Sarah Formica

WRT118

Jonathan Ruseski

Unit 3 Paper

Political Pop: How MUNA's Activism Combats A Shifting Pop Music Landscape

Art and music have a history of being rooted in sociopolitical commentary and reflecting the feelings of the public. Reflecting on the history of the United States, it is impossible not to find art intertwined in the creation of social change. Even things that may be overlooked, like the American flag and The Star-Spangled Banner, are pieces of art and music rooted in political statements. In 2026, with rising conservatism and an overwhelming amount of media to consume online, it may seem like art may not have the role it once did in impacting social and political movements. Pop music especially, which once was very political, may seem to be leaning away from activist messaging. However, subcultures within pop music arise to combat this shifting culture. One avenue for this is queer pop. The queer pop band MUNA is a great example of how pop musicians can create meaningful commentary and social change through and beyond their music. Formed as a college band in 2013, their music has consistently had activist messaging. Even as they have broken more into the mainstream, they remain committed to their ideals and in the age of Trump and social media they are doubling down on their beliefs rather than shying away from speaking out. It is still possible for pop music artists to be activists both in their art as well as by using social media to their advantage. MUNA's activism through their art represents a

new generation of pop musicians who have the ability to fight for human rights and social justice in new and radical ways.

In the paper "'They Don't Really Care About Us!' On Political Worldviews in Popular Music," Ulrich Franke and Kaspar Schiltz study messaging within popular music over multiple decades. They answer the research question "Which songs that made it into the top ten of the German and US music charts in the years from 1960 to 2009 refer in their lyrics to world politics, and what are the political worldviews that become manifest in those references?" (Franke and Schiltz 45). The findings reveal the recurring themes of alienation from and disenchantment with institutions and politicians with specific messaging about war and peace, political conflict, environmental, technical, and economic issues, anti-racism, and commitments to group solidarity. In Melanie Davis's article "On This Day in 1970, Neil Young Peaked as a Protest Artist, Leaving Some To Assume Pop Activism Was Dead," however, she identifies a rise of centrism that seemed to wipe away the prevalence of protest anthems. She describes Young's song "Ohio" as "one of the last true protest anthems of the time before the gap between musicians and activists widened" (Davis). These articles show the significant ties that activism and popular music once had, but, perhaps, shifting US politics and culture made musicians less prone to activism in a way that contradicts what art has historically accomplished.

The pop band MUNA formed as a college band in 2013 and got a record deal a few years later. The band consists of 3 members: Katie Gavin, Josette Maskin, and Naomi McPherson, all of whom hold varying queer identities. They have been creating political art since the beginning of their career. Their first release after signing their first record deal was the *The Loudspeaker EP*

in 2016. The title track, “Loudspeaker,” is an anthem for speaking up against abuse. The lyrics say: “What you've done to me / Well I've seen many a friend be silenced / Thinking nobody would believe them / … / But every time I don't shut up, it's revolution // … / I am a loudspeaker.” These lyrics not only bring the widespread issue of sexual assault to light but also validate the experiences of victims and encourage them to be outspoken. Later that year, ahead of the 2017 release of their first studio album *About U*, MUNA released the single “I Know A Place.” This is a song about radical queer acceptance and the importance of safe spaces for the queer community. Inspired by the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court ruling, federally legalizing gay marriage, and released following the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting, this song directly responds to and reflects on the political context of the time period. The lyrics say: “Somebody hurt me / But I'm staying alive // … / I know a place we can go / Where everyone gonna lay down their weapon.” This anthem was widely adopted by the LGBTQ+ community at a time when they especially needed a feeling of safety and solidarity, showing that there are still pockets of political activism in pop music that can make a difference to the communities that need it.

Beginning their career in this way meant they had an established political platform when they eventually broke out to a more mainstream audience. In 2023, they opened for Taylor Swift on *The Eras Tour*. In “‘Shade Never Made Anybody Less Gay’: Taylor Swift’s Performance of Allyship and the Neoliberalization of Activism,” Clementine Oberst notes that though Swift began to align herself with feminist and progressive ideals, she has a “fluctuating relationship with authenticity” (Oberst 487). She then goes on to describe how Swift’s activism more aligns with rainbow capitalism and white neoliberal feminism. When breaking into the mainstream and

joining Taylor Swift on *The Eras Tour*, MUNA had the opportunity to embrace fame and abandon their activism in favor of more centrist or neoliberal ideals. Instead, they seemed to double down. In March 2026, the band released a music video for the song "So What," the second single from their fourth studio album *Dancing On The Wall*. While the song itself is not inherently political and explores the topic of loneliness and validation, one of the video's main scenes shows the band's members in front of a concrete structure graffitied with the words "Fuck ICE." This overt political messaging being embedded in the music video for a song that does not call for it is a radical act, certainly showing the band's commitment to the fight against fascism.

Despite identifying themes of alienation from and disenchantment with political institutions in popular music, Franke and Schiltz believe that political messaging within pop music is not strong enough to produce the level of change that it calls for. They see pop songs with political messages as "mashing socioeconomic cleavages and, thereby, [stabilizing] extant power structures" (Franke and Schiltz 52). Additionally, Oberst writes that "Celebrity activism tends to be dubiously effective, reinforcing some social norms even as it challenges others and centering celebrities as allies" (Oberst 488). This idea that music and celebrity have socioeconomic and performative elements that may make their political messaging fall flat have legs in a centrist and conservative leaning social landscape. However, discounting the effects of this political messaging feels like a generalization that does not fully recognize the historical importance of political art. Additionally, MUNA's most recent activism seems to disprove this idea. In late March 2026, they did a special release of a new song from *Dancing On The Wall* called "Big Stick." They are advertising the song as their most overtly political to date, with lyrics saying:

Make you wanna give money to the government

So the cops can all have military tanks

To protect your nice neighborhood just in case

'Cause I write all the papers and the TV shows

To make you think that other people are criminals

And I control the airwaves, I control the news

So I can make you want anything that I want you to

…

Make you want to build an army and wage a war

Make you want to show the world what America's for

And how America gives more than America takes

We give weapons to dictators in apartheid states

We give kids in Palestine PTSD

But we'll never fucking ever give them something to eat

And if you've got a problem with it, you could end up in jail

Send you to Louisiana, million dollar bail

Because I have a big stick I'm not afraid to use.

These lyrics are incredibly strong, directly calling out the United States government and its racist, oppressive, fascist power structures. This can be categorized as a kind of grassroots activism, radicalizing and mobilizing those who hear the music and raising awareness for these important issues. However, MUNA does also go a step further in this activism. The special release of this song meant that it was only available for a time to be purchased ahead of its wide release in May with all proceeds from the song going to Pal-Humanity, a mutual aid organization that provides supplies, medical care, and education for communities in Gaza. This type of fundraising is a direct way that pop musicians can use their platform to go beyond the messaging in their music and begin to apply their worldviews to actionable change. Davis writes about Neil Young's struggle walking the line between taking advantage of a situation by highlighting it through music and productively engaging in that situation's history (Davis). What MUNA does here seems land on the side of engaging with the Palestinian genocide in a way that not only brings awareness but also brings aid to those struggling in Gaza.

The political landscape shifting towards conservativism in the United States certainly has affected the prevalence of political pop music. However, there are pop subcultures, like queer pop communities, that continue to fight for human rights. MUNA's political messaging in their art has only gotten stronger, not backing down from their beliefs. Beyond that, they pair their music with important fundraising that go past the bounds of consciousness raising and into actionable change.

Annotated bibliography (all accessed through Smith Libraries):

Davis, Melanie. "On This Day in 1970, Neil Young Peaked as a Protest Artist, Leaving Some To Assume Pop Activism Was Dead." ***American Songwriter*****, 21 May 2025, https://americansongwriter.com/on-this-day-in-1970-neil-young-peaked-as-a-protest-artist-leaving-some-to-assume-pop-activism-was-dead/**

Summary: This article recounts the release of Neil Young's song "Ohio" in response to the 1970 Kent State University shootings. Davis writes about how despite what one might have expected, the shootings led less to public outrage and more to widespread apathy and the rise of centrism. She identifies Young's song as a last attempt to keep music political before the gap between activists and musicians eventually grew. At the end of the article, she includes a quote from Young where he reflects that the backlash he got from the song stopped him from singing it for a while, saying it made him feel like he was taking advantage of the situation by releasing a song about it. Looking back, however, he realizes that folk music is meant to document history and by performing it now he is bringing that history back into the light.

Reflection: I really appreciated this article's documentation of the apathy and centrist thinking that has now become pervasive in society. I think Davis includes important reflections on the role of music and seems to demand more political activism in music/from musicians. I also really appreciated the discourse between taking advantage of a situation and documenting the situation that Neil Young himself brings up in the quote that Davis included. I think that this article will give me a good historical basis for the arguments I plan to make in my paper.

Franke, Ulrich, and Kaspar Schiltz. "'They Don't Really Care About Us!' On Political Worldviews in Popular Music." *International Studies Perspectives*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2013, pp. 39–55. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44218729.

Summary: This article documents a study of the political worldviews represented in the lyrics of pop songs across multiple decades. It answers the research question "Which songs that made it into the top ten of the German and US music charts in the years from 1960 to 2009 refer in their lyrics to world politics, and what are the political worldviews that become manifest in those references?" The findings reveal the recurring themes of alienation from and disenchantment with institutions and politicians. However, the authors believe that the political messaging within the music is not strong enough to produce the level of change that it calls for.

Reflection: I have mixed feelings about this paper. I found its extraction of political worldviews very useful. However, I take issue with its final claim. I feel more aligned with what they call an optimistic view, which is that the political messaging in art is a form of grassroots activism and that, specifically in pop music, it has the ability to influence and inspire listeners on a wide scale. Additionally, I plan to intervene with the ways that the presence of social media offer alternative ways for artists to create change beyond what the authors call "celebrity diplomacy".

Oberst, Clementine. "'Shade Never Made Anybody Less Gay': Taylor Swift's Performance of Allyship and the Neoliberalization of Activism." *POPULAR MUSIC AND SOCIETY*, vol. 47, no. 5, 2024, pp. 487-504.

Summary: Oberst analyzes Taylor Swift's activism throughout her career, tracking how she began her career as intentionally apolitical before shifting towards liberal politics later in her career. Oberst notes that her allyship seems to be performative rather than genuine and that the worldviews and feminism that she expresses in her music seem be neoliberal and focused on individualism rather than uplifting marginalized communities.

Reflection: This is a great analysis of Swift's activism and, I think, highlights very well the way that mainstream pop music has shifted into centrism. Even in Swift's most progressive activism, she still seems to be working out of her own best interest. This is an interesting perspective to include in my paper.