

Pop-Culture and Trump, Part 3: Roger Waters Vs. The Big Man, Pig Man

Written by Robert A. Saunders

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ROBERT A. SAUNDERS, JAN 4 2018

In the third instalment of my series on the pop-culture presidency of Donald J. Trump, I want to focus on the current Us + Them tour of Roger Waters, former frontman of the hugely influential progressive rock band Pink Floyd. The creative genius behind *Wish You Were Here* (1975), *Animals* (1977), and the visceral-yet-enduring *The Wall* (1979), as well an unapologetic auteur who often challenged fans with painfully introspective projects like *The Final Cut* (1982) and *Radio K.A.O.S.* (1987), Waters has taken on a long list of political targets from the Falklands War to monetarism to food policy. I recently had the pleasure of attending one these shows, and while Waters has always been known for his politics, this current tour represents a watermark in his evolution as a musician-cum-activist.

Waters has never been shy about his social and political views. In one of the series most talked-about interviews, BBC *HARDtalk*'s Stephen Sackur probed Waters' background which included discussions of his father's die hard pacifism and membership in the Communist Party. Waters employs this patrimony as a foundation for his globally-inclined political project, one he argues is based on 'love' as he recently told the centre-right CNN host Michael Smerconish in an interview on the anti-Trump content of his current tour. Like many U.S. conservatives of a certain age (and gender), Smerconish was visibly at pains to reconcile his aesthetic admiration for Waters' oeuvre and his distaste at the overtly leftist orientation of the performances, from indictments of the Israeli border wall to post-9/11 critiques of Guantanamo Bay detentions to the current anti-Trump invective. The pundit even went as far as to pen an editorial about his 'complicated relationship' with the singer and his work in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

I saw a late summer performance on Us + Them in Newark, New Jersey – one the U.S.'s most economically depressed and crime-ridden cities, a rather appropriate venue for the dystopian themes of Water's tour-associated album *Is This the Life We Really Want?* (2017). Towards the middle of the North American leg of the tour, it was clear that Waters had settled into a groove (both performatively and politically). The concert was a stunning exhibition of technology, sound and messaging. Interestingly, a giant Battersea Power Station-like projection extended over the middle of the floor-level seating, blocking the views of the highest-paying audience members, but giving those of us in the 'cheap seats' the best vantage points to experience the full effect of spectacle (thus providing a subtle reminder of his socialist roots). Kept under wraps until the start of the tour, the content was decidedly anti-Trump, featuring the 'billionaire' real estate mogul-turned reality TV star-turned U.S. president as a demonic nemesis of the common people. Effigies of a coiffured Trump proliferated throughout the show, but interestingly, Waters did not let Barack Obama off the hook, heavily featuring footage of the 'drone presidency' of Trump's predecessor (a theme of the new track 'Déjà Vu', which was featured in the concert). While the set included tracks from *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), *The Wall*, *Wish You Were Here* and Waters' latest album, the most evocative songs were those drawn from the Pink Floyd's concept album *Animals*.

Referenced in the title of this post, the lyrics from 'Pigs (Three Different Ones)' – which was the second song of the second set (following *Animals*' anti-bullying anthem 'Dogs') – proved particularly ripe for Trumpian era. Intertextually referencing the political elite of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), 'Pigs' was originally written as an invective against mid-1970s British politicians and social campaigners, and specifically calls out the conservative activist (Mary) Whitehouse by name. However, the song proved infinitely versatile, quickly being retooled to impugn the U.S. President Jimmy Carter (and a list of other officials over the decades). With the opening lines 'Big man, pig man/Ha,

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ha, charade you are', 'Pigs' tears into the institution of politics, eviscerating the very notion of 'public service'. However, it is now painfully evident that Waters' youthful antipathy towards the greedy, self-serving politico was tragically naïve, given the contemporary manifestation of Trumpism. On Inauguration Day, the Pink Floyd alumnus explicitly linked Trump's anti-Mexican campaign rhetoric to the content of 'Pigs', posting a video of a performance of the song in Mexico City to initiate the 'resistance'. The show included images of Trump 'toting a machine gun outside the White House, giving the Nazi salute and surrounding himself with KKK members', a prognostic chimera that is now chilling in the wake of Charlottesville.

Waters seems comfortable in his role as activist-musician, taking direct aim at the malignant narcissism of 'demagogues and despots' who use 'us and them' bombast to assure their positions (and fill their wallets). Whether the Berlin Wall, the West Bank Barrier or Trump's promised-though-as-yet-unrealised 'Southern Wall', Waters has long railed against such physical manifestations of (state) power. And for those fans who don't want to hear his messages, he dismissively suggests they go listen to Katy Perry (a somewhat ironic barb given the pop-star's close association with Trump's rival Hillary Clinton). As a multimedia phantasmagoria, the Us + Them tour represents the current pinnacle in the meeting of pop-culture and global politics, as Waters has mobilised his political fervour for the world stage. From his criticism of Radiohead for performing in Israel as part of his support for the Boycott, Divest & Sanctions movement to his re-imagining of his 1970s-era lyrics for the Trumpocalypse, Waters constantly proves himself to be a key player in the popular culture-world politics continuum. And with the tour now headed to Europe and then Australia, it appears that there's no stopping him.

About the author:

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