

Palaima: What's the message of the candidates' theme music?

By Tom Palaima

Posted Sep 3, 2016 at 12:01 AM

Updated Sep 25, 2018 at 9:12 PM

Austin American-Statesman

<https://www.statesman.com/news/20160903/palaima-whats-the-message-of-the-candidates-theme-music>

If you were running for president, what theme songs would you play during your campaign and why?

We call our city the Live Music Capital of the World. Living in Austin attunes us really to listen to songs and what they are telling us.

I know then I am not alone in wondering what people are thinking when they use songs discordantly with the messages the songs are putting out. A landmark case is the playing of Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" at the Republican National Convention in 1984 in order to celebrate the pride that supporters of Ronald Reagan took in what his presidential policies in four years had done for our country.

Listen to Springsteen's song. It laments unrelievedly how neglected our country's veterans were. Lines like "End up like a dog that's been beat too much / Till you spend half your life just covering up"; "Come back home to the refinery / Hiring man said, 'Son if it was up to me'"; and "Went down to see my VA man / He said, 'Son, don't you understand'" are clear cries that we were not providing our veterans with good jobs, high-quality medical and mental health care services, appreciation and understanding. After experimenting with more somber styles, Springsteen released a version with an uplifting anthem quality to encourage veterans that they could overcome their problems. Yet those at the RNC who had ears but did not hear and

eyes but could not see used the song to rejoice being born in the only USA they knew, one of wealth and comfort.

When I was a scoutmaster instructor at a Boy Scouts of America Cub Scout summer camp at Emma Long Metropolitan Park 10 years or so ago, I was teaching young scouts out of the BSA handbook for their moviemaking, theater and music merit badges. The three American musical performers the BSA wanted the scouts to listen to were Stephen Foster, Woody Guthrie and Stevie Wonder. Really listening to songs like Foster's "Hard Times Come Again No More," Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land," and Stevie Wonder's "Higher Ground" is not what the BSA had in mind. These songs are thoroughly American, but they offer visions of the American experience that do not fit in with the simplistic "gee, we're swell" patriotism of most Cub Scout projects.

Guthrie's song dreams of a world in which private ownership of land and the sledgehammer of poverty would both disappear. All gated communities and inequitable property ownership would vanish.

Foster's haunting song takes its melody from spiritual gospel hymns he remembered from attending church with his black nanny on Sundays as a young child. It is a lamentation, offering glimpses that well-off folks may get of human misery. The "silent voices" and "pleading looks" of "frail forms fainting at the door" reflect the hard times that have beset them. Several websites now discuss the racism inherent in the song.

And Wonder's classic song asks us to wonder why "soldiers keep on warrin'" despite the fact that "people keep on learnin'." His lyrics, like Springsteen's, are right on target, so direct. Scouts should learn at an early age that for some Americans "Powers keep on lyin' / While your people keep on dyin'." Supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement, or victims of Katrina who never received promised FEMA help, or the parents of the over 6,000 children in Flint, Mich., with elevated blood-lead levels can surely hear Wonder's words loud and clear.

I had these thoughts after listening to Donald Trump's bold promise in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention to be our voice. Right afterward we heard "All Right Now" by the band Free. In it, lead singer Paul Rodgers asks, "Look, what's your game?" and declares, "Now you're tryin' to trick me."

I think that lots of good could come from would-be leaders listening to what popular singers are singing. How about playing songs at the start of the upcoming presidential and vice presidential debates and asking Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, Mike Pence and Tim Kaine to address the issues they raise?

Here are my five choices: Michael Franti, "Oh My God"; Steve Earle "Rich Man's War"; Will Hoge, "The Ballad of Trayvon Martin"; Kendrick Lamar, "m.A.A.d City"; Bruce Springsteen, "We Take Care of Our Own."

What five would you pick?