The Sound of Media Spectacle: Music at the Party Conventions¹

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All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects...

—Jacques Attali²

Introduction

The few extant studies of American presidential campaign music have tended to concentrate on campaign songs (written or modified for a specific candidate),³ music used in radio and television advertising, and the so-called “playlist” of pre-recorded music that candidates feature at public appearances and on their websites.⁴ The music performed at or in connection with the national party conventions has not received the same level of scrutiny—in part because it largely consists of songs already in circulation (nothing new or creatively derived) and in part because it does not serve a deliberative or persuasive function. For most analysts, including musicologists, meaningful election music consists of text and sound aimed at the individual voter.⁵ This narrow view of music and politics—reduced to melody and words in the service of a candidate—limits the power of the aural realm in its capacity to create collective identity and to construct consensus. Above and beyond bringing aesthetic pleasure through the individual performances of bands and soloists, music at both the pre-meditated (nineteenth- and early twentieth-century) and media-centered (post-World War II) national or presidential American party conventions has consistently reinforced narratives of party identity and unity for delegates and the media. This essay will consider how the Democratic and Republican conventions for the 2012 election conscribed music in their “media spectacles,” against the backdrop of the quadrennial American party convention and its evolving musical practices.

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² Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 6.

³ See, for example, Benjamin Schoening and Eric Kasper, *Don't Stop Thinking about the Music: The Politics of Songs and Musicians in Presidential Campaigns* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012); Jodi Larson, “American Tune: Postwar Campaign Songs in a Changing Nation,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 42 (2009): 3–26, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2009.00568.x>; and William Miles, *Songs, Odes, Glees, and Ballads: A Bibliography of American Presidential Campaign Songsters* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990).

⁴ See above all the contribution by Dana Gorzelany-Mostak in this issue.

⁵ Typical of this literature are Timothy Dowd, “Rocking the Vote: The Music Industry and the Mobilization of Young Voters,” *Soundscapes: Journal on Media Culture* 3 (August 2000), http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/VOLUME03/Rocking_the_vote.shtml; and Ted Brader, *Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

The Convention

National gatherings of party members have characterized the American experience in representative federal democracy. According to a report produced by the Congressional Research Service in 2000,

[n]ational conventions combine three important functions: nomination of candidates for the office of President and Vice President; formulation and adoption of a statement of party principles—the platform; and adoption of rules and procedures governing party activities, particularly the nomination process for presidential candidates in the next election cycle.⁶

However, with the growth of primaries and caucuses and the lengthening of the election process over the course of the twentieth century, the deliberative aspects of these functions have disappeared from the conventions, which—at least since 1956—have served to ratify the clear front-runners and affirm pre-determined platforms.⁷ Conventions have also served the functions of spotlighting rising stars in the party (especially through the keynote addresses), providing the candidate a “bump” in the polls⁸ (see Table 1), and motivating party workers for the final push to the election.

Table 1: Historical Convention Bounces 1964–2008, Registered Voters (in percentage points), Gallup Polls.⁹

Year	Democratic Candidate	Post-Dem. Convention Bounce	Republican Candidate	Post-Rep. Convention Bounce
2008	Obama	4	McCain	6
2004	Kerry	-1	G.W. Bush	2
2000	Gore	8	G.W. Bush	8
1996	Clinton	5	Dole	3
1992	Clinton	16	G.H.W. Bush	5
1988	Dukakis	7	G.H.W. Bush	6
1984	Mondale	9	Reagan	4
1980	Carter	10	Reagan	8
1976	Carter	9	Ford	5
1972	McGovern	0	Nixon	7
1968	Humphrey	2	Nixon	5
1964	Johnson	3	Goldwater	5

Lengths of the conventions varied in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but since the beginning of the 1960s they have settled into a four-day format for both parties, generally in July or August.¹⁰ With the loss of public deliberations, the conventions could be scripted for a specific, predictable

⁶ Kevin J. Coleman, Joseph E. Cantor, and Thomas H. Neale, *Presidential Elections in the United States: A Primer* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service/Library of Congress, 2000), 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸ Christine Barbour and Gerald C. Wright, *Keeping the Republic: Power and Citizenship in American Politics*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), 530.

⁹ This information is based upon a table assembled by Jeffrey M. Jones in his article “Conventions Typically Result in Five-Point Bounce,” *Gallup: Politics*, August 20, 2008, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/109702/conventions-typically-result-fivepoint-bounce.aspx>.

¹⁰ The tendency over the years has been toward later conventions that take place closer to the election date.

time frame, although Hurricane Isaac did delay the opening of the Republican National Convention (RNC) in 2012. The earliest conventions privileged Baltimore as host city, followed by Chicago and Philadelphia (and not New York), with a greater rotation of cities after World War II when site selection became a strategic issue: it was exploited among others to appeal to a region or state or to place the party platform in a favorable context¹¹ (see Table A1). The number of convention delegates necessarily fluctuates from election to election, with the Democratic count growing steadily since World War II to 5,560 in Charlotte (2012), while the Republicans have averaged around 2,200 since the mid 1970s (2,285 delegates attended the 2012 convention in Tampa Bay).

Overall, the contemporary national party convention has aimed at providing delegates a diversity of activities, even though the core remains the individual speech, from the greetings of the city mayor and party officials through the many candidate and platform-item endorsements to the acceptance speeches by the presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Between these live stage appearances occur performances by invited artists and party-produced videos, with music by the house band providing intros and outros for speakers, fills and transitions to facilitate flow, and special music like the national anthem. Each day of the proceedings tends to lead toward a major address at the end, whether by a noted politician, the candidate's spouse, or the candidates themselves, and the general flow of the convention sweeps toward the final night with the presidential candidate's acceptance speech. Music is involved in all of this, itself undergoing a crescendo over the course of the four days that reflects an increasing saturation of acts and rising celebrity of guest artists. Needless to say, the music and performers that introduce the more prominent speakers are carefully selected to maximize their effectiveness, even though all of the convention music—other than certain delegate-initiated chants—is scripted.

The full-scale coverage in television beginning in 1952 undoubtedly contributed to the transformation of conventions into tightly scheduled, fully predetermined (non)events. All of the public convention activities are geared to the media, more so than to the convention-hall delegates, despite the significant reduction of coverage by the three major American networks as of 1992.¹² In fact, televisual broadcasting has influenced the structure of the events, so that the sessions once held during the day have shifted to evening hours to ensure coverage and bolster viewer numbers. Shorter speeches and high-end production values also bespeak the role the networks have taken in (re)organizing and spectacularly mediatizing the national party conventions. Beside the musical acts, professionally produced films about party members, platform issues, and the presidential/vice-presidential candidates themselves have both relieved the tedium of podium speeches and introduced sophisticated campaign-style video promotion into the convention hall.¹³ These features have not contributed to the content but rather to the “media spectacle” that the conventions have become, to adopt Douglas Kellner's term.¹⁴

¹¹ The need for a central or readily accessible location has historically limited the geographic choices and all but eliminated West Coast hosts.

¹² They moved from supporting a gavel-to-gavel broadcasting policy to providing one-hour evening summaries with coverage of major convention speeches.

¹³ Candidate campaign films have been taken up by scholars, who regard them as “incorporating the conventions of documentary and advertising.” Janis L. Edwards, “Presidential Campaign Films in a Televisual Convention Environment: The Example of 2004,” in *The 2004 Presidential Campaign: A Communication Perspective*, ed. Robert Denton, 75-92 (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 77. See also J. Cherie Strachan and Kathleen E. Kendall, “Political Candidates' Convention Films: An Overview of Political Image Making,” in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, ed. Charles A. Hill, Marguerite Helmers, 135-154 (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004).

¹⁴ Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

History of Conventions

The first national party conventions in the United States took place during the 1831–1832 election campaign, with the Democratic Party and its candidate Andrew Jackson holding its meeting on May 21–23, 1832, in Baltimore.¹⁵ By 1840 the two main parties—Democrats and Whigs—had fully replaced the caucus with the convention as the means of nominating candidates and “by the 1850s conventions were firmly established as a technique for gaining publicity, interest, and party legitimacy.”¹⁶ These conventions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were frequently the sites of hefty confrontation over choices of candidates, involving multiple ballots and intense political maneuverings that often extended well beyond set dates—in contrast to the symbolic media spectacles of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, instrumental deliberation was their primary function. Thus, the most notorious convention of the nineteenth century, that of the Democrats in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1860, witnessed the exit of fifty Southern delegates and took fifty-seven ballots, only to arrive at no collectively suitable candidate.¹⁷

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the national conventions—as the most public manifestations of the parties—were challenged to exploit the advances in media technology. Initially, the silent newsreel provided moving images from conventions sites that would be shown in cinemas across the United States¹⁸ (Video 1). Then in June of 1924, the Republicans became the first party to receive live coverage through the new medium of radio, broadcast from Cleveland by WEA and WJZ in New York (among other stations).¹⁹ Sound accompanied the newsreel coverage beginning in 1932,²⁰ and television joined the growing array of media options in 1940: NBC affiliate W2XBS from New York telecast the Republican national convention in Philadelphia, at a time when American television was in its infancy. The loss of major television network support in the 1990s—coverage on ABC, CBS, and NBC was reduced to highlights—left the alternative venues of the cable channels CNN, PBS, and C-SPAN to provide fuller live and recorded broadcasts, with C-SPAN not only transmitting from the convention sites but also maintaining a publicly accessible archival record of the complete proceedings. More recently, social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and personal bloggers have rendered audio and video content widely available to non-conventioners, while jumbo screens and improved sound systems enhanced the in-hall experience of delegates.

Video 1: Silent footage of 1924 Democratic Convention

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

¹⁵ Baltimore was the preferred site for the earliest national conventions, hosting the Democratic Party from 1832 to 1852 and in 1860 and 1872 (the current Republican Party was founded in 1854).

¹⁶ Matthew Bowman, “Party Nominating Conventions,” in *The Concise Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 379.

¹⁷ The 1860 convention spawned a literature of its own: John G. Parkhurst, *Official Proceeding of the Democratic National Convention, Held in 1860, at Charleston and Baltimore* (Cleveland: Nevins’ Print, Plain Dealer Job Office, 1860); *Proceedings of the Conventions at Charleston and Baltimore* (Washington, DC: National Democratic Executive Committee, 1860). It ultimately nominated Stephen Douglas, who would oppose and lose to Republican Abraham Lincoln.

¹⁸ For example, a silent Pathé newsreel from the 1928 Democratic National Convention in Houston is accessible online: YouTube video, July 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcopBKsclhY>.

¹⁹ Erik Barnouw, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, vol. 1, *A Tower in Babel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 148–149.

²⁰ Although sound-on-film would have been available to newsreel producers in 1928, the recording technology was by no means universally accessible and theatres were just in the process of changing over to sound.

Perhaps the most notorious media events in the history of party conventions were the riots surrounding the Democratic National Convention of 1968 in Chicago.²¹

Image 1: Protesters Clash with National Guard, Chicago, 1968

The party's inner turmoil over support for the Vietnam War spilled onto the streets when pro-war candidate Hubert Humphrey won the nomination over a divided opposition—the hordes of activists rallied outside the hall and at other strategic locations and were met by brutal police tactics.²² As a result of this “broken” convention, a commission headed by losing candidate George McGovern recommended reforms that, by placing greater emphasis on primaries, vitiated the quadrennial convention as the site for deliberative politics. The Republicans followed suit with their own reforms after a controversy-filled convention in 1976. Since then, the selection of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates has resided to caucuses and primaries, so that the political purpose of the conventions has become ratification of a slate (as well as approval of a platform, reaffirmation of party identity, and celebration of unity).

²¹ Among others see David Farber, *Chicago '68* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Frank Kusch, *Battleground Chicago: The Police and the 1968 Democratic National Convention* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and John Schultz, *No One Was Killed: The Democratic National Convention, August 1968* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

²² For a discussion of the role of music and sound in the media reportage of those riots, see James Deaville, “The Envoicing of Protest: Occupying Television News through Sound and Music,” *Journal of Sonic Studies* 3 (2012), <http://journal.sonicstudies.org/cgi/t/text/text-index?c=sonic;sid=bb183a4399b0e5de14ae237bdad05fee;view=text;idno=m0301a05;rgn=main>.

Music at Conventions

Murat Halstead's detailed memoir of the conventions of 1860 clearly establishes at an early date the role of music at these events, which was heard inside and outside the convention halls, in Charleston and Baltimore for the Democrats and Chicago for the Republicans.²³ Halstead describes, for example, the gallery performance of the Boston Brass Band (the first all-brass band of the United States) early on May 2 in Charleston (before the thirteenth ballot): it "played several national airs, and at the close of which, Mr. Flournoy of Arkansas proposed three cheers for the Union, which were given,"²⁴ while outside the hall, the Boston band "[brought] out speeches."²⁵ The documentary record attests that throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, one or more bands would provide music at key points in the proceedings, as we read in the *Official Proceedings of the National Democratic Convention* from 1876: "During the sessions of the Convention music was supplied at appropriate intervals by Postlewaite's band, which occupied an elevated stand behind the rostrum."²⁶

More detailed about musical practices is an anonymous *New York Times* report about the 1872 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia:

With the break of day the numerous brass bands now in the city were abroad on the streets calling sluggards from their beds, proclaiming that the important day had come ... [Then,] ten minutes before noon, the band of the Second Pennsylvania Militia, which had been stationed in the balcony, struck up "Hail Columbia," which was greeted with applause, and then followed the "Star Spangled Banner," "Yankee Doodle," and the "Battle Cry of Freedom," this last evoking immense enthusiasm, and some of the delegates shouting out that grand old chorus which so electrified our armies in the dark war-days. Then came the Loyal League Initiation hymn, and the "March to the Sea," both excellently rendered by the band ... The address to the Throne of Divine Grace [i.e., Benediction] was followed by music by the band ... The Chairman came down from his platform, and moved toward the part of the house where Mr. SMITH was seated, waiting to conduct him before the audience. Music being called for to fill the gap until Mr. SMITH could get upon the stage, the band in the circle played "Hail to the Chief." By the time the music ceased, Mr. SMITH stood before the cheering assemblage.²⁷

What the reporter describes is the convention as a musico-dramatic spectacle in a contemporary sense, with music mobilized to help create and reinforce a certain spirit among delegates, to foster unity on the convention floor, and to fill in gaps in the stage action.

The document from 1872 reflects the co-participation of delegates in music-making, in that case taking up the chorus "Battle Cry of Freedom" as an act of nostalgia.²⁸ The same occurred on the floor of the RNC of 1888 in Chicago, as reported in the *New York Times*: "as the air turned into 'Marching through Georgia' the assemblage caught up the refrain and the chorus of many voices resounded throughout the hall." Such spontaneous manifestations in music and sound have eluded researchers, yet comprise a

²³ Murat Halstead, *Caucuses of 1860: A History of the National Political Conventions of the Current Political Campaign* (Columbus, OH: Follett, Foster and Company, 1860).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁶ *Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, Held in St. Louis, Mo., June 27th, June 28th and 29th, 1876* (St. Louis, MO: Woodward, Tiernan and Hale, 1876), 13.

²⁷ "Philadelphia: Opening of the Republican National Convention," *New York Times*, June 6, 1872, 1.

²⁸ About songs of the Civil War and nostalgia, see especially Jennifer C. H. J. Wilson, "(Re)establishing Southern Patriotism: Professional and Amateur Minstrelsy in Lynchburg, Virginia," in *Music, American Made: Essays in Honor of John Graziano*, ed. John Koegel (Detroit: Harmonie Park Press, 2011), 397-420.

powerful force for the construction of collective identity and the building of unity—and whatever the chant or song, they have remained effective in those capacities up to the present.

As theatrical organs infiltrated large, enclosed acoustic spaces in the United States, they augmented and supplanted the brass bands:²⁹ thus, at the Chicago Stadium (built in 1929), the Barton organ—allegedly the world’s largest pipe organ—accompanied the national conventions of the Democrats in 1932, 1940, and 1944 and of the Republicans in 1932 and 1944.³⁰

Image 2: Barton Organ at the Chicago Stadium³¹

The organs at such venues possessed the stylistic versatility and timbral diversity to embrace a wide range of musical expression, from light-hearted transitions to dignified marches and celebratory fanfares. Serendipitous as it may have been, the performance of “Happy Days are Here Again” at the 1932 Democratic Convention in Chicago (on organ) was so effective that it became “the unofficial theme song” of the Democrats for years to come.³²

Video 2: Sound footage of 1932 Democratic Convention

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

²⁹ Already in 1882 an organ is reported as accompanying the “military band” in the Cincinnati Music Hall for the Democratic National Convention: “And when, at the nomination of General Hancock, that mighty audience rose to its feet and joined its voice to the trumpet tones of the military orchestra and the tremendous volume of sound which came pealing from the full organ, in that quaint old anthem, ‘Should auld acquaintance be forgot,’ the whole edifice seemed to quiver in sympathetic response to the enthusiastic hosts within its walls.” Edward B. Dickinson, introduction to *Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention* (Dayton, OH: Daily Journal Book and Job Rooms, 1882), ix.

³⁰ That organ’s history is narrated in “Remembering the ‘Big Barn’ on W. Madison and its Big Barton Pipe Organ,” website of the Chicago Area Theatre Organ Enthusiasts, last modified February 19, 2013, <http://www.catoe.org/barton.html>.

³¹ <http://theatreorgans.com/travellingmoller/melgarde.gif>

³² The song first appeared in the 1930 musical *Chasing Rainbows*. Regarding the apocryphal history of the tune and Roosevelt, see Gary Rosen, *Unfair to Genius: The Strange and Litigious Career of Ira B. Arnstein* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5-7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199733484.001.0001>.

The rise of playback equipment in arenas, meeting halls and the like has led to the current musical practices at national party conventions, which blend piped-in prerecorded music, live music from the stage (stage band and invited guest artists), and diverse vocalizations and related sounds (clapping, stamping, etc.) from the delegates. The styles of music have necessarily shifted over the years, but always with an ear to the most current music that would appeal to the greatest number of participants, whether in the hall or consuming the spectacle through sound media (thus, the choices can be identified as media- and consumer-driven). Despite emphasizing newer music, convention organizers also draw upon “new classics” of patriotic, inspirational, or generally national character, such as Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” for the Democrats (1984) or Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the U.S.A.” for the Republicans (also 1984).³³ And not unlike the spectacles of sporting events, especially the Super Bowl, the four-day event is saturated with music from all of the aforementioned sources, in a densely woven fabric of supremely theatrical actions.

Theoretical Perspectives

Few political scientists or pundits would disagree with the statement that the conventions of today no longer fulfil a deliberative function in the making of the president or the changing of minds: they ostensibly serve to consolidate and energize support among delegates and to play to a media—largely television—audience (though network coverage has been progressively shrinking). Linda Miller-Kahn argues, “political party conventions function as the most obvious stage of political spectacle. Conventions have lead actors and bit-players, costumes and props.”³⁴ This descriptive designation of “spectacle” has been associated with national party conventions in the United States from the start; though it initially carried the meaning of a highly impressive event, through the mediatization of conventions in the twentieth century, the term has come to describe the political convention as a pompous display of empty symbols. Indeed, the *Concise Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History* all but dismisses the post-1970s staged affair under the rubric “Convention as Spectacle.”³⁵

Guy Debord’s concept of the “society of the spectacle,” which “describes a media and consumer society organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities, and staged events,” has informed these critiques of party conventions.³⁶ Like the commentators above, Debord occupies a critical position vis-à-vis the logic and manifestations of the spectacular society.³⁷ In analyzing the role of media in such a society, Douglas Kellner adapts Debord: “I argue that media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to initiate individuals

³³ Two articles in the same publication present the context for Reagan’s attempt to appropriate the Springsteen song: Jim Cullen, “Bruce Springsteen’s Ambiguous Musical Politics in the Reagan Era,” *Popular Music and Society* 16, no. 2 (1992): 1-22, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007769208591471>; and Susan Mackey-Kallis and Ian McDermott, “Bruce Springsteen, Ronald Reagan and the American Dream,” *Popular Music and Society* 16, no. 4 (1992): 1-9, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007769208591493>.

³⁴ Linda Miller-Kahn, *Political Spectacle and the Fate of American Schools* (London: Routledge, 2004), 21.

³⁵ Bowman, 380.

³⁶ Kellner, *Media Spectacle*, 2. Kellner’s book most significantly draws upon the thought of Debord, but others have built upon the association of the party convention and spectacle, including Jeffrey Broxmeyer, “Of Politicians, Populism, and Plates: Marketing the Body Politic,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 38 (2010): 138-152; Michael Real, “Reflections on Communication and Sport: On Spectacle and Mega-Events,” *Communication & Sport* 1 (2013): 1-13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2167479512471188>; and Benedikt Feldges, *American Icons: The Genesis of a National Visual Language* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

³⁷ For a more severe indictment of the “society of the spectacle” see Debord’s *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Michael Imrie (London: Verso, 1998).

into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles ...”³⁸ He posits, moreover, that “media culture is also the stage on which social conflicts unfold and social reality is constructed,”³⁹ all of which could be read as suggesting a more positive function for the contemporary media spectacle in contrast with Debord’s position. Kellner’s appropriation of Debord’s “society of the spectacle” for the media spectacle is a useful tool to help understand how the 2012 party conventions and their musical components functioned.⁴⁰

As already stated, however, conventions prior to the late twentieth-century media spectacle did not lack a spectacularity of their own in the non-mediated sense of the word. Indeed, the quadrennial events that brought delegates from across the Union are reported as always having something extraordinary about them, even in the earliest manifestations (1832):

The Convention presented the animating spectacle of near three hundred and fifty individuals, representing the people of twenty-three states, coming together in friendly communion, bringing in all their separate interests and prepossessions, irreconcilable as they might seem, to be weighed by the united judgment of all.⁴¹

Over one century later, in 1948, the *New York Herald Tribune* published a two-page advertisement under the following title: “Starting Today on LIFE-NBC Television: A History-Making Presentation of a Great Spectacle—The Republican Convention.”⁴² Here the addition of a new broadcast medium is brought to stand in direct relation to the event’s spectacularity, which of course included the hall’s sounds even though the promo emphasized television’s visuality.

Video 3: Televised footage of 1948 Republican National Convention

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

The presidential campaign of 2004 clearly illustrates the beneficial effect of a well-staged convention upon the electorate: George Bush’s general job-approval ratings jumped from 49 percent beforehand to 52 percent afterward, while during their convention Democrats themselves dropped in enthusiasm over the election from 63 to 57 percent.⁴³

Daniel Boorstin calls the mediated theatricality of an event like a party convention a “pseudo-event,”

³⁸ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 2.

³⁹ Kellner, *Media Spectacle*, 89.

⁴⁰ Kellner himself develops the concept of “media spectacle” in greater depth in research subsequent to the 2003 book in the following works: *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy: Terrorism, War, and Election Battles* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005); “Cultural Studies, Media Spectacle, and Election 2004,” *InterActions* 2 (2006), <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/24p3h52t>; “Media Spectacle and the 2008 Presidential Election: Some Pre-election Reflections,” *Mediascape* (Fall 2008), http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Fall08_Kellner.pdf; “Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle,” *International Journal of Communication* 3 (2009): 715-741; and “Media Spectacle and Media Events: Some Critical Reflections,” in *Media Events in a Global Age*, ed. Nick Couldry, Andreas Hepp, Friedrich Krotz (New York: Routledge, 2010), 76-92.

⁴¹ *Summary of the Proceedings of a Convention of Republican Delegates . . . Held at Baltimore . . . May, 1832* (Albany, NY: Packard and Benthuyson, 1832), 32.

⁴² Cited by Arthur W. Hunt, III, in *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 183.

⁴³ Rachel Holloway, “Political Conventions of 2004: A Study in Character and Contrast,” in *The 2004 Presidential Campaign: A Communication Perspective*, 67.

since all aspects are staged, including the camera work.⁴⁴ C-Span footage of the RNC and DNC for recent elections does conform to such expectations, although the shots of audience members raise questions about the priorities and biases behind the images:⁴⁵ do those delegates who wear the most outlandish costumes, who dance to the music, or who differ from a party's racial or ethnic profile most readily attract the camera's attention, as happens in the audiences for certain game shows?⁴⁶ The media event of the conventions certainly taps into standard rhetorical practices of televisual media, including the creation of star narratives for candidates, the exploitation of memory and the construction of hero discourse in the audience, and the scripted crescendo of excitement over the four days.

The 2012 Conventions: Music in the Halls

For the 2012 party conventions, C-SPAN broadcast seventeen hours of coverage for the Republicans in Tampa and twenty-one hours for the Democrats in Charlotte, including several hours of music between them.⁴⁷ At the same time, the sonically and musically animated demonstrations outside the meeting halls made for even more footage in television and on diverse social media websites, especially YouTube. As a result of this sheer quantity of musical material, any presentation of music at and around the conventions of 2012 must of necessity be limited in its selection and goals. The following pages nevertheless introduce the music for the event and place that aural realm within the broader context of the "convention as spectacle," for both Republicans and Democrats understood the value of music for contributing to the spectacle of Tampa Bay and Charlotte, tactically tying it in with party ideology and the identity of speakers.

The researcher must bear in mind that, as Nick Corasaniti of the *New York Times* remarked on September 6, "conventions are tightly scripted events, and no beat plays unplanned."⁴⁸ Higher powers were at work in both campaigns to ensure that the music sent the proper message, beginning with the choice of musical directors for the conventions' "framing music," which served as intros and outros for speakers, bridges, and accompaniment for special moments. For 2008 the Democratic convention

⁴⁴ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 251.

⁴⁵ C-SPAN is traditionally represented as featuring "unedited" coverage of political events. Nevertheless, issues surrounding C-SPAN coverage arose already for Jesse Jackson's speech at the Democratic National Convention of 1984; see Robert K. Tiemens, Malcolm O. Sillars, Dennis C. Alexander, David Werling, "Television Coverage of Jesse Jackson's Speech to the 1984 Democratic National Convention," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 32 (1988): 1-22, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08838158809386681>. Its representation of gender came under scrutiny for the 1996 conventions; see Jane Blankenship, Deborah C. Robson, and Maureen S. Williams, "Conventionalizing Gender: Talk By and About Women at the 1996 National Political Conventions," *American Behavioral Scientist* 40 (1997): 1020-1047, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0002764297040008006>.

⁴⁶ The model here is Monty Hall's *Let's Make a Deal* (1963-1977), the audience members of which wore outlandish clothing and costumes to draw the emcee's attention (thus Hall functioned as a type of mediation).

⁴⁷ The full video transcripts for the 2012 party conventions can be found on C-SPAN's website. Here are the URLs for the transcripts for the Republican National Convention: Day 1 (<http://www.c-span.org/video/?307601-1/2012-republican-national-convention-day-one>); Day 2 Afternoon (<http://www.c-span.org/video/?307602-1/republican-national-convention-day-two-afternoon-session>); Day 2 Evening (<http://www.c-span.org/video/?307602-2/2012-republican-national-convention-day-two-evening>); Day 3 (<http://www.c-span.org/video/?307603-1/republican-national-convention-day-three>); Day 4 (<http://www.c-span.org/video/?307604-1/republican-national-convention-day-four>). Full transcripts of the Democratic National Convention can be found at the following URLs: Day 1 (<http://www.c-span.org/video/?307931-1/2012-democratic-national-convention-day-one>); Day 2 (<http://www.c-span.org/video/?307932-1/democratic-national-convention-day-two>); Day 3 (<http://www.c-span.org/video/?307952-1/democratic-national-convention-day-three-review>).

⁴⁸ Nick Corasaniti, "Dropping the Beats at the Democratic Convention," *The Caucus: The Politics and Government Blog of The Times*, September 6, 2012, http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/06/dropping-the-beats-at-the-democratic-convention/?_r=0.

producers Ricky Kirschner and Glenn Weiss hired musician Ray Chew and his hand-picked band,⁴⁹ while Republican convention organizers used recorded soundtracks for their in-house music.

Prominent deejay DJ Cassidy and iconic guitarist G. E. Smith were ostensibly responsible for the house music at the 2012 Democratic and Republican conventions, respectively (Images 3 and 4). Born Cassidy Durango Milton Willy Podell in 1981, DJ Cassidy was discovered by Sean Diddy Combs and quickly became one of the top-paid and most sought-after American deejays and a favorite of the Obamas (thus, he had programmed all ten inaugural balls in 2009).⁵⁰ The 61-year old Smith, whose birthname was George Edward Haddad (“blacksmith” in Arabic), was lead guitarist for Hall and Oates, served as musical director for *Saturday Night Live* until 1995, and toured with Roger Waters’ *The Wall Live*.⁵¹ The choices of Cassidy and Smith to provide the framing music for the conventions clearly reflect party ideologies: one was a youthful, popular figure from the hip-hop community, the other an aging icon from rock history who typically received one line of reference in media reports about music at the RNC (in contrast, the first deejay to appear at a convention, Cassidy garnered headline attention from the *New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, ABC News, Yahoo News, and *US Magazine*). Smith may have remained in the shadows, yet his work was received by some as having shifted the party from its historical convention musical fare: as *PBS Newshour* reporter Ellen Rolfes commented, “for a party that traditionally relied on country and classical music for their convention soundtrack,” the Republicans “were treated to a playlist that mixed country, classical, rock and pop.”⁵²

Obama and DJ Cassidy

G.E. Smith

Images 3 and 4: Obama and DJ Cassidy; G.E. Smith

⁴⁹ See Clayton Perry, “Interview: Ray Chew—Musical Director, Composer, and Producer,” *Blogcritics* (website), August 22, 2009, <http://blogcritics.org/interview-ray-chew-musical-director-composer>. Chew became musical director for *American Idol* in 2011.

⁵⁰ Biographical information can be found at Cassidy’s own website <http://www.djcassidy.com/bio/>. Interviews with Cassidy have appeared in such publications as *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Post*, *Billboard*, and *People Magazine*.

⁵¹ Of Lebanese descent, Smith avoids the issue of ethnic background and birth name on his website with the following mystifying comment: “One of the most in demand blues / rock guitarists in the world is a mysterious character who goes by the name of G. E. Smith.” For a fuller biography, see Smith’s website, <http://gesmithmusic.wordpress.com/about/>.

⁵² Her references to “classical music” are unclear, since no conventionally defined classical music was featured on the schedule. As a stand-in for music that falls outside the realm of popular music, however, the designation could well refer to traditional (Republican) convention fare like “God Bless America” and “God Bless the U.S.A.” Ellen Rolfes, “A Musical Review of the 2012 Republican Convention,” *The Rundown* (blog), *PBS Newshour*, August 13, 2012, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/2012/08/a-musical-recap-of-the-republican-convention.html>. The article includes links to actual performances from the RNC.

Tables A2 and A3 (see appendix) present the music choices of Cassidy and Smith from the last day of their conventions.⁵³ When asked about the process behind his playlist, Cassidy averred that he started by “creating a master pool of music, feel-good, high-energy, emotionally inspiring songs,” which he then refined with convention producers and customized “to intro and outro each speaker.”⁵⁴ (Cassidy did not necessarily create the individual tracks himself, however, for composer Irwin Fisch took credit for having arranged and produced “15 speaker playons” for the last night.)⁵⁵ In a typically laconic statement, Smith remarked that he and his band played “where the need is greatest.”⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that Smith’s ensemble remained onstage throughout the convention, as a visual marker for live, engaged participation in the events, but also serving as a reminder of the tradition-bound, white-male-dominated ideology of the GOP.⁵⁷

Image 5: Smith’s Band at 2012 Republican Convention⁵⁸

In contrast, Democratic delegates could not see Cassidy, whose music sonically represented him and—ultimately—the party, while his sonic artistry as deejay performed the practices and technology of

⁵³ The last day of a convention tends to feature the most music, leading to the candidate’s acceptance speech.

⁵⁴ Corasaniti, “Dropping the Beats at the Democratic Convention.”

⁵⁵ News post on Irwin Fisch’s personal website, September 2, 2012, <http://irwinfisch.com/news>: “9/2/12. Arranging and producing 15 speaker playons for the Democratic National Convention. They’ll be used on the final night, when the convention moves to the Bank of America Stadium in Charlotte and the President accepts his nomination. I was fortunate to have great musical contributions from Shawn Pelton, Ira Siegel, Andy Snitzer and Jay Messina.” There is no reason to doubt the veracity of Fisch’s claim, especially given the tradition of outsourcing and uncredited work in the arena of production music. For a nuanced discussion of production music, see Robert Fink, “Orchestral Corporate,” *ECHO: A Music-Centered Journal* 2 (2000), www.echo.ucla.edu.

⁵⁶ Molly K. Hooper, “Former ‘SNL’ Band Leader Wasn’t Playing Politics in Tampa—Just His Guitar,” *The Hill*, August 31, 2012, <http://thehill.com/conventions-2012/gop-convention-tampa/246871-former-snl-band-leader-wasnt-playing-politics-at-gop-convention-just-his-guitar>.

⁵⁷ Footage of the band in performance at the RNC can be found on the C-SPAN coverage, at the times indicated in Table A2.

⁵⁸ <http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-pUIPcYoFGtc/UEdQ9bJuSuI/AAAAAAAAA7E/sIos9pKmtcg/s400/band05rnc0828-pg-horizontal.jpg>.

Millennials and laid down tracks that conveyed hipness.⁵⁹ The Republican band had to function in a wide range of capacities: introduce speakers, fill in programming gaps and breaks, and even accompany guest artists, to which ends they played whole songs and even sets. For his part, Cassidy provided only recorded fragments, leaving complete musical selections to the guest artists.

Image 6: DJ Cassidy at His Console⁶⁰

It is instructional to compare how Cassidy and Smith musically framed one analogous moment in their respective conventions—the outro music for the candidates’ wives, Ann Romney and Michelle Obama, brings to the fore decisive issues for party identity, including attitudes toward gender, the role of the first lady, and musical style. Smith’s performance of The Temptations song “My Girl” directly after Ann Romney’s speech promoted a traditional patriarchal perspective on women in general and the president’s wife in particular.

Video 4: Outro for Ann Romney (at 21:21)

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

The choice of an R&B classic from the 1960s likewise communicates to the party and its delegates a “feeling of nostalgia [that] reshapes the past to address concerns and desires specific to the present.”⁶¹ In

⁵⁹ Dave Barry, “The DJ Has the Democrats Spinning,” *Miami Herald*, September 5, 2012, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/09/05/2986117/dave-barry-the-dj-has-the-democrats.html>.

⁶⁰ http://assets.nydailynews.com/polopoly_fs/1.1153709!/img/httpImage/image.jpg_gen/derivatives/landscape_635/confweb907-1-web.jpg

⁶¹ Christine Sprengler, *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film* (New

particular, the dual implications of ownership and submission in this particular context position potential first lady Ann Romney in the conventionally subservient, domestic role of women. In contrast, Cassidy's "performance" of the 2011 version of Beyoncé's "Move Your Body" in flash-dance style casts Michelle Obama as a contemporary woman who has a personal agenda that she is realizing in alliance with a current celebrity, and yet with whom she also shares "activist motherhood."⁶² Here the deejay foregrounded the first lady's ostensibly independent activity in promoting a healthy lifestyle for America's youth, thus showing her to be engaged in the political sphere.⁶³

Video 5: Outro for Michelle Obama (at 25:18)

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

The featured performers at the conventions naturally drew the lion's share of audience and media attention. The selection of artists involved the most varied input, from such diverse sources as the advance teams, the media and PR companies that are hired for campaigns, and the candidates themselves. Performers may also volunteer their services, on the basis of political conviction or an existing relationship with the candidate. For the Republicans in Tampa Bay, however, we possess an unusually clear and detailed knowledge of at least one set of agents for procuring guest performers in a venue adjacent to the hall because of a lawsuit launched in early 2013. The legal documents reveal that the Republican non-profit fundraising organization American Action Network had hired agency Cater America LLC to book concerts "just outside the doors to the GOP's convention," which resulted in contracts with Lynyrd Skynyrd and Journey.⁶⁴ The AAN director of development Pete Meachum requested that Rob Jennings, head of Cater America, also seek such acts as Pitbull and Lady Gaga, offering the latter \$1 million with the promise that "\$150,000 will go towards a domestic violence shelter."⁶⁵ It should be noted that none of the artists Meachum named agreed to appear in the context of the convention, which did not surprise media commentators, who jumped on the news when the legal documents became public in March of 2013.

Whatever or whoever the source for or politics behind guest artist selection, the frame of the events itself lent the performers the authority to represent the party on the convention stage, which is how delegates and the media perceived them. The choices adhere to time-tested principles of playing to the

York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 73.

⁶² For a discussion of activist motherhood, see Mary Frances Rogers, "Mothering as Political Action," in *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 259-272.

⁶³ A song under the title "Move Your Body" was released by Italian band Eiffel 65 in 1999, which however stands in no relationship to Beyoncé's song. In 2006 on the album *B'Day* she recorded "Get Me Bodied," a song she re-recorded in 2011 as "Move Your Body" in conjunction with Michelle Obama's Let's Move! Flash Workout initiative. It stands to reason that the Democrats would exploit the tie-in with one of the most popular artists of the day, who nevertheless also represents a certain African-American bourgeois respectability. See Kenna McHugh, "Beyoncé Joins Mrs. Obama's 'Let's Move' Campaign with 'Move Your Body' Music Video," *Social Times*, April 28, 2011, http://socialtimes.com/beyonce-joins-mrs-obama%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Clet%E2%80%99s-move%E2%80%9D-campaign-with-%E2%80%9Cmove-your-body%E2%80%9D-music-video_b59981.

⁶⁴ Susan Ferrichio, "Lady Gaga Turned down \$1 Million to Perform during RNC," *Washington Examiner*, March 31, 2013, <http://washingtonexaminer.com/lady-gaga-turned-down-1-million-to-perform-at-rnc/article/2525899>. The Lynyrd Skynyrd concert never took place because of Hurricane Isaac.

⁶⁵ Ibid. The lawsuit concerned a loan to Jennings from AAN, which alleged that the corporate executive had failed to repay the money in question.

base of delegates. As Robin Bronk, head of the Creative Coalition observed, “The average convention-goer is between 35 and 55 ... You want to give them what they want. It’s the sweet spot of music that’s current yet ties in with great memories. And it has to be a group that’s not too overexposed, especially in Washington.”⁶⁶ Above and beyond that, the individual or ensemble must pass tests of ideological orthodoxy and musical reputation, so that the parties can take advantage of the cultural capital of the artist(s). For the media, it was the line-up that mattered, so that pre-convention reports on signed artists outnumbered reviews by over five to one—it is much easier to comment on a press release than to have to evaluate actual performances—and the GOP could still profit from Lynyrd Skynyrd, even though Hurricane Isaac forced them to cancel their appearance.⁶⁷

For the Democrats, and for Barack Obama in particular, the musicians had to be on the edge and speak to Millennials (Amber Riley from *Glee* sang the national anthem on the first day, for example), while not offending older constituents.⁶⁸

Video 6: Amber Riley Sings the National Anthem at the 2012 Democratic Convention

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

This meant largely maintaining the status quo from the 2008 stage show, with its healthy respect for traditional musical styles that could be performed by young, well-known artists (e.g., Jessica Sanchez covering Marvin Gaye’s “You’re All I Need to Get By”). However, the 2012 Democratic Convention also featured live performances by a varied line-up that included such diverse talents as Mary J. Blige, Foo Fighters, and James Taylor.

Video 7: Jessica Sanchez Singing Marvin Gaye’s “You’re All I Need to Get By” at 2012 Democratic Convention

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

As already suggested, the Republicans had more work to accomplish a perceived shift in style, for if Democrats appropriated a range of style choices (including funk/soul, hard rock, and club), the GOP needed to break out of the alliance with country music forged already in the Reagan years.⁶⁹ Republican

⁶⁶ Cited in David Browne, “Journey, Kid Rock and More Set to Play Republican National Convention,” *Rolling Stone: Music*, August 27, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/journey-kid-rock-and-more-set-to-play-republican-national-convention-20120827>.

⁶⁷ Paul Bond, “Some Acts Canceling on Republicans at GOP Convention,” *Hollywood Reporter*, August 26, 2012, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/lynnyrd-skynyrd-canceling-republican-gop-convention-mitt-romney-paul-ryan-hurricane-isaac-365236>.

⁶⁸ Nelson W. Polsby, Aaron Wildavsky, Steven E. Schier, and David A. Hopkins, *Presidential Elections: Strategies and Structures of American Politics*, 13th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 150.

⁶⁹ See among others J. Lester Feder, “‘Song of the South’: Country Music, Race, Region, and the Politics of Culture, 1920–1974” (PhD diss., UCLA, 2006); Lori Maxwell and Kara E. Stooksbury, “No ‘Country’ for Just Old Men,” *M/C Journal* 11, no. 5 (2008), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/71>; and an early study, William S. Fox and James D. Williams, “Political Orientation and Music Preferences Among College Students,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 38 (1974): 352–371, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/268171>. At the same time, some country music artists have adopted liberal political positions, as witnessed in the saga of the Dixie Chicks. See above all Molly Brost, “Post-Dixie Chicks Country:

National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus attempted to address this situation when he rolled out the convention's musical line-up on August 24: he noted how performers will cover the spectrum of genres, embracing "everything from pop and rock to country and gospel."⁷⁰ Paul Ryan himself made an effort to distance himself from GOP musical conservatism in this comment from his acceptance speech:

We're a full generation apart, Governor Romney and I. And, in some ways, we're a little different. There are the songs on his iPod, which I've heard on the campaign bus and on many hotel elevators. He actually urged me to play some of these songs at campaign rallies. I said, I hope it's not a deal-breaker Mitt, but my playlist starts with AC/DC, and ends with Zeppelin.⁷¹

Still, we have a blogger like Roger Catlin posting derogatory comments through his descriptions of the talent at the GOP convention, calling Lane Turner "an obscure country artist" and 3 Doors Down "a returned to obscurity rock band" and dismissing Neal Boyd as "an opera singer" (Boyd had performed "the inevitable Lee Greenwood 'God Bless the U.S.A.'").⁷² For their part, some of the musicians tried to distance themselves from any possible political meaning that could be attributed to their performing in Tampa Bay: a Journey spokesperson called the pre-convention party just another gig,⁷³ and 3 Doors Down lead singer Brad Arnold told the *Tampa Bay Times* "We've never really been a very political band."⁷⁴ As Reinhold Niebuhr demonstrated in 1934, however, such disavowals of political responsibility have a long history (and are rarely believed).⁷⁵

Video 8: Neil Boyd Singing Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." at 2012 Republican Convention

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

The few post-convention reviews of music at Charlotte tended to give the Democrats the advantage, by virtue of the breadth, depth, and relevance of the talent and their attempt to tap into the headspace of Millennials. Commentators particularly noted the strategic deployment of DJ Cassidy's tracks, although baby boomer Catlin did not quite comprehend the practice when he complained that the Democrats

Carrie Underwood and the Negotiation of Feminist Country Identity," in *The Politics of Post-9/11 Music: Sound Trauma and the Music Industry*, ed. Joseph P. Fisher and Brian Flota, (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 161–172.

⁷⁰ Cited by Catherine Poe in "Republican Convention Delegates to Hear Taylor Hicks, Lynyrd Skynyrd, 3 Doors Down," *The Washington Times*, August 26, 2012, re-posted at <http://sl.zetaboards.com/connections/topic/4903340/1/> As Liz Garnett argues in her study of barbershop quartets and their attempts to diversify, "one cannot assume that increasing the breadth of musical styles represented within an institution will necessarily increase the breadth of social groups represented as a result." Liz Garnett, *The British Barbershopper: A Study in Socio-musical Values* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 180.

⁷¹ Cited by Reuters, "Voices from the Right: Best Quotes from the Republican Convention," August 30, 2012, <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSBRE87T1LP20120831>. The video excerpt is available on YouTube, posted by *National Review* on August 29, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovWwUefDVFc>. Of course, with his implied classical rock playlist Ryan was actually playing into the hands of Democrat pundits, who pointed out the historical gap between those artists and the present scene and the discrepancies between the groups' song lyrics and the Republican platform. Particularly scathing is Randall Roberts in "Paul Ryan's Playlist: What's Between AC/DC and Led Zep on his iPod?," *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/30/entertainment/la-et-ms-paul-ryan-playlist-whats-between-acdc-led-zeppelin-on-his-ipod-20120830>.

⁷² Roger Catlin, "Music at the Republican Convention," Roger Catlin's personal website, August 29, 2012, <http://rogercatlin.com/2012/08/29/music-at-the-republican-convention/>.

⁷³ Kory Grow and Chris Martins, "Romney Scores Kid Rock's Support, Obama Gets the National," *Spin*, August 27, 2012, <http://www.spin.com/articles/mitt-romney-barack-obama-kid-rock-national-chris-cornell-journey/>.

⁷⁴ Rolfes, "A Musical Review of the 2012 Republican Convention."

⁷⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1934), 178.

played “only the instrumental intros, looped over and over.”⁷⁶ The live performances at the DNC also had the youth and gender edge, which is exemplified by the singers who presented the national anthems (Table 2). Thus Jean MacKenzie blogged,

Seven, a musical group that is basically a barbershop septet, did a wonderful job on the “Star Spangled Banner” on the last night of the RNC [and] people clapped politely. But when Amber Riley, who plays the attitudinous Mercedes from *Glee*, hit the “rocket’s red glare” in Charlotte, she had half the hall in tears.⁷⁷

Table 2: National Anthem Performances at 2012 Democratic and Republican Conventions

Day	Republicans	Democrats
1	Philip Alongi (solo voice)	Amber Riley (solo voice)
2	Ayla Brown (solo voice)	Branford Marsalis (solo soprano saxophone)
3	Seven (solo voices)	Marc Anthony

Music was centrally complicit in all of these elements of the 2012 spectacles. If the national party conventions are supposed to reward, solidify, and excite the delegate base and nationally disseminate the party’s message through the media, it stands to reason that music will be a major component of the event. No statistics exist to empirically confirm the effectiveness of the framing music of Smith or Cassidy or the live performances by guest artists, but the care and expense accorded to the music by the parties betrays an underlying belief in its value and importance for the spectacle.⁷⁸ The selection of musical acts, the choreographing of their stage appearances, and the coordination of intro and outro music to individual speakers all suggest a spectacle- and media-driven agenda for music at the conventions. This helps to explain Pete Meachum’s aforementioned attempts to secure current recording industry headliners Lady Gaga and Pitbull for convention-related concerts. And, as already proposed, the August release of a convention’s musical line-up has become a major media event, with some pundits using that information to predict the success of the gathering and even to measure party direction, like another platform item.

Two more aspects of music inside the hall merit attention before looking outside. The videos projected at intervals within the convention program prominently used traditional film underscoring techniques to support their rhetoric: these campaign videos added a “classical” tone to the proceedings,⁷⁹ a contrast to the popular music of Smith, Cassidy, and the guest acts, and would be an interesting topic for further study. And the researcher would be remiss by overlooking the music generated by the convention audience, in the form of spontaneous chants, which energized the delegates and contributed to the media spectacle—again, that aspect of the event’s aurality awaits thorough investigation.

⁷⁶ Catlin, “Music at the Democratic Convention.”

⁷⁷ Jean MacKenzie, “RNC vs. DNC: Who Knows How to Party,” *GlobalPost*, September 10, 2012, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/highway-2012/rnc-vs-dnc-obama-polls-sugar-high>.

⁷⁸ The costs the AAN was willing to incur in the wooing of Lady Gaga and other first-rank musical artists reflects the significance assigned to musical message by the convention organizers.

⁷⁹ Scholars in communications and media studies have recognized the value of these in-hall videos, but have yet to engage them in detailed study. See, for example, David Timmerman and Gary Weier, “The 1996 Presidential Nominating Conventions: Good Television and Shallow Identification,” in *The 1996 Presidential Campaign: A Communication Perspective*, ed. Robert Denton (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 77-100, especially 81.

Video 9: Kennedy Tribute Video at 2012 Democratic Convention

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

The 2012 Conventions: Music outside the Halls

In a way, the streets of Tampa Bay and Charlotte became sites for another form of spectacle, no less performed for the media than that which took place in the convention halls. A host of groups, from far left to far right, converged on the cities to make their voices heard—and *heard* is the operative word, since their principal tactic exploited the traditional sounds of protest. As Georgina Born has recently observed, “Particularly audible today are those sonic publics enlivened by the prominent use of sound in the performance of political protest—when sound, noise and/or music are employed to enhance the efficacy, presence and consociation of a political public.”⁸⁰

The video material from convention protests posted on YouTube reveals a diverse soundscape embracing a wide range of musical practices: solo performances of pre-existing or new songs; improvised rhythmic group chants, often in series; charivari-like drumming to accompany marching; and even the trademark human microphone of the Occupy Wall Street movement.⁸¹ These practices all exploit the enunciatory and hailing qualities of sound to take “sonic advantage” of the media, in a tactical deployment of the aurality of protests, which historically predates their audiovisual (re-)presentation. Thus the demonstrations represent an inversion of the events inside the convention halls, where delegates by and large passively consumed performed music and the moments of improvisatory vocal or bodily participation were few and far between.

Video 10: Protests Outside 2012 Republican National Convention

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

Video 11: Protests Outside the 2012 Democratic National Convention

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

As previously mentioned, however, the protesters also participated in a form of media spectacle scripted and staged for the cameras and microphones of broadcast outlets (and possibly print media).⁸² After all, they could not hope to change the minds of delegates, who at that very moment were (supposed to be) experiencing increasing solidarity and motivation through the spectacle of the convention. Instead, the protesters wished to bring their messages to a broader audience: as Ray Louis remarks in the 2008 article “Tactics and Prognosis for a Successful RNC Protest,” “this protest will give us the opportunity to

⁸⁰ Georgina Born, “Introduction—Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience,” in *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 38, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511675850>.

⁸¹ See Deaville, “The Envoicing of Protest.”

⁸² Katz and Dayan call such media events of “contest” scripted because “they determine the distribution of roles within each type of event and the ways in which they will be enacted.” Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 25.

really take a stand and make a statement to the world.”⁸³ Indeed, the phrase “make a statement” arises time and again in interviews with participants in and organizers of convention demonstration, as if they anticipate that someone would be watching and listening (and here “statement” can imply visibility as well).⁸⁴ Kellner does associate media spectacle with what he calls “spectacular demonstrations,”⁸⁵ such as the 1999 “Battle for Seattle” and the 2002 IMF protests in Washington, but we can also assign it to Occupiers sonically vying for camera and microphone attention in Charlotte or even the solitary protester making a noise within the context of a mass event outside the convention halls. Kellner may claim that “the media also arguably delegitimizes itself through constructing a media spectacle ... more concerned with dramatizing than with informing or illuminating,”⁸⁶ yet the participants exploit just that aspect of media coverage to promote their message, which—short of a violent riot—most readily projects through its auralness. Charles Euchner’s dour prognostication from 1996, that “the sights and sounds of protesters may become ‘white noise’—nondescript background sounds,”⁸⁷ does not seem to have realized itself in media representations of demonstrations, nor have protesters taken the warning to heart.

Video 12: David Rovics Outside 2012 Republican Convention

View at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0009.205>

Closing Remarks

I would have to disagree with noted political economist James T. Bennett when, in *Not Invited to the Party*, he calls party conventions “spectacularly meaningless affairs.”⁸⁸ These staged performances construct scripted narratives of party identity and unity for delegates and the media, which are underscored by music. When reinforced by the appropriate selection of music, the speeches by party notables and appearances by prominent musicians take on a star power for the members of the audience and larger-than-life meanings for media consumers. The effects of such spectacle spill outside the hall to the streets of convention host cities, where demonstrators capitalize on the attention of media cameras and microphones. Political scientist Byron E. Shafer undoubtedly had music and related sounds in mind when he wrote the following about the continuing attractions of the national conventions: “Even in an era when it is widely viewed as an institution in decline, the national party convention retains a certain immediate, raw and visceral fascination.”⁸⁹

⁸³ Ray Louis, “Tactics and Prognosis for a Successful RNC Protest,” *Nihilo Zero*, August 11, 2008, <http://nihilo0.blogspot.ca/2008/08/tactics-and-prognosis-for-successful.html>.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Viv Bernstein, “Protests Continue on Final Night of Democratic Convention,” *The Caucus: The Politics and Government Blog of The Times*, September 6, 2012, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/06/protests-continue-on-final-night-of-the-convention>; and Allison Kilkenny, “Hundreds of Activists Protest at the Republican National Convention,” *The Nation*, August 27, 2013, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/169571/hundreds-activists-protest-republican-national-convention#axzz2frMRaQQS>.

⁸⁵ Kellner, *Media Spectacle*, 177.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸⁷ Charles C. Euchner, *Extraordinary Politics: How Protest and Dissent are Changing American Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 62.

⁸⁸ James T. Bennett, *Not Invited to the Party: How the Demopublicans Have Rigged the System and Left Independents Out in the Cold* (New York: Springer, 2009), 134.

⁸⁹ Byron E. Shafer, *Bifurcated Politics: Evolution and Reform in the National Party Convention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 1.

Appendix I

Table A1: Convention Dates and Sites

Year	Party	Location	Dates
1832	Democratic	Baltimore	May 21-23
1835	Democratic	Baltimore	May 20-23
1840	Democratic	Baltimore	May 5-6
1844	Democratic	Baltimore	May 27-29
1848	Democratic	Baltimore	May 22-25
1852	Democratic	Baltimore	June 1-5
1856	Democratic	Cincinnati	June 2-6
	Republican	Philadelphia	June 17-19
1860	Democratic	Charleston	April 23-May 3
		Baltimore	June 18-23
	Republican	Chicago	May 16-18
1864	Democratic	Chicago	Aug. 29-31
	Republican	Baltimore	June 7-8
1868	Democratic	New York	July 4-9
	Republican	Chicago	May 20-21
1872	Democratic	Philadelphia	July 9-10
	Republican	Baltimore	June 5-6
1876	Democratic	St. Louis	June 27-29
	Republican	Cincinnati	June 14-16
1880	Democratic	Cincinnati	June 22-24
	Republican	Chicago	June 2-8
1884	Democratic	Chicago	July 8-11
	Republican	Chicago	June 3-6
1888	Democratic	St. Louis	June 5-7
	Republican	Chicago	June 19-25
1892	Democratic	Chicago	June 21-23
	Republican	Minneapolis	June 7-10
1896	Democratic	Chicago	July 7-10
	Republican	St. Louis	June 16-18
1900	Democratic	Kansas City	July 4-6
	Republican	Philadelphia	June 19-21
1904	Democratic	St. Louis	July 6-9
	Republican	Chicago	June 21-23
1908	Democratic	Denver	July 7-10
	Republican	Chicago	June 16-19
1912	Democratic	Baltimore	June 25-July 2
	Republican	Chicago	June 18-22
1916	Democratic	St. Louis	June 14-16
	Republican	Chicago	June 7-10
1920	Democratic	San Francisco	June 28-July 6
	Republican	Chicago	June 8-12
1924	Democratic	New York	June 24-July 9
	Republican	Cleveland	June 10-1
1928	Democratic	Houston	June 26-29
	Republican	Kansas City	June 12-15
1932	Democratic	Chicago	June 27-July 2
	Republican	Chicago	June 14-16
1936	Democratic	Philadelphia	June 23-27
	Republican	Cleveland	June 9-12
1940	Democratic	Chicago	July 15-18
	Republican	Philadelphia	July 24-28

Table A1 (cont.): Convention Dates and Sites

1944	Democratic	Chicago	July 19-21
	Republican	Chicago	June 26-28
1948	Democratic	Philadelphia	July 12-14
	Republican	Philadelphia	June 21-25
1952	Democratic	Chicago	July 21-26
	Republican	Chicago	July 7-11
1956	Democratic	Chicago	Aug. 13-17
	Republican	San Francisco	Aug. 20-23
1960	Democratic	Los Angeles	July 11-15
	Republican	Chicago	July 25-28
1964	Democratic	Atlantic City	Aug. 24-27
	Republican	San Francisco	July 13-16
1968	Democratic	Chicago	Aug. 26-29
	Republican	Miami Beach	Aug. 5-8
1972	Democratic	Miami Beach	July 10-13
	Republican	Miami Beach	Aug. 21-23
1976	Democratic	New York	July 12-15
	Republican	Kansas City	Aug. 16-19
1980	Democratic	New York	Aug. 11-14
	Republican	Detroit	July 14-17
1984	Democratic	San Francisco	July 16-19
	Republican	Dallas	Aug. 20-23
1988	Democratic	Atlanta	July 18-21
	Republican	New Orleans	Aug. 14-18
1992	Democratic	New York	July 13-16
	Republican	Houston	Aug. 17-20
1996	Democratic	Chicago	Aug. 26-29
	Republican	San Diego	Aug. 12-16
2000	Democratic	Los Angeles	Aug. 14-17
	Republican	Philadelphia	Jul. 31-Aug. 3
2004	Democratic	Boston	July 26 -29
	Republican	New York	Aug. 30-Sept. 2
2008	Democratic	Denver	Aug. 25-28
	Republican	Saint Paul, MN	Sept. 1-4
2012	Democratic	Charlotte, NC	Sept. 4-6
	Republican	Tampa	Aug. 27-30

Table A2: Music at the 2012 Republican National Convention⁹⁰

Time	Title	Music	Time	Title	Music
0:03:06	National Anthem	Live Seven All male a capella group	1:29:54	Marching band music	Recorded
0:08:40	"I Got a Feeling" (Black Eyed Peas)	Live G.E & Company Band	1:43:16	"Call Me Maybe" (Carly Rae Jepsen)	Live G.E & Company Band
0:10:10	Generic rock music	Recorded	1:51:37	"Taking it to the Streets" (The Doobie Brothers)	Live Taylor Hicks
0:15:32	Orchestral music over video	Recorded	2:01:40	Orchestral music, Copland?	Recorded
0:19:20	***70s music ⁹¹	Recorded	2:05:21	Chanted "USA, USA!"	Live
0:26:00	"Signed, Sealed, Delivered" (Stevie Wonder)	Live G.E & Company Band	2:17:15	"America America"	Live BeBe Winans and Tampa Bay Chorus
0:26:58	Orchestral music over video	Recorded	2:21:00	"Get Ready" (The Temptations)	Recorded
0:30:32	***Funk (non-lyrical transition)	Live G.E & Company Band	2:32:06	"Man in the Mirror" (Michael Jackson)	Live G.E & Company Band
0:33:35	Orchestral music over video	Recorded	2:32:56	<i>The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly</i> inspired transition	Live G.E & Company Band
0:53:35	"Just My Imagination" (The Temptations)	Live G.E & Company Band	2:44:25	Chanted "Make my day"	Live
0:54:26	"Gimme Some Lovin'" (Spencer Davis Group)	Live Spencer Davis Group	2:44:32	Alternative funk/rock transition	Live G.E & Company Band
0:57:44	Funk-transitional	Live G.E & Company Band	3:03:15	Born Free (Kid Rock)	Live G.E & Company Band
1:19:25	***Funk song	Live G.E & Company Band	3:44:16	Living in America	Live G.E & Company Band
1:20:34	Funk transitional	Live G.E & Company Band	3:49:20	America, the Beautiful	Live Samuel A. Ward and chorus
1:29:32	Misc over film (begins ominous)	Recorded			

⁹⁰ The information in Tables A2 and A3 has been assembled from the full C-SPAN footage by graduate research assistants Mariam Al-Naser and Lora Bidner (Carleton University).

⁹¹ The asterisks indicate music that cannot be precisely identified but rather described by style traits

Table A3: Music at the 2012 Democratic National Convention

Time	Title	Music	Time	Title	Music
0:01:56	***Rock/Soul sound incl. sax, drumset, winds	Recorded	2:29:34	"Walk of Life" (Dire Straits)	Recorded
0:06:39	***Funk – Piano, drumset, organ synth, guitar, fusion type sound	Recorded	2:36:05	Chanted "Joe! Joe!"	Live
0:08:09	"Walking on Sunshine" (Katrina and the Waves)	Recorded	2:44:20	"There Goes My Hero," "Walk" (Foo Fighters)	Live Foo Fighters
0:09:25	"Change the World" (Eric Clapton)	Recorded	2:58:56	"Holiday, Celebrate" (Madonna)	Recorded
0:10:57	"Give Up the Funk" (Parliament)	Recorded	3:04:27	"I Want You Back" (Jackson Five)	Recorded
0:12:27	***Trombones, bebop/swing era music instrumental	Recorded	3:08:42	*** Funk, synth piano 80's sound	Recorded
0:23:01	"Carolina on my Mind," "You've Got a Friend," and "How Sweet it is" (James Taylor)	Live James Taylor	3:12:53	"Shining Star" (Earth, Wind, and Fire)	Recorded
0:38:44	"I'll Take You There" (The Staple Singers)	Recorded	3:15:36	"Think" (Aretha Franklin)	Recorded
0:41:50	"Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'" (Michael Jackson)	Recorded	3:21:05	"Born in the USA" (Bruce Springsteen)	Recorded
0:46:50	National Anthem	Live Marc Anthony	3:27:23	"Don't Stop Believing"(Journey)	Recorded
0:55:26	"Give Me a Higher Love" (Steve Winwood)	Recorded	3:32:57	***Funk – synthesized piano, muted trumpets	Recorded
0:59:17	"I Am What I Am" (Gloria Gaynor) with lyrics	Recorded	3:39:55	***Funk– Trumpet riff, high energy	Recorded
1:08:28	"Where is the Love?" (Black Eyed Peas)	Recorded	3:45:37	***Latin Influence instrumental, guitar, bass, hand drum, laid back	Recorded
1:15:00	"Ain't No Mountain High" Enough (Diana Ross)	Recorded	3:54:50	"Soul Man" (The Blues Brothers)	Recorded
1:16:15	*** Soul/rock/jazz fusion, lively	Recorded	4:14:55	Chanted "USA! USA!"	Live
1:19:23	"Let's Get Started" (Black Eyed Peas)	Recorded	4:30:26	Chanted "USA! USA!"	Live
1:31:31	"Who Says You Can't Go Home" (Bon Jovi)	Recorded	4:31:12	Chanted "USA! USA!"	Live
1:34:08	"One Love" (Bob Marley) "Family Affair" (Mary J. Blige)	Live Mary J. Blige	4:35:13	"I Gotta Feeling" (Black Eyes Peas)	Recorded
1:42:19	"Power to the People" (John Lennon)	Recorded	4:49:50	"Higher and Higher" (Jackie Wilson)	Recorded
1:42:36	"Give Up the Funk" (Parliament)	Recorded	5:28:58	"September" (Earth, Wind and Fire)	Recorded
1:43:18	Chanted "Stampede"?	Live	5:30:24	Chanted "We are fired up"	Live
1:49:55	"Life is a Highway" (Rascal Flatts)	Recorded	5:30:48	***Funk – synth organ and keyboard included	Recorded
1:59:19	*** Rock recognizable and in same key as previous	Recorded	5:44:21	"City of Blinding Lights" (U2)	Recorded
2:04:22	*** Funk no lyrics	Recorded	5:45:50	Chanted "Four more years"	Live
2:18:37	*** Rock – generic rhythm at forefront	Recorded	6:24:34	"We take care of our own" (Bruce Springsteen)	Recorded
2:24:15	"We Are Family" (Sister Sledge)	Recorded			

Abstract

Above and beyond bringing aesthetic pleasure through the individual performances of bands and soloists, music at both the pre-mediatized (nineteenth- and early twentieth-century) and media-centered (post-World War II) national or presidential American party conventions has consistently reinforced narratives of party identity and unity for delegates and the media. This essay considers how the Democratic and Republican conventions for the 2012 election conscribed music in their “media spectacles,” against the backdrop of the character and history of America’s quadrennial party conventions and their evolving musical practices. Guy Debord’s concept of the “society of the spectacle” and Douglas Kellner’s adaptation of DeBord help us to analyze the visual and aural spectacle of the conventions.

The onstage and pre-recorded music for the 2012 conventions did not depart from the expectation that the Democrats would appeal to a youthful, liberal constituency while the Republicans would speak to their typically older, more conservative base. And indeed, the Democrats and noted deejay DJ Cassidy presented artists and tracks that were on the edge and appealing to Millennials, while the Republicans chose iconic guitarist G. E. Smith for their house music that blended country music and classic and Southern rock performed by Smith’s band and guest artists. The selection of musical acts, the choreographing of their stage appearances, and the coordination of intro and outro music to individual speakers all suggest a spectacle- and media-driven agenda for music at the conventions. The essay also considers convention-related music outside the halls, where protesters staged their own media-driven spectacles, replete with music (and speech).