

## **R.E.M. - Rock, alternative, new wave... political?**

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### **1: Introduction**

R.E.M. is a popular American band, known for their iconic new-wave rock sound mixed with guitars, synthpop, and a touch of political messaging. Selling over 85 million albums worldwide, they are one of the most successful alternative rock groups alongside Weezer, Pavement, and Nirvana, with their unique sound being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame ("R.E.M. | Rock & Roll Hall of Fame", 2007). Through the success of their music, they have potentially been able to spread and promote political themes and messages to their millions of listeners across the globe. With R.E.M. amassing musical success and reaching a large audience, this research is societally relevant, as due to the mainstream success of R.E.M. (Kruse, 1993, p.33), a possibility of them having politically-heavy lyrics and influence is important.

This research showcases alternative forms of political communication, which have tangible societal influence, yet are often seen as illegitimate forms of communication by scholars (Dunaway, 1987, pp.269-272). Music is sometimes perceived as an insignificant form of political communication in academia than traditional forms of communication. However, by showcasing R.E.M.'s ability to inform the public of current affairs and state political opinions, whilst receiving radio airplay, this essay proves that music can be used as an effective tool to spread political and ideological messages. Songs, in particular, can act as expressions of political views and wider aspects of society (Astor, 2021, pp.2-3). During R.E.M.'s musical career, they have promoted ideologically-based messages and themes by using metaphors for political content in their lyrics instead of explicit political statements. R.E.M.'s underlying political messaging seems to follow a leftist narrative, further examined in a lyrical analysis of their popular songs, including 'Orange Crush,' 'Finest Worksong,' and 'Exhuming McCarthy.'

### **2: Research Question - How has the band R.E.M. used music as a tool of political communication to spread ideologically-based messages and themes?**

### **3: Theory and Literature Review: 'Alternative' Music as a form of 'Alternative' Political Communication**

Music is consumed by billions across the globe; it can often come alongside political and ideological messaging and forms of identity and representation. Music can shape the direction of policy, as well as informing and influencing fans to think a certain way. Street (2014) explains that the counterculture behind rock music in particular, the genre R.E.M. fall under, is somewhat specifically responsible for the fall of the Berlin Wall (Munkittrick, 2010, p.665), and can often perpetuate a message of anti-establishment rhetoric and the encouragement of political resistance (Kruse, 1993, pp.34-35). The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication claims music can be categorised into three subsections with regards to politics; music can act as a protest tool, propaganda, or resistance (Street, 2014, pp. 3- 5). Music that spreads resistance messaging can also be broken into two subsections; the first being explicit political rhetoric and the latter being the use of intentional metaphor and subtlety - R.E.M. have opted to create music that resists capitalism, consumerism, and American exceptionalism in a subtle form, with uses of literary devices and double meanings in their popular songs (Street, 2014, pp. 4).

Philosopher Jean Jaques Rousseau believes the connotations within music and the linguistic field are crucial to the narrative behind language, seen within his writings on the societal and political aspect of music (Rousseau, 1998, p. 292). Despite Rousseau's work being written in the enlightenment era, centuries before modern popular music and the rise of alternative rock groups such as R.E.M., the quote "let us conclude that visible signs convey a more precise imitation, but what interest is aroused more effectively by sound (Rousseau, 1998, p. 292)," remains relevant, as R.E.M., and many other alternative rock artists who have been influenced by their work, use connotations and metaphor in their work. Astor (2021) offers a contemporary take on Rousseau's philosophy, stating that songs can act as a wider expression of the artist, imposing meaning to the audience. Even when detailing personal aspects of life, an artists' recollection becomes shared with the listenership, who personalise and contextualise lyrics with meaning (Astor, 2021, pp.2-3). This leads to what Astor (2021) describes as "a situation of togetherness, the many distinct individuals into the one group," detailing that audiences often relate themselves and their own personal meaning to songs, becoming a part of a collective identity; in a wider political sense, the idea that audiences can share political narratives can be inferred (Astor, 2021, p. 3).

Outright music censorship is a rare phenomenon in Western democracies (Street, 2003, p.118) however the censorship of music can still take place at the discretion of individual businesses; as R.E.M. were based in the United States, their content is protected under the first amendment of the United States Constitution (Munkittrick, 2010, p.667). In Britain, however, many tracks have been banned by the British Broadcasting Corporation for containing 'foul language' and causing public offence, specifically with references to sexual promiscuity and/or drug use (Snapes, 2019). R.E.M.'s work has avoided censorship by being subtle with their political messaging, as compared to their alternative rock counterparts the Sex Pistols, who received mass censorship from broadcasters such as the BBC for songs criticising the monarchy (Snapes, 2019).

This research paper is not the first to focus on the political narrative of R.E.M. Through a lyrical analysis of their most popular songs, music journalist Rich McLaughlin (2017) connects well-known R.E.M. lyrics to contemporary politics by using their political lyrics to express dismay at then-President Donald Trump's inauguration. This showcases R.E.M.'s vast political discography, highlighting the flaws of the American politician in songs written about previous American Presidents and previous political crises, and arguably showing that the messaging of the political right in the United States has not differed significantly since R.E.M.'s peak popularity in the 1980s and 90s (McLaughlin, 2017). Zaleski (2017) held similar views; she connected songs from R.E.M.'s political album 'Document' to the 2016 United States election, stating that 'Document' was written in unprecedented times, and remains relevant to this day.

Mercer-Taylor (2005) conducted a lyrical analysis of the popular R.E.M. song 'The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite' in *The Musical Quarterly*; whilst this research paper will not include this song, as it is less overtly political than others, it is important to note the societal influence this song has had on popular culture and alternative music, proved by academic analysis. The paper also claims that R.E.M.'s celebrity gave them power to enact change as societally influential people, adding that their music adds to a wider anti-Republican ideology (Mercer-Taylor, 2005, p.460).

Music can also act as a form of identity and expression in popular culture; this phenomenon is especially found within the alternative genre, which is often merged with youth subculture and anti-establishment views (Kruse, 1993, pp.34-35). Gardikiotis & Baltzis (2011) found that those who consumed non-mainstream and 'rebellious' music were more open to the ideas of progressivism and political change. Whilst not directly referencing R.E.M. in this paper, they are

defined as an alternative rock group, therefore, one can conclude that a majority of their listeners fit the category of being politically progressive (Gardikiotis & Baltzis, 2011, pp.159-160), if not anti-establishment.

#### **4: Political Themes and Messaging in Popular R.E.M. Songs**

##### **4a: Orange Crush, Not Just The Soda**

R.E.M. have chosen to promote ideologically significant messages and themes by using subtle metaphors and double entendre in their lyrics instead of explicit political statements. The subtlety of their politically-based messaging through popular alternative music has helped R.E.M. gain mainstream success, pushing them into the spotlight from the 1980s through to the early 2000s (Kruse, 1993, pp.34-35). Their lyrical genius is often conducted with double entendre and subtle political lyrics; being subtle enough to receive radio play and therefore seep into mainstream popularity (Sloane & Valdivia, 2003, p.76). Through lyrics, R.E.M. have promoted pacifism.

An example of this phenomenon is found within R.E.M.'s song 'Orange Crush,' which many associate with orange-flavoured soda; however, when analysing lyrical connotations and the artist's interpretation of the track, it becomes clear that the song protests the Vietnam War, against United States' military involvement in the region (Hughes, 2018). The title 'Orange Crush' relates to the use of the chemical Agent Orange in military operations by the United States in the Vietnam War (Hughes, 2018). In this example, it becomes evident that R.E.M. use music as a subtle tool of political communication. Through a lyrical analysis of this song and examining the personal lens of the song, it becomes clear that this song is politically-charged, protesting against the use of Agent Orange, a chemical herbicide sprayed over Vietnam during the war in a chemical warfare operation by the United States; the use of this chemical later caused a multiplicity of health defects in Viet Cong troops and American soldiers alike ("Agent Orange | Definition, Effects, & Victims", 2020). The song 'Orange Crush' subtly calls out the United States' use of force and chemical warfare in the conflict, starting out with a drum beat that is said by the artists to mimic machine guns used in the war (Hughes, 2018).

R.E.M.'s bassist Mike Mills detailed his personal recollection of the song in an interview with Louder Sound, stating that it was a track with a double-meaning and a subtle anti-war message,

highlighting the juxtaposition of orange soda with the use of a horrific chemical (Hughes, 2018). Mills outlined that their subtle political messaging gave them wider listenership, and that “if you wanted to dig a little deeper there was always something there,” detailing that their songs have an underlying message. He furthered this by saying in the interview, “there was no real sign that it was a big protest song, so most people listened to it and didn’t realise,” which helped R.E.M. gain mainstream success compared to more ‘obvious’ protest groups like Rage Against The Machine (Hughes, 2018) or the Sex Pistols (Snapes, 2019). “It’s most directly related to the indiscriminate use of Agent Orange in the deforestation of Vietnam and the horrible effect it had on everyone, from soldiers to civilians. It was just a terrible poison that was so widely used it caused a lot of pain and misery (Hughes, 2018).” The use of metaphor and subtle lyrics is outlined in the Oxford Handbook of Political Communication as something that “allows for meaning to be hinted at, rather than stated explicitly,” (Steep, 2014, p.3) which is directly seen in the song ‘Orange Crush.’

R.E.M.’s album ‘Document’ which prefaces the song ‘Orange Crush’ is another example of their work being fine-tuned with political themes and ideologically-based messages of anti-consumerism and anti-establishment politics (Zaleski, 2017). ‘Document’ is home to an array of politically-charged tunes, and is a prime example of R.E.M.’s societal influence (Zaleski, 2017), reaching 10th on the United States’ Billboard Magazine music charts and being the band’s first album to reach platinum status with over one million units sold in the United States. Singer Micheal Stipe told The New Yorker ‘Document’ was a way for the band to protest (Rothman, 2021). Stipe outlined, “I had purpose. I think that was realized and cauterized in ‘Document.’ And it was seven f\*cking years of Reagan-Bush, at that point, and AIDS, and a country even more divided and separated (Rothman, 2021).” The ‘purpose’ of the album to Stipe was calling out the regime that had caused division in the United States (Rothman, 2021). ‘Document’ worked. The album pushed R.E.M. further into the spotlight, landing the band on the cover of Rolling Stone, complete with the heading ‘World’s Best Band’ (“R.E.M.- Reckoning 35th Anniversary- Michael Stipe, Peter Buck”, 2019). ‘Document’ was their most successful album at the time, with tracks peppered with leftist rhetoric for their millions of fans to consume.

#### **4b: ‘Finest Worksong’ and Pro-Union Rhetoric**

R.E.M.’s genius tactic of subtlety works through purposefully structured polysemic phrases which evoke political messaging, leading to mainstream musical success and the avoidance of

ensorship (Sloane & Valdivia, 2003, p.76). Sloane and Valdivia (2003) elucidate that R.E.M.'s songs, especially from their hit album 'Document' were politically-based in nature, but "not overtly so," meaning their label gave R.E.M. the ability to voice political concerns through the use of abstract lyrics. R.E.M.'s 1987 hit album 'Document' begins with the anti-capitalist song 'Finest Worksong,' which advocates for workers' rights, calling for revolutionary change to the exploitative labour system in the United States (DeRiso, 2017). The song starts out with a heavy guitar riff followed by revolutionary lyrics advocating for political change, seen in their work as "the time to rise has been engaged, you're better best to rearrange, I'm talkin' here to me alone." This opening hook details the struggles which workers faced in the United States at the time, as the stock market crash of 1987, detailed as 'Black Monday,' caused disruption to employment rates and labour conditions (Eckblad & Bernhardt, 2013). In addition, trade union membership had been significantly declining since its peak in 1964 (Bui, 2015). Due to the dwindling influence of trade unions advocating for better labour conditions and fairer pay, workers' rights were taken less seriously over the years (Bryson & Blanchflower, 2008, p.27), with higher levels of worker exploitation and less accountability taking place. In the song, R.E.M.'s lyrical wordplay reads similarly to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' Communist Manifesto, which is famously known for the phrase, "workers of the world unite (Marx and Engels, 2017, p.103)." Whilst R.E.M. were not specifically advocating for an overhaul of the capitalist system in this track, the ideological link between this song and The Communist Manifesto remains relevant; both highlight the struggles the working class, or proletariat, face due to the economic greed of the bourgeois class.

The pro-worker message of this track is further reinforced in the second verse, with the lyrics "Another chance has been engaged, to throw Thoreau and rearrange." This line refers to the work of 19th century philosopher Henry David Thoreau, who founded the philosophy of transcendentalism, stating that human knowledge is limitless, and has a spiritual aspect to it, going beyond aspects of life that our senses can experience (Goodman, 2019). In addition to this, Thoreau argued that people have a moral obligation to disobey laws or governments which perpetuate or uphold unjust laws (Delmas & Brownlee, 2021). Thoreau outlines the concept of civil disobedience: "when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize" (Thoreau, 2020, p.443). Essentially, Thoreau issues a call to arms, telling oppressed peoples to fight against the unjust laws and systems they are subject to. In the

context of R.E.M.'s 'Finest Worksong' on the album 'Document,' the line about Thoreau references his work on encouraging civil disobedience, defined as non-violent protest to counteract the immoral acts of the government, or those in a higher societal position than oneself. By encouraging listeners of the song to 'throw Thoreau,' R.E.M. encourage the public to speak out against unjust policies; furthermore, in the context of 'Finest Worksong,' R.E.M. refer specifically to members of the working class, advocating for union membership and better working conditions through means of uprising. This idea is pushed by later verses of 'Finest Worksong,' containing the lyrics "what we want and what we need has been confused," referring to businesses putting economic means before workers' rights. R.E.M. singer Micheal Stipe commented on this song's lyrics directly, quoting that they decided to write the piece as "The American work ethic can be a very ugly thing. (Gray, 1996)" Stipe added that their hit-album 'Document' dealt with similar themes throughout, stating "some of the songs on the album deal with a misunderstanding of work as a replacement for feeling, or repression of feeling," pointing out that the exploitative system of capitalism has been a catalyst for poor mental health outcomes for workers.

#### **4c: American Exceptionalism from McCarthy to Reagan in 'Exhuming McCarthy'**

R.E.M.'s 'Document' is a prime example of the politically-charged message behind the band, described by author Dorian Lynskey as "the high water mark of R.E.M. as political songwriters (Lynskey, 2013, p.1846)." In addition to 'Finest Worksong,' their track 'Exhuming McCarthy' on the aforementioned album portrays a political narrative. The title refers to former American senator Joseph "Joe" McCarthy, who is known for exacerbating the States' fear of a communist regime, pushing for a conservative agenda. The track 'Exhuming McCarthy' is critical of McCarthy's anti-communist regime and the scare-tactic rhetoric he perpetuated through to the American public during and after the Cold War (Edmonds, 1990, p.11). The song is critical of American exceptionalism, perpetuated by McCarthy in his time as senator. R.E.M. band member Peter Buck said they felt a need to write a song on McCarthy's scare tactics, which immortalised fear of communism and leftist policy in the American public (DeRiso, 2017). Buck outlined the importance of the track 'Exhuming McCarthy' an interview with United Press International (UPI), saying "It's hard to believe that people can live in a time like this and not be concerned," and adding that the political exceptionalism and excessive patriotism of the United States, "makes [Peter Buck's] stomach churn (DeRiso, 2017)."

Joe McCarthy was known for claims that the United States had Soviet spies and communist sympathisers within their borders, leading to the period of the second red scare, where those with leftist views were shunned, and fear of communism was spread ("McCarthyism and the Red Scare | Miller Center", n.d.). McCarthy exacerbated public fear of communism, specifically claiming the United States would be subject to bombings and chemical warfare at the hands of the Soviet Union ("McCarthyism and the Red Scare | Miller Center", n.d.). Despite McCarthy having political prominence in the 1950s, R.E.M. connect the controversial public figure to Ronald Reagan, who, at the time of the album 'Document,' was perpetuating anti-communist and pro-America rhetoric similar to McCarthyism. The concept of 'Exhuming McCarthy' referred to the idea that his political narrative had been exhumed, brought back from the dead by Ronald Reagan and his exceptionalist, conservative regime (Edmonds, 1990, p.11).

The R.E.M. song 'Exhuming McCarthy' starts out with an ode against American Republicanism with the introduction stating, "You're beautiful, more beautiful than me. You're honorable, more honorable than me. Loyal to the Bank of America." These lines refer to Joseph McCarthy's military service, which was deemed 'honourable and beautiful' by Republicans; the words stating that McCarthy's actions fit that criteria are said in jest by R.E.M., as those with a left wing ideology do not see military service in a positive light due to the many innocent civilians who are killed from unnecessary military action, and due to the excess financial expenditure the United States military has cost the public. The 'loyal to the Bank of America' line specifically references the savings and loan crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, which caused economic harm to the working class in favour of corporate means and profitability for financial operators (Ely, 1993).

The chorus of the song 'Exhuming McCarthy' adds to the anti-Reagan and anti-capitalist rhetoric R.E.M. spread in the opening lines of the track. The chorus states, "You're sharpening stones, walking on coals to improve your business acumen," which references R.E.M.'s distaste for capitalism's focus on economic gain as the paramount aspect of success (Edmonds, 1990, p.11). The track repeats the words 'it's a sign of the times,' throughout, referencing the idea that President Reagan is continuing McCarthyism. The song samples a speech from head counsel Senator Joseph Welch from the United States Army-McCarthy hearings; when McCarthy accused Welch of having communist ties, Welch responded with the line 'have you no sense of decency, sir,' a catalyst in Americans turning their back on McCarthy (Ritchie & Bolling, 2003). R.E.M. using this line symbolises that they believe McCarthy, and Reagan who they are indirectly relating to, are untrustworthy and indecent.

The third verse of the song 'Exhuming McCarthy' is similar to the aforementioned line referring to Thoreau, as R.E.M. say "I'm addressing the realpolitik. Look who bought the myth. By Jingo, buy America." Realpolitik is defined as nations seeing national interests as paramount, often in favour of human rights or legal precedents (Bew, 2016, p.2); Niccolo Machiavelli is commonly associated with this philosophy, and states in his book 'The Prince' that a leader will meet their downfall pursuing the 'good,' Machiavelli is known for the idea that a leader succeeds when they are feared, and, being a realist, sees the use of force as necessary, often in military situations (Wootton, 1996, pp.40-42). R.E.M. use the theory of realpolitik in a contemporary manner, referencing the pragmatic, yet destructive, uses of American militarism under Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of State who has been criticised for conducting war crimes to benefit the nation (Scharf, 2001, p299). The idea of 'buying America' is a direct reference to American exceptionalism at the hands of realpolitik rhetoric, as consumers were encouraged to grow the American economy under legislation being made at the time of the song.

## **5: Conclusion**

In conclusion, by examining selected popular R.E.M. songs using a lyrical analysis, research proves R.E.M. are an inherently political band, spreading underlying political messages. The messages they spread follow a leftist agenda, with many references against consumerism, war (Hughes, 2018), and American exceptionalism (Lynskey, 2013, p.1846). This hypothesis has been proven by academic research regarding the importance of music as an alternative form of political communication and a strong form of protest, giving the public artistic interpretations of anti-government and anti-consumerist views. The theory that R.E.M. perpetuate and further leftist rhetoric is confirmed in various interviews by band members cited throughout this research paper. With the use of metaphor, odes to political theory and philosophy, and subtle lyrics relative to their punk rock counterparts, R.E.M. have managed to receive radio airplay, notoriety, and a dedicated fanbase of millions as proved by lyrical analysis.

And they feel fine.

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