. Critics either loved or hated her, but even those who didn’t like her could not deny that she was a captivating artist.

The obsession with P!NK's outgoing and rebellious personality highlights gender as a major factor that had an effect on the way she was perceived. Being a woman drastically shaped the way P!NK was portrayed and criticized in the media, especially in relation to the sexual liberty that she displayed on stage and in various songs for the ways she dressed, her dancing, and the raunchy lyrics that she sang (Gundersen, 2003; Anderman, 2002 & 2006; Nichols, 2002). Her mannerisms were commonly contrasted with other famous female artists from the same era, such as Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears (Nichols, 2002; Gundersen, 2003; Anderman, 2003; Kot, 2006). These comparisons often highlighted P!NK's deviance from what was socially acceptable in pop music, as well as for women, at the time.

Her decision to write and perform "Dear Mr. President," like many of her other songs, sparked controversy because of its content. However, unlike in some of her other music, critics weren't upset about sexual content or explicit lyrics (Gundersen, 2003), but rather that she challenged many difficult current social norms and the powers at be (Pareles, 2006). An analysis of the Dixie Chick's role in celebrity public protest by Kasia Anderson highlighted that the female trio faced similar constraints to P!NK, saying that "part of the uproar...can thus be attributed to how they exposed the ideological constructions dictating how they are expected to act as women, country stars, celebrities and patriots in post-9/11 America" (2005, 310). As was the case with many of her creative decisions, some critics celebrated P!NK's boldness in "Dear Mr. President," while others saw it as out of line for a woman and for a pop singer.

Purpose

Like P!NK's personality, "Dear Mr. President" deviated from the social norms, specifically as a protest song. By definition, the purpose of protest songs is to "identify a social problem and/or a call for action in response to a social problem" (Brigance, 2002, p. 8). Most

protest music, which while still political, tends to have lyrics that are more ambiguous to their purpose. For instance, Beyoncé's popular song "Formation" wasn't considered overtly political until her performance at the Super Bowl in 2016, which she used as a tribute to Malcolm X and the Black Panther movement in the wake of police violence against black people (Way, 2019). Another example is Bruce Springsteen's popular song "Born in the USA," which has widely been interpreted as a song about being proud of U.S. heritage, when in reality it is a protest song about the government failing to care for Vietnam veterans when they returned from war (RadioX, 2019). Springsteen's song, like many other protest songs, have been misinterpreted because the lyrics aren't candid enough about the problems, or people get too caught up in catchy titles and lyrical phrases without listening to the songs word for word. However, P!NK's "Dear Mr. President" has a title that gives us a clear preview of the content that follows and no one can mistake her song for anything less political than what it is.

"Dear Mr. President" also differs from many other protest songs because of the sheer amount of political topics P!NK addresses. Like the examples in the previous paragraph, most protest songs seem to be in response to a single event or problem, such as protest songs in response to war and violence. For example, songs written in response to the Vietnam War and police violence against black people are some of the most prevalent (RadioX, 2019). Protest songs that do address multiple issues, such as John Lennon's "Imagine," (RadioX, 2019) fail to get specific and instead address problems of violence and poverty broadly and without placing any blame. These types of protest songs send a sentimental but cliché appeal for everyone to get along – "the kind of awkward, generic complaint that gives protest songs a bad name" which P!NK manages to avoid throughout the majority of her song (Kot, 2006). By being specific about the problems, and who she believes is to blame for them, P!NK gives her audience a more

tangible target for their anger. However, considering the complex nature of the topics she addresses, she is also constrained by trying to tackle as many subjects as she does. Her inability to talk about any single issue in depth presents an especially difficult challenge for the purpose of protest music in giving her audience a call to action, since each issue she addresses is complicated and realistically might deserve its own individual call to action. Analyzing the context and constraints P!NK faced helps us to better understand “Dear Mr. President” as a rhetorical act and will also help us to better understand why she uses certain rhetorical strategies, which I highlight in the upcoming section.

Rhetorical Descriptive Analysis

Audience

P!NK’s immediate audience in the specific concert I chose to analyze would have been primarily British citizens, which makes it interesting that she chose to perform this song at this particular concert. However, it’s possible that P!NK wanted to address issues that affected a global audience in the song such as women’s rights (P!NK, 2011, 2:33), gay rights (2:40), refugee crises (3:37), etc. which would explain her decision to perform the song in this context.

P!NK creates an audience of President Bush and his supporters. She calls the former president out directly, not only with the title “Dear Mr. President” which could have been ambiguous to any president, but also by using specific examples from his presidency such as “No Child Left Behind” (P!NK, 2011, 2:17). It is more than likely that Bush would have been heard about the song even if he had never listened to her music before, due to her popularity as an artist, and the song’s controversial nature. Similarly, the outrage surrounding the song from Bush’s supporters and supporters of his policies such as “No Child Left Behind” in the age of growing social media would have been significant. P!NK created public discourse about these

difficult social and political issues by creating an audience out of people who disagree with her who might not have otherwise listened to her music.

P!NK's target audience would have been primarily young people, as evidenced by the fact that she uses her platform in pop culture to spread awareness and empathy for the social issues she addresses. Young people, specifically those old enough to vote or at least be politically active, are also her agents of change. They are the ones that have the most power to shift the future. They will become the future artists, activists, and even presidents. They are also the ones who have the most to lose. They might be the future soldiers who lose their life in what she sees as a needless war, or the mother's of those soldiers (P!NK, 2011, 1:25), the future single moms who can't make ends meet (3:29), the future of the LGBTQ or feminist movements fighting for their rights (2:33), etc. P!NK tailors to these group as her agents of change, and as a result, seeks to unite all these audiences in the persona she creates as well.

Persona

In "Dear Mr. President," P!NK takes on many peer roles within different communities throughout the song, such as the LGBTQ community, feminists, families of soldiers, and more. These individual roles help to formulate her larger persona as one of the "Us." Throughout the song, P!NK identifies with a group mentality. The members of the larger group are identified by the smaller communities she chooses to include as mentioned above. P!NK considers herself a part of this larger group. Her use of plural pronouns is how we identify the group mentality. At one point she asks, "How do you sleep while the rest of us cry?" (P!NK, 2011, 1:19) The "you" of course refers to former President Bush, and she identifies herself with the "us": the refugees, the homeless, the financially burdened working class, and all the other groups she gives a voice to throughout the song. She begins to form this idea of "us vs. them" in her song, or more

accurately “us vs. him,” with the “him” referring to George W. Bush. Truthfully, there are many family members of soldiers who have passed away who probably don’t care much about refugees or advocating for gay rights. P!NK manages to group all these communities of people together. She shows them that they aren’t as different as they think, and that they are all being harmed by policies and actions from the same president, thus creating the “us” dynamic. As a result of uniting her audience using an “us vs. him” mentality, P!NK’s song “Dear Mr. President” is able to unite diverse groups of people, and therefore serves a purpose beyond just entertainment.

Purpose

The purpose in writing and performing this song was threefold: to formulate belief about polarizing social and political issues, to initiate action by motivating her audience to engage in public discourse about those issues, and to alter positive perceptions of former president George W. Bush. As previously mentioned, P!NK presents a host of difficult social and political issues in her song and she alters belief by encouraging her audience to think differently and have compassion for the people involved with the various issues. The very last line is “Dear Mr. President, you’ll never take a walk with me,” (P!NK, 2011, 4:28) highlighting our natural human tendency to flock to people who agree with us. By using her popularity as an artist and putting these difficult conversations into a song, P!NK is able to get more people thinking and talking about some of these difficult subjects. She challenges us to take a walk with people who disagree with us and learn about their experiences, therefore initiating action in the form of public discourse. By encouraging this communication among different groups of people, P!NK makes her audience believe that they have more in common than they might think.

By creating the “us vs. him” mentality, P!NK is also able to create a negative opinion of George W. Bush and she uses this to convince her audience that they all have the same person

and principles to blame and fight against. She addresses a multitude of social issues such as homelessness, the aftermath of war, education, juvenile incarceration, women's rights, gay rights, etc. and pairs them with personal attacks on Bush's morals with phrases like "what do you feel when you look in the mirror... how do you sleep?" (P!NK, 2011, 1:11) among other criticisms of him. It doesn't matter that Bush can't be re-elected in the next presidential election. P!NK knows that there are plenty of other politicians and people like him with the same values and policies who need to be held accountable. Bush was perhaps one of the most relevant examples of a perpetrator of the harmful social policies that were affecting a global audience at that time, and therefore served as an appropriate target of P!NK's anger. She uses evidence to give credibility to her assertions that Bush is a main figure in the creation or perpetuation of the social and political issues she addresses.

Evidence

While P!NK doesn't use evidence in the forms that we typically think of, such as definitions, statistics, and appeals to authority, she does use direct examples that make sense to her audience. She identifies specific terminology such as "No Child Left Behind," (P!NK, 2011, 2:17) and talks about George W. Bush's use of drugs recreationally when he was in college (2:47). Other phrases, like "they're all sitting in your cells," (2:26) are used to identify his role in other issues going on at the time, such as the "tough on crime" criminal justice reform narrative. All of these examples were relevant, controversial, and polarizing topics at the time of his presidency.

In the live version of the song that I analyzed, P!NK also relies heavily on images and videos as evidence to the horrors that she claims Bush was creating, not just in the U.S., but globally. The images are strategically juxtaposed with the lyrics to contrast with P!NK's lyrics

about Bush's policies and the real life effects of them worldwide. She tells the tragic stories of people around the world, showing clips of what we presume is the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the bombings in the Middle East, through pictures (P!NK, 2011, 0:55-1:10). She also uses clips of Bush in her live performance as a way of showing what she believes to be his indifference to the tragic circumstances that he had a part in generating, to make the former president seem as apathetic and callous as possible (0:25-0:55). This juxtaposition of the images and the lyrics was just one of many rhetorical strategies that P!NK used to further her purpose.

Strategies

P!NK uses multiple strategies to break down Bush's character. First of all, she creates a hypothetical situation: taking a walk with the President. She says "Let's pretend we're just two people, and you're not better than me." (P!NK, 2011, 0:36) This gives her audience the impression that Bush thinks he's better than her, and subsequently, the rest of "us" that she created with the "us" persona. With this hypothetical situation P!NK poses, she begins to craft Bush as a common enemy to the "us."

P!NK also uses the strategy of repetition throughout the text to emphasize various parts, the most notable example being the bridge of the song when she repeats "Let me tell you about hard work, minimum wage with a baby on the way. Let me tell you about hard work, rebuilding your house after the bombs took them away..." (P!NK, 2011, 3:30) emphasizing that she doesn't think Bush knows anything about the hard work. She also repeats a phrase saying "what kind of father would..." (2:34) calling into question not only Bush's character as a human, but also as a father. Other tactics, don't seem to be working, so P!NK uses this strategy of questioning his ability to be a good father, not once but twice, as a kind of last-ditch effort to stress to him, and to other father's and people, that they are on the wrong side of the social issues she identifies.

The fatherhood example also highlights another strategy that P!NK uses in her attempts to persuade: rhetorical questions. Throughout the song, she poses a consistent string of rhetorical questions. Sometimes they apply very directly to the President, such as when she asks “how do you sleep?” ((P!NK, 2011, 1:18) or “what kind of father?” (2:33), creating anger at Bush and also empathy for the groups of people and communities he is affecting through his policies. However, the questions also make the different audiences look inwardly and try to answer them. These rhetorical questions with the answers implied cause us to analyze our own positions on the topics P!NK addresses and start asking ourselves and talking with those around us about whether we are on the right side of these social issues or not, therefore creating public discourse.

Tone & Structure

I chose to analyze tone and structure together for this analysis. The structure is slightly limited because it is a song and it follows a typical song arrangement. However, when we analyze how the tone changes as the song progresses, the structure becomes more important especially in the escalation of tone, volume, and the context of the lyrics at the bridge (P!NK, 2011, 3:29-4:02). P!NK sets the tone of the song as one of being disheartened. The entire song includes only a single acoustic guitar for instrumentals that starts out by playing a soft, sad melody. The first half of the song maintains the softer instrumentals and aims to stir an empathetic reaction for the victims that P!NK claims Bush is to blame for.

The tone is shifted in the second half of the song though, starting right before the second chorus. P!NK turns her sadness, and that of her audience, into anger. The shift starts with the line “I can only imagine what the first lady has to say: you’ve come a long way, from whiskey and cocaine.” (P!NK, 2011, 2:50) At this point, P!NK is still sad, but even more so furious over Bush’s hypocrisy in his policies and his seeming lack of care for so many people. In the

performance, she throws her fist in the air at this point in the song, which is followed by rallying cheers from her immediate audience. It's a powerful moment when, as audience members, we go from feeling sad and disheartened about the state of the world that Bush has helped create, to rage-filled and ready to make a change.

The tempo of the song picks up as she moves into the bridge, her emotional investment in the song is clear as she sings fiercely into the microphone a series of "Let me tell you about hard work!" (P!NK, 2011, 3:30) This shift from sadness into anger helps define the song's structure as one of problem-solution as the audience goes from being empathetic to being motivated to help make changes. She continues to build that anger with each line, until it suddenly drops back to the sad tone from before, when she sings "Dear Mr. President, you'll never take a walk with me" (4:28). It seems like she's giving up, but it could be that she takes the tone back to the sadder melody to remind us that empathy is the emotion that we should be motivated from, even though anger will be the emotion we act out of. The strategies identified in this section paired with the historical factors and constraints identified in the contextual analysis are considered to evaluate "Dear Mr. President" as a rhetorical act in the upcoming section.

Evaluation

P!NK's song "Dear Mr. President" and the performance of the song at Wembley Arena in 2007 carry significance in the intersections of music as communication especially as it applies to protest music and participation in public discourse. In this section I will use Campbell and Huxman's standards of evaluation (2009) to evaluate P!NK's rhetorical strategies for their aesthetic, effect, truth, and ethical values. These standards will also help me to answer the question: How does P!NK use rhetorical and musical strategies in "Dear Mr. President" to encourage public discourse?

From an aesthetic perspective, P!NK uses rhetorical strategies effectively to create lyrics that are successful in accomplishing her purposes of formulating belief about the social and political issues she addresses and altering perception of George W. Bush. Her use of repetition in identifying various issues paralleled the people who face these issues, causing them to see themselves as people with things in common. For example, when P!NK sings the lines about hard work, she parallels working moms who are expecting a child and refugees facing crisis after their homes are bombed (P!NK, 2011, 0:36). As Kot pointed out, when P!NK's lyrics get specific she is the most effective at a powerful message (2006). By using specific examples and repetition to show people they have things like hard work in common, she creates the "Us" identity that ultimately helps to unite her audience behind a desire for action.

P!NK also uses rhetorical questions to emphasize the discriminatory nature of some of Bush's personal views and the policies he helped to create because of them. For instance, she asks him "What kind of father would take his own daughter's rights away? What kind of father would hate his own daughter if she were gay?" (P!NK, 2011, 2:33). These types of questions are effective at making, if not Bush, then at least other parents, stop and self-reflect on their roles in their children's lives (Kot, 2006). In general, the rhetorical questions she poses invite her audience to take a look at their own beliefs and to see how they are affecting the lives of people.

The song also has aesthetic value as a musical performance. The song provided "the emotional heart" for many of P!NK's shows, which allowed her to show an element of intimacy and vulnerability with her audience that resonated with many of them at her live performances (Cromelin, 2006). The raw, emotion-packed lyrics obviously hit home for many, but the medium for the words in a song with P!NK's moving live performance are what give the lyrics emotional meaning and ultimately makes them successful. Sellnow and Sellnow contend that "where words

fall short in expressing the inner emotions of the inmost being, music is able to do so” (2001, p. 397). People have the ability to identify emotions in music, with sadness and happiness being the easiest to identify for most people (Mohn, Argstatter, Wiker, 2010). Juslin found that performers were especially successful at communicating emotion to listeners by using cues to signal changes, in addition to their body language and facial expressions. For anger, these cues are identified as a fast tempo and high sound level, and for sadness these cues are identified as a slow tempo and low sound level (Juslin, 2000). These are the cues and emotions I identified in the tone of the song, and we can see that they are two emotions that are fairly easy to differentiate between in music. P!NK uses these cues adeptly and, as listeners, we are able to identify the song as one mostly of sadness throughout, but picking up into a faster tempo and louder, more fierce vocals and acoustics from the end of the second verse and chorus to the end of the bridge (P!NK, 2011, 2:47-4:11). Goldstein’s research analyzes the way music can cause people to experience thrills – defined as chills, shudders, goose bumps, etc. – and that the most people experience these sensations through music more than any other medium, especially that which is associated with an emotionally charged event or particular person in the subject’s past (1980). P!NK uses emotionally charged social and political events and examples in the lyrics of “Dear Mr. President” to further evoke an emotional response from her audience. “Rhetorical power of music can only be ascertained effectively by considering both lyrical content and musical score” and from an aesthetic perspective, P!NK pairs music and lyrics to communicate emotion effectively (Sellnow and Sellnow, 2001, p. 396). When we consider the combination of emotional music and direct, powerful lyrics used by P!NK, “Dear Mr. President” transitions from just another protest song to a forceful rhetorical act.

The aesthetic values play directly into the effect the song has on the audience, because by being able to effectively communicate emotion, P!NK is able to inspire and unite them in an effort to make change. P!NK effectively identifies many social problems in “Dear Mr. President” and inspires in her audience a desire to make change, which is a key purpose and desired effect of protest songs (Brigance, 2002). Where she falls short is by not giving her audience an explicit call to action, in part due to the fact that she addresses such a wide variety of issues that each might require an individual call to action. However, I argue that while she doesn’t give her audience a direct call to action in the traditional sense, she is effective at initiating action in the form of encouraging people to engage in public discourse.

P!NK’s platform allows her to get involved in public discourse on a large scale by singing about political and social issues. Singing about topics that are politically or socially motivated is not unique to P!NK (Sellnow and Sellnow, 2001; Anderson, 2005; Way, 2019; Brigance, 2002; RadioX, 2019). “Dear Mr. President,” however, is unique even to protest music as a genre. Unlike many protest songs, “Dear Mr. President” is specific and blunt in addressing Bush and the issues P!NK claims he is to blame for, leaving no room for the song to be misinterpreted. Her song is also unique to protest music because it rallies people of different backgrounds by addressing many different social and political issues at the same time. And finally, unlike many other protest songs, she doesn’t stop at personally engaging in the discourse of the times, but also invites more people to engage in discourse with her final line that reads: “Dear Mr. President, you’ll never take a walk with me” (P!NK, 2011, 4:28). This final line emphasizes that people don’t engage enough with people who are different than them or disagree with them, which is a key aspect to productive public discourse. P!NK doesn’t issue a traditional call to action such as encouraging her listeners to protest, resist the power, start a revolution, etc.

Instead, she calls her audience to conversation, asking them to take a walk with someone who has a different perspective. I argue that by encouraging people to start thinking and talking about these issues and creating empathy for the problems, P!NK is enacting change by uniting people through public discourse and asking her audience to do the same.

In analyzing “Dear Mr. President from the truth and ethical standards, P!NK could use improvement. She addresses a multitude of social and political issues in a blunt and unfiltered way. And although her one-liners are persuasive, she is not able to address each complex issue in depth which limits her credibility. In addition, throughout the song P!NK seems to use Bush as a scapegoat for a number of broad problems that the United States and the world are facing. She fails to recognize that Bush does not act alone and represents multiple bodies of people making decisions. She also vilifies the former president in the specific news clips that she uses in her video during the live performance, as well as her placement of those clips in relation to other clips in the video and the lyrics that she sings. She paints him in his worst light and makes it look as if he laughs at tragedy (P!NK, 2011, 0:25-0:55). For P!NK, these examples help to create the “us vs. him” mentality which serves a purpose in uniting her audience, but all at the expense of her ethical credibility.

Implications

Because “Dear Mr. President” regained popularity after Donald Trump’s election to the presidency, the song has present-day applied implications (Crowley, 2017). People have drawn the parallels in the lyrics to what is currently going on around the world and the song continues to inspire people. While her music still tends to be political, P!NK’s reaction to Trump has been different than her reaction to Bush (Ryan, 2019). Rather than adapting the lyrics or writing a new song to protest Trump like some thought she would, P!NK instead said in a tweet that “there

aren't words for this shameful person" (Crowley, 2017). She hasn't kept her criticisms of Trump out of her music entirely however, with a reference to him in her recent song "Can We Pretend" (Ryan, 2019) as well as clear political messages which Trump has connections to in "What About Us" (McDermott, 2017) and "Wild Hearts Can't Be Broken" (Bendix, 2017). Regardless, P!NK's criticisms of President Trump in her recent music are simply not as blunt and direct as those in "Dear Mr. President" are. In addition, this area warrants further study because P!NK has since asked for people who disagree with her on certain issues to "please block me" via an Instagram post (Crowley, 2017). While it seems to be a message expressing her intolerance for homophobia, racism, etc., the message alienates her created audience of Bush's supporters (or more broadly people who disagree with her in the present-day context). This audience is especially important in creating public discourse. More research is needed to understand how the challenges P!NK currently faces as a rhetor affect the song's present-day purpose.

This analysis of P!NK's song "Dear Mr. President" also has theoretical implications in the realms of protest music and communication. P!NK's strategies of protest music were seen as divergent from her normal styles of music and overall more successful than other protest music in the past because of the authentic, raw, and blunt ways she addressed the issues in her lyrics (Kot, 2006). This analysis of "Dear Mr. President" reinforces previous research, such as that from Sellnow and Sellnow in 2001, Juslin in 2000, Mohn, Argstatter, Wiker in 2010, and Goldstein in 1980, which identify certain musical strategies as persuasive due to their ability to communicate emotion to audiences. Other artists seeking to create effective protest songs could potentially imitate the strategies of pairing authentic lyrics and musical patterns used by P!NK for similar results. It also holds significance for public discourse through the medium of music, specifically protest music as a genre. While there is extensive research about music, especially

that of a political nature, as a form of communication and persuasive rhetoric (Sellnow and Sellnow, 2001; Anderson, 2005; Way, 2019; Brigance, 2002), this analysis of “Dear Mr. President” establishes music as a medium for engaging audiences in widespread public discourse. More research is needed to understand the extent of music’s ability to invite broader audiences into conversations, especially conversations involving political and social issues.

Alternatives

In order to improve the rhetorical act that is “Dear Mr. President” as it was performed at Wembley Arena in 2007, I would have kept the clips of the disasters both in the US and across the globe, such as those found at 0:55 in the video from the live performance (P!NK, 2011). However, I would have eliminated the news reel footage of the former President in the video during the live performance, such as that found at 0:49 when a video clip of Bush laughing during a press conference plays right after video clips of natural disasters. The juxtaposition of clips, which do not appear to go together or in sequence, can make viewers unreceptive to her message if they are critical of the ways they may be subtly persuaded. The song and performance are powerful enough without said clips. Ultimately by using the footage of Bush in the live performance, P!NK loses some of her ethos as a rhetor and “Dear Mr. President” loses some of its credibility and potential to engage others in public discourse.

P!NK sings “I’m not here for your entertainment” in her song “U + Ur Hand,” a popular party anthem with a serious message about sexual assault which was released on the same album as “Dear Mr. President, (Kot, 2006). While P!NK is singing to men at a night club in the song, this message seems like a broader statement for the purpose of her album and her music in general. While audiences are effectively entertained by her, P!NK goes a step further than entertainment when she deviates from what’s socially acceptable for an entertainer by taking on

difficult subject matter. Upon analysis, this was especially true of “Dear Mr. President.” The contextual analysis revealed P!NK’s ability to appeal to broad audiences and her deviance from social norms in a variety of ways, even norms for protest music. The descriptive analysis revealed how P!NK’s rhetorical strategies united her diverse audiences, fostered empathy and emotion among them, and ultimately invited them to enter into conversation about a broad array of issues facing the United States and the world. P!NK’s platform as an artist gives her the ability to unite music and lyrics to craft a message, and in the case of “Dear Mr. President, to entertain and get political in order to motivate people to care about social and political issues.

References

- AllMusic. (2006). All music review by Stephen Thomas Erlewine. Retrieved from <https://www.allmusic.com/album/im-not-dead-mw0000720047>
- Anderman, J. (2003, Nov 11). Pink takes a fearless step in a rock 'n' roll direction: third edition]. *Boston Globe*.
- Anderman, J. (2006, Jul 19). Pink brings a darker edge to the world of lightweight pop: third edition]. *Boston Globe*.
- Anderson, K. (2005). How to “Dixie Chick”: Celebrity advocacy, public protest and the body politic. *Conference Proceedings -- National Communication Association/American Forensic Association (Alta Conference on Argumentation)*, 306–311.
- Bendix, T. (2017). P!NK’s ‘Wild Hearts Can’t Be Broken’ is a timely rally cry for women. *Billboard*. Retrieved from <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/8005696/pink-wild-hearts-cant-be-broken-timely-rally-cry-women-essay>
- Brigance, L. C. (2002). Persuasion and protest music. *Communication Teacher*, 16(3), 7-9.
- Campbell, K. K., & Huxman, S. S. (2009). *The rhetorical act: thinking, speaking, and writing critically* (4th ed.). California: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Cromelin, R. (2006, Jun 30). Pop music review; A rebel diva hits a soulful groove; pink genre- hopped during her concert at the avalon, but her emotion-filled songs were the highlight.: home edition]. *Los Angeles Times*.
- Crowley, P. (2017). Will Pink update ‘Mr. President’ for Donald Trump? ‘There aren’t words.’ *Billboard*. Retrieved from <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/7670112/pink-donald-trump-mr-president>

- Goldstein, A. 1980. Thrills in response to music and other stimuli. *Physiological Psychology*, 8(1), 126-129. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03326460>
- Gundersen, E. (2003, Nov 11). Pink prolongs the party ; 'try this' seals rebel singer's rowdy rep: final edition]. *USA Today*.
- Greg Kot, T.,music critic. (2006, Apr 09). Pink's usual sass unaccounted for on 'I'm not dead': Chicagoland final edition]. *Chicago Tribune*.
- Juslin, P. 2000. Cue utilization in communication of emotion in music performance: Relating performance to perception. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 26(6), 1797-1813. doi:10.1037/0096-1523.26.6.1797
- McDermott, M. (2017). Pink's powerful 'What About Us' video tells the story of a wounded America. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2017/08/10/pink-asks-what-us-comeback-single-announces-new-album/555113001/>
- Mohn, C., Argstatter, H., Wilker, F. (2010, Oct 27). Perception of six basic emotions in music. *Psychology of Music*, 39(4), 503-517. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735610378183>
- Nichols, N. (2002, Jul 01). Pop music review; pink performs with arena aspirations; in a high- energy show recalling early (and uneven) madonna, her rebel rock and R&B dance tunes go over big with an eclectic crowd.: HOME EDITION]. *Los Angeles Times*.
- Pareles, J. (2006, Apr 03). Critic's Choice: New CD's. *The New York Times*.
- PEW Research Center. (2008, Dec 18). Bush and public opinion: reviewing the bush years and the public's final verdict. Retrieved from <https://www.people-press.org/2008/12/18/bush-and-public-opinion/>
- Pop music; RECORD RACK; think of pink as a spectrum: home edition]. (2006, Apr 02). *Los Angeles Times*.

- P!NK. (2011, March 18). *P!nk – Dear Mr. President (from Live from Wembley Arena, London, England)* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnlzCPv8ad4>
- RadioX. (2019, Sept 04). The 50 best protest songs. Retrieved from <https://www.radiox.co.uk/features/x-lists/best-protest-songs/>
- Ryan, P. (2019). Pink talks new album ‘Hurts 2B Human,’ wanting more kids and anti-Trump lyrics: ‘He’s a joke.’ *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2019/04/30/pink-talks-kids-politics-and-star-studded-new-album-hurts-2-b-human/3617931002/>
- Sellnow, D., & Sellnow, T. (2001). The "Illusion of Life" rhetorical perspective: An integrated approach to the study of music as communication. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 18(4), 395-415.
- Udovitch, M. (2002, Jul). Pink fights the power. *Rolling Stone*, 58-60.
- Way, L. C. S. (2019). Discourse, music and political communication: Towards a critical approach. *Journal of Language & Politics*, 18(4), 475–490. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.18065.way>