

2020 Vision: An Examination of Anti-Flag in the Age of Trump

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Anti-Flag released their 12th studio album, *20/20 Vision*, in early January 2020, preceded by the single “Christian Nationalists”. While neither explicitly addresses the events that would unfold later in 2020, the album’s themes resonate strongly with those important struggles. The summer of 2020 included a surge of music addressing the social and political climate, drawing historical parallels to a musical tradition of social commentary and activism. For instance, the Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd echoed the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Songs like “Alright” by Kendrick Lamar, used during Black Lives Matter protests (McKinney, 2020), mirrored the use of “We Shall Overcome” as a way to recognize the duality of despair and hope during both movements in time. Similarly, “I Can’t Breathe” by H.E.R. and “What’s Going On” by Marvin Gaye both addressed police brutality against Black men and women.

The summer of 2020 in the U.S. was an active time. Protests erupted throughout the U.S. following the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, drawing attention to the ongoing police brutality of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. A highly contentious presidential election followed, culminating in an attempt to overturn the election results. All this social unrest and political tension took shape against the backdrop of a global pandemic that intensified social and racial inequalities. Consequently, as the *New York Times* reported¹, protest and social movement activity was the highest since the Civil

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¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

Rights Movement. Musicians contributed to a broader discourse of resistance during this time, continuing a long tradition of activism in music (Denisoff, 1983; Eyerman & Jamison, 1998; Garratt, 2019; Roy, 2010; and Weissman, 2010).

In this article, I examine Anti-Flag's contributions to this tradition of activism in music. Focusing on Anti-Flag, a band known for its heavily left-leaning political activism and lyrical content, allows me to examine the social and political context of 2020 through the lens of punk music scholarship. At the time of writing this article, the *20/20 Vision* album still seemed relevant in the content it addressed: Donald Trump's racist border policies; implicit and explicit support for violence against Black and Brown protestors; and his rhetoric of white, right-wing Christian nationalism. While some sense of racial and ethnic equity may have shifted during Joe Biden's presidency, the issues are still major concerns for progressives and remain part of progressive discourse in U.S. politics. Given this context, Anti-Flag positioned themselves as informal educators, and the messaging within their music moved the band beyond mere entertainment.

Anti-Flag became a source of controversy when frontman, and lead singer, Justin "Sane" Geever was accused of rape. In an exposé by *Rolling Stone* in September 2023, Roundtree (2023) detailed the accusations and Anti-Flag's sudden disbandment after the news broke. The allegations were a significant moment in the band's history as the band had positioned themselves as a group that stood against sexual assault and were called into question because Geever's actions contradicted that stance. While this context does not necessarily detract from what Anti-Flag's music meant in 2020, before the broader public and fans were aware of these allegations, the rape allegations impact how the music is received in the present. In short, the band serves as a complex example of how to critically read the past when the past was the present and how to read the past with present knowledge. I return to this moment in Anti-Flag's history later in this paper. While Anti-Flag is not the only group whose reputation is altered by accusations of sexual assault, I think the band provides a powerful and important context for considering political action in different contexts (i.e., what a band meant in the past and how that past can be reconsidered in the present).

Music as Resistance and Educational Space

Hawkins and Burns (2012) and Dunn (2016) claim that while punk lacks a central political philosophy, it often leans toward a Left and liberal political space. This is a helpful frame for positioning punk as political. However, it does present

some challenges. Most notably, there is a considerable latitude as to how we can interpret “political” in terms of ideology, where examining punk and politics often omits punk spaces where right wing or conservative politics are present. Kevin Dunn addresses this by challenging a common criticism of punk’s lack of central governing political philosophy. Constructing an image of punk as politically progressive with “a leftist/anarchist bent...only works if you ignore all the bands and punks that do not fit that description” (2016, p. 18). Punk music as a site of resistance and education can be made by fascist, neo-Nazi, or right-wing political groups. As Bestley (2018) discusses, we cannot assume that punks generally hold certain political stances and should not be applied to the entire culture. However, it is essential to recognize other spaces where punk and politics intersect.

Furthermore, while political leaning tends to be linked to left wing and liberal punk bands and their lyrics, identifying punk as progressive also ignores bands or sub-genres that have no overt political alignment yet are producing content that is very much political. Pop-punk, often seen as less overtly political, can be politically critical. Sum 41, with their song “45”, is an excellent example of how a more mainstream pop-punk band leans into punk’s frequent politicalness by strongly criticizing Donald Trump’s actions as president. Green Day, which also falls within pop-punk and represents a more mainstream success with punk writ large, used their platform to address contemporary global issues. Green Day’s 2004 album, *American Idiot*, is another good example of pop-punk and politics intersecting with songs like “American Idiot” and “Holiday.” Both songs, inspired by the war in Iraq, addressed media manipulation and tackled the U.S. invasion of Iraq, respectively.

Recognizing the political spectrum in which punk and its associated genres can exist, Street (2012) argues that “music embodies political values and experience, and organizes our response to society as political thought and action” (p.1). Street expands our understanding of punk as educational and what some punks aim to achieve with their music. Anti-Flag, for example, aimed to enlighten listeners about what is happening in society and encourage further education. This move aligns with Dunn’s (2016) analysis of punk. Dunn states that “punk provides individuals and local communities with resources for self-empowerment and political resistance” (p.9).

Anti-Flag, through their work, demonstrates their commitment to left-leaning political ideology. Additionally, their songs show how music can be educational and serve as sites of resistance; both were explicit in the album *20/20 Vision*. For instance, the song “Christian Nationalists” called attention to the use

of religion to justify oppressive state policies and white supremacy. The lyric video for “Christian Nationalists” links white supremacy, the prevalence of mass shootings in the U.S., and the politicians who received donations from the National Rifle Association (NRA) (Smith-Engelhardt, 2019). The video opens with the familiar phrase repeated by Donald Trump, “Make America Great Again!” but quoted by David Duke, Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. “Christian Nationalists” then moves through a series of mismatched images of figures who were complicit in promoting white Christian nationalism, aligned themselves with the NRA, or were identified as white supremacists. The more recognizable faces in the video are Dylann Roof, who murdered nine Black parishioners at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015; Mitch McConnell and Ted Cruz, both of whom received money from the NRA (Bradyunited.org, n.d.); and Donald Trump and Mike Pence who promoted a white nationalist agenda during their time as President and Vice-President.

While a complete examination of the album is beyond the scope of this discussion, this article focuses on “Hate Conquers All” because the song directly responds to the political climate in 2020, especially focusing on Donald Trump and the violent rhetoric he espoused during his presidency. By narrowing the focus of this article to “Hate Conquers All,” I can still capture the overarching themes represented across the album.

Denisoff (1966) posits that a song falls into six primary goals, two of which are relevant to this discussion. He states that a song “attempts to solicit and arouse outside support and sympathy for a social or political movement” and a song “points to some problem or discontent in the society, usually in emotional terms” (p. 582). These goals align with the political content of Anti-Flag’s music. “Hate Conquers All” enlightened listeners on the political climate of the time, such as Donald Trump’s use of racist rhetoric during his presidential campaign, and encouraged listeners to further educate themselves in a critically reflective manner. Anti-Flag’s song exemplified Denisoff’s notion of a song pointing to societal problems.

I chose to analyze this song because it moves beyond trying to entertain listeners. Instead, “Hate Conquers All” can be heard as a site of resistance, encouraging listeners to recognize and critically reflect on what was happening around them. In this regard, Anti-Flag’s political work through song can be viewed as a contemporary example of the organic intellectual. Rooted in Gramscian thought, the organic intellectual emerged from a specific social class, typically those without any formalized education, who worked to develop critical

consciousness from the ground up (Ramos, 1982). Looking at Anti-Flag through the lens of the organic intellectual, we can see how “Hate Conquers All” sought to develop critical awareness among listeners.

Examining “Hate Conquers All”

Unlike Anti-Flag's past songs that alluded to former presidents indirectly, such as “Outbreak” referencing Bill Clinton and “Turncoat” written about George W. Bush (Graff, 2019), “Hate Conquers All” directly references Donald Trump. This move highlights the importance of this album as it was a stark departure from their previous songwriting conventions. The track leads with a sample of Trump stating, “In the good old days, this does not happen. Because they used to treat them very, very rough. And when they protested once, they would not do it again so easily” (Butler, 2016). This sample is attributed to one of his rallies while he was still a presidential candidate in 2016. In this clip, Donald Trump is making references to enacting violence against protestors by police. Without directly naming the subjects in his speech, Trump’s double use of “they” in the first and second sentences alludes to police and protestors, respectively.

Interestingly, this sound bite also features in the trailer² for Ava DuVernay’s *13th*, “where a woman being pushed at a Trump campaign event transitions into civil rights footage of a black man being punched and pushed across the street by a racist mob” (Butler, 2016). Anti-Flag used this sound clip to call attention to Donald Trump rhetoric calling for the suppression of any dissent and protest against him. Connecting “Hate Conquers All” to *13th* makes the opening quote all the more powerful in what it calls attention to: the normalization of violence against protestors.

Following the sample, we move into the chorus. The song states, “Hate conquers all in the ashes of the fall/With our backs against the wall/ With our backs against the wall/Watch the empire fall/ Watch the nation dissolve/ With our backs against the wall with our...” (Anti-Flag, 2020). The song immediately cuts the final word from the sentence before moving into a short guitar-driven riff. This verse suggests that hate and social division have taken over and that the U.S.'s social life and economic opportunities are moving in a downward spiral. For people who aspire to a culture of equity, It is easy to see how this socio-political context warranted further attention. Trump enacted many policies that shifted the

² <https://x.com/13THFilm/status/786295040314253312>

U.S. in a more conservative direction. One instance of this is one of Trump's earliest legislative acts, placing a ban on immigration from several Muslim-majority countries in the name of national security (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, n.d). Widely referred to as the Muslim ban, this policy increased anti-Muslim violence and Islamophobia in the U.S. (Beutel, 2018; CAIR-Philadelphia, 2018; Deutsche Welle, 2018; Patel & Levinson-Waldman, 2017; Reuters, 2018). The notion of having "our backs against the wall" evokes being trapped in the face of opposition. However, a different take on the chorus can also be interpreted as a direct nod to resistance. With our backs against the wall in any situation, we do not just give up; we fight back.

We can break the first complete verse into two parts. First, Anti-Flag evoked an image of a nation in decline, opening with the lines, "The new disorder of/ The impoverished nation-state/The endless cycle, divide and manipulate" (Anti-Flag, 2020). While "impoverished" may be too strong for the U.S., the lyrics captured a sense of social and economic weakening in 2020. The Trump administration's policies and rhetoric around isolationism, international monetary policies, the rollback of environmental regulations, and a disregard for science-based evidence during the COVID-19 pandemic created a sense among critics that the United States was in decline (McTague & Nicholas, 2020). The second part of the line, "divide and manipulate," is a powerful statement to make in the context of 2020. The cycle of division and manipulation was seen in the deep partisan divide during Trump's administration and in the potential manipulation of Trump's support base through a series of misinformation campaigns about the 2020 election and COVID-19.

The second part of the verse further alluded to the idea that those in power may offer words of solidarity, sounding good superficially, but ultimately, when people need help, no one will be there. Anti-Flag states, "Never give in to the sympathy/Never give in to reality/No one could save us so build/Up and lock the gate/Never give in to our sensory/Never give in to the honesty/No one could save us" (2020). The message here is to challenge unquestioning optimism and surface-level acceptance. This part of the song urges listeners to critically reflect on what they hear, favoring reason over an instant emotional response. While emotions are not unimportant, critical thinking only strengthens our experiences. Examining Trump's statements uncovers his reliance on triggering an emotional response.

In the second full verse, the song builds on the idea of false hope in our leaders. It heavily suggests that those who oppress us are, in turn, the ones who want to save us: "The same masters who made/Us their fucking slaves are now

our saviors.” In addition to addressing the oppressor/oppressed dynamic, the band created a powerful and contentious image here by using the terms master/slave. At a time when race, power, and inequality were at the forefront of American discourse (and remains so), even before Trump became president, this is an interesting and important lyrical choice. The song's latter half says, “I am so sick of needing to be saved/Never give in to the sympathy/Never give in to reality/No one could save us .” This phrasing further pushes against relying on an external source for help. During the summer of 2020, many in power (elected officials and business leaders) were largely silent about a quest for improved social equity. Any meaningful change regarding racial disparities, police violence, and social and economic inequalities was mainly driven from the ground up by local communities.

Anti-Flag included another sample from Donald Trump as an interlude toward the song’s end. “And you know what? The audience swung back, And I thought it was very appropriate; the audience hit back, And that is what we need a little bit more of,” Trump says. This sample was pulled from one of his 2016 presidential campaign rallies, which also called for violence against protestors (Gass, 2016). In this instance there was an incident at a different campaign rally where participants of the event attacked a protester. The inclusion of the sample was Anti-Flag’s way of calling attention to how Trump reinforced the use of violence against protestors during his presidential campaign rallies. But the sample can also be heard as potentially reappropriating Trump’s words as a call to listeners to act.

Using another sample from Donald Trump before moving into the final chorus cements this song as a site of resistance. The band refused to accept the circumstances in which the U.S. existed then and called for the listener to act. As an example of informal educational discourse, “Hate Conquers All” did not explicitly call for resistance; instead, it prompted listeners to engage with the song deeper lever. By encouraging critical reflection on what was happening in the U.S. during Trump’s presidency, the song empowered listeners to make a decision: be an agent of change or remain a passive bystander.

The summer of 2020 featured a wave of social movement activity in the U.S. Buchanan et al. (2020) reported that the estimated total number of people participating in the protests during the summer of 2020 was between 15 and 26 million. If accurate, the Black Lives Matter protests would have outpaced some of the United States' other notable protests and social movement activity across time, such as the Women’s Marches of 2017 and 2018. The Women’s Marches,

which were important and powerful social actions, were reported to have 1.5 to 5 million, respectively (Owen, 2017; Waddell, 2017, New York Times, 2018). Even the 1999 WTO protests, referred to as the Battle for Seattle, a significant moment in anti-globalization protesting, were estimated to be more than 40,000 people (The Seattle Police Department, 2000). Highlighting these areas of social movement activity only amplifies the magnitude of the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and helps contextualize the release of “Hate Conquers All.” The song is a useful site of analysis because the issues addressed in the lyrics profoundly resonate with the context in which people protested en masse.

The murders of Breona Taylor and George Floyd, along with the violence enacted on other Black Americans, sparked outrage and demands for justice. Public officials were criticized widely for their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, the increasing economic inequalities continued to intensify, fueling calls for action in the U.S. and other countries. Though much of what was addressed in “Hate Conquers All” existed well before Trump’s election, the actions and discourse of Donald Trump and his administration seemed to further the disparities that Anti-Flag sought to protest. Thus, the band focused on Trump’s speeches, actions, and policies to reflect on the then-contemporary explication of multiple social, political, and economic concerns for progressives.

Anti-Flag existed amidst a tradition of activist musicians. Through their music, they can be seen as organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense. By using their platform as musicians, Anti-Flag raised their fans’ consciousness. Weaving biting social commentary into their music, Anti-Flag provided listeners with a creative lens to explore alternative forms of resistance and uncommon areas where resistance could be practiced. Anti-Flag’s music challenged the dominant ideology and empowered listeners to think critically about social and political contexts relevant to their lives.

Thoughts on Anti-Flag’s Disbandment

In late summer of 2023, news of Anti-Flag’s disbandment began to spread. The band broke up after news broke about allegations of sexual assault perpetrated by Justin “Sane” Geever. The band’s social media posts narrated that the band was breaking up, that their web presence would be shut down, and that all future shows were canceled. Details of these allegations were not fully known at that time; this was a cryptic stance from an otherwise active band. Nevertheless, there was no immediate denial or acknowledgment of what happened. Several months

later, Roundtree (2023) wrote about the band's disbandment and fans learned more about the allegations against Geever. I agree with the band's decision to dissolve what they had built over 30 years, since the alleged sexual assault is highly troubling and contradicts the progressive politics that were a core tenet of the band's songwriting and actions. I admire the conviction of a group to make that type of commitment and stand by it without question. I also hope the remaining members of Anti-Flag can offer as much support as they can to any victim choosing to come forward.

When artists we admire become embroiled in controversy, especially those accused of sexual assault, a dilemma arises for fans: How do we move forward? Should we dismiss entirely Anti-Flag's work, despite what it can teach us about activism? Or should we acknowledge this complexity when analyzing their music? Anti-Flag had a long history of writing songs that offered both progressive resistance. The songs were examples of informal education. However, just because the band offered progressive criticism through lyrics does not make the band immune from a broader critical engagement with social ills—allegations of sexual assault demand critical reflection from listeners.

We can read the past in the present context when assessing a band's actions, but such consideration should not ignore how a band influenced fans in the past. At the time of release, "Hate Conquers All" offered a blistering critique of former President Donald Trump. The song meant something in 2020 to punks who looked to politically engaged artists to help us make sense of the social, political, and public health turmoil that was happening at that time. We should not gloss over or re-write that history. However, we should revisit the band (especially Justin "Sane" Geever) using the template they offered about striving for social equity and striving for alternatives to violence.

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