UNDER PRESSURE

MAX BRZEZINSKI

SINGLES ONE SONG ONE BOOK ONE OF A KIND

A SONG BY **DAVID BOWIE AND QUEEN**

UNDER PRESSURE

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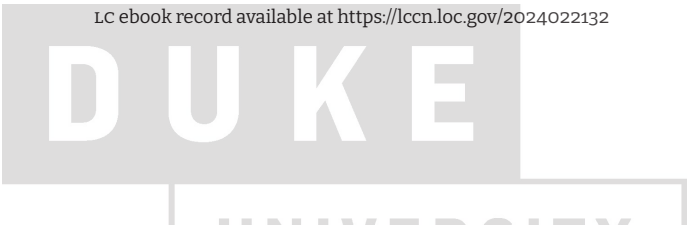

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0 Intro
Anthem, Counter-Anthem, Anthemic

IN THE FALL OF 1977, Queen and David Bowie each released singles destined to become anthems: on September 23, Bowie released "'Heroes'"; two weeks later, Queen dropped "We Are the Champions" with "We Will Rock You" on the flip side. "'Heroes,'" although put out in German, French, and English editions, was only a minor chart success. Both sides of Queen's 45 were immediate smashes.

Queen wrote "We Are the Champions" and "We Will Rock You" with mass consumption, arenas, and stadiums in mind. Both were reverse engineered from a live show in May 1977 during which a rowdy audience stamped, clapped, and sang Liverpool FC's anthem "You'll Never Walk Alone." Soon after, Queen created a 45 that channeled crowd behavior and expectation into a perfect pop commodity. Demographic market research here preceded artistic inspiration: "I was thinking about football when I wrote it," Freddie Mercury recalled of "We Are the Champions."[1] Market research, then, but also applied physics: Brian May recorded the memorable percussion of "We Will Rock You" at various distances, "all prime numbers" apart, "so you just feel like you're in the middle of a large number of people stamping on boards and clapping."[2]

Both songs are lyrically skeletal, almost contentless. The lyrics do nothing more than reiterate the music's effects: we will rock you, we are the champions. These minimal, self-contained songs are universal machines, inventions intended to produce direct and monumental affect in large crowds and simulate it for the home listener.

Queen's combination of rousing technical effects with placeholder lyrical forms was intentional. As Roger Taylor recently said of his band's relation to commitment: "In Queen, we always tried to be apolitical," while May once noted that "[a] Queen audience is a football crowd which doesn't take sides."[3] In Queen's anthems, banners are waved "all over all the place," but the com-

batants and stakes are unclear. "We Are the Champions" auto-allegorizes Queen's attempt to become stars but is open-ended enough that any listener can number themselves among the *we*. "We Will Rock You" focalizes the rocker, not the rocked. They were written to empower crowds of all types, no matter the political, economic, and social divisions within them.

Bowie's "'Heroes,'" a song of furtive love under the shadows of the Berlin Wall, gathered its popularity more slowly than Queen's contemporaneous release. The power of "'Heroes'" initially seemed a different sort than Queen's: It's not musically direct or lyrically neutralized enough to be a jock jam. It's a dark, ambivalent song about alcoholic, erotic, and geopolitical tumult—not a monumental song of triumph. Built on Robert Fripp's woozy, interval-jumping guitar eruptions and a volume-dependent microphone rig that applied different effects on Bowie's voice depending on its amplitude, the track is a counter-anthem for outsiders struggling under the oppressive weight of Cold War terror. It takes sides, and only underdogs can really identify with it. Bowie scare-quoted the title of "'Heroes'" (both the song and its album) to emphasize that melodramas of heroes and villains were beside the point. The anthem crosses out the possibility of heroism and victory for a period any longer than "just for one day." The only thing it insists upon is struggle, and only for survival levels of meaning and connection.

By 1977, then, pop musicians like Queen and Bowie were taking up the mantle of exhausted institutional anthems in opposed,

contradictory fashions. But "We Are the Champions," "We Will Rock You," and "'Heroes'" alike announced that national airs, church sing-alongs, and revolutionary hymns were tapped out, even embarrassing. Such "classic" anthems no longer inspired and fused communal imaginaries like the "wretched of the earth" of the nation, the church flock, or "The Internationale."

Whether ultranationalist, ecclesiastical, or radical, these traditional songs' propagandistic power to train and move citizens, parishioners, and believers was rapidly diminishing. Red Krayola's Mayo Thompson's 1981 put-down of "The Internationale" as "inflated and overwrought" held more generally for the historical condition of lesser anthems of church and state.[4] Even true believers could only pay lip service to the sense of the old airs while no longer feeling the music: a case more of inertial obligation than aesthetic passion. In the era of structural adjustment and deindustrialization, self-consciously grand anthems like "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," "Deutschland Über Alles," "The Sacred War," and "Ode to Joy" (retrofitted as the EU's "Anthem of Europe") were now productions of an inaccessible, pre-45 era, with limited aesthetic and political purchase on the present. By the late 1970s, all institutions that formerly inspired collective belonging seemed corrupted—the wars nation-states waged were dirty and antiheroic, democracy and communism had both suffered elite capture by bureaucrats and kleptocrats, and corporations were busy rediscovering their passion for out-

sourcing and sweatshops. Grassroots countermovements were either AstroTurfed from the outset or harassed and tortured out of existence.

The only ascendant collectives with a hopeful future seemed to be members of antidemocratic institutions, nominally national but increasingly globalized: businesspeople, spies, paramilitaries, and lobbyists. The cohesion between these players is better described as authoritarian solidarity than revolutionary camaraderie, given that their shared goals were to jack up oil prices and control wages, overthrow leftists and social democrats at home and abroad, jockey for neo-imperial preeminence, and maintain bottom lines and monopolies of violence.

As a result, long gone were the days in which anthems inspired true fervor, or even genuine crises of political conscience. C. L. R. James gives a sense of this dissonance between the anthem as a form and the content it might be called upon to convey. In *The Black Jacobins*, James relates a story of French legionnaires in 1802 shocked to hear Haitian rebels singing "their" anthems of freedom: "Yet at nights they heard the blacks in the fortress singing the *Marseillaise*, the Ça Ira, and the other revolutionary songs. Lacroix records how these misguided wretches as they heard the songs started and looked at the officers as if to say, 'Have our barbarous enemies justice on their side? Are we no longer the soldiers of Republican France? And have we become the crude instruments of policy?'"[5] By the 1970s, it seems all sides felt like

crude instruments of policy. The reasons for a newer phase of crisis in the traditional anthem form were multiple and overdetermined. I count three major ones:

1. Traditional anthems of state, church, and revolutionary movements had aged poorly compared to the productions of the cultural industry. The sonics of the older anthems felt dated to contemporary listeners, even those committed to their ideological contents.
2. Older airs' grandiosity of address to entire nations, large congregations, international masses, and global diasporas no longer accorded with the grimmer, more fragmented, and contradiction-riven realities of collective life after World War II, and especially post-1968 and what Eric Hobsbawm has called the "crisis decades."[6]
3. A century of total war and global capitalist expansion had ravaged the local and national institutions whose spirit these anthems previously incarnated and promulgated. The old anthems were flagging in strength as the aesthetic, social, and political terrain underneath them gave way, but the hunger for new ones remained sharp and keening.

Enter the pop anthem. In supplanting the older anthems in content, many new strains of pop music anthem in the decade

before 1981 and "Under Pressure" retrofitted and transformed their essential formal lineaments for new uses. Whether travestied, inverted, or pastiched, underground or corporate, the welter of new popular anthems released between 1968 and 1981 had to maintain some connection to tradition to remain legible and successful.

So the new anthemics continued to draw out intense bodily and emotional participation from listeners — if not in the footstomps and war-whoops of Queen's arena rock fans, then in the humming, dancing, miming, and singing-along of bedroom dwellers and drivers. The new pop anthems aimed to *move* people, both in a literal, physical sense and in an internal, subjective, affective one. They still articulated at least an attenuated collective vision — they were "we" songs, not singer-songwriter confessions. Most of the new pop anthems, unlike Queen, still named an enemy.

Pop anthems, like their nationalist, religious, and internationalist predecessors, were still, at least nominally, songs of struggle. As a result, they needed to map out their contemporary historical conjecture, in both sound and lyric. They approached this task of diagnostic analysis — sketching the shape of their present moment — to lay out a vision of an improved, optative, or even utopian state. All this they had to do, as of old, in grand, heightened style. Furthermore, as anthems are, by definition, melodramatic allegories of the collective's relation to institutions, these newer anthems, like the old ones, required a capacious view on

human affairs and a monumental, even epic tone. Of course, a pop song could possess all these qualities and still fail to be legitimated as an anthem by mass audiences.

The pop anthem is an index of social bondedness and, partially, its producer. The anthem is a form that represents the contemporary state of collective relation; it is also something that offers the musical means to invent new collective states, conjuring fresh groupings by creating new affects or feelings and, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari observed, "mak[e] us become with them."[7] In daily life, we still tend to separate the domain of representation, thought, and language from that of affect. Against this false partition that would separate the ideas in a song from its sentiments, in pop music they run in parallel, intertwine, or contradict but never separate.

This combination of analytical, narrative diagnoses of the present and its capacity to help invent future affects makes pop music inherently unstable: it works differently in every song. But unlike loner singer-songwriting or dyadic love songs, the pop anthem must keep faith with group subjects and experiments in collective feeling.

But what collectives could still be depicted and promoted in the 1970s? The desire for the anthem, for belief, belonging, and a cause, was seemingly objectless. By the time the seventies were in full swing, no existing institutions seemed likely bearers of a more egalitarian, progressive, let alone revolutionary, future. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's sanguine 1971 answer to the ques-

tion "Will the circle be unbroken?" on their cover for an album of the same name — that "music forms a new circle" — in its vaporous modesty beat quite a retreat from more radical forms of utopianism.

And by the mid- to late seventies, all forms of collective possibility seemed shut down. The dreams of Marxism-Leninism were bogged down by Soviet bureaucratic malaise and declining rates of economic growth; in the years before his death in 1976, Mao had lost the plot and loosed the furies of the Cultural Revolution on the Chinese citizenry; in foreign policy, the United States remained committed to providing cash, guns, soldiers, and the CIA to any reactionary in Africa and the Americas willing to kill leftists, while mass bombing civilians in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; OPEC tormented Western nations, manipulating prices to produce not one but two oil crises. Suffering economically, Labour in the UK proved an ineffectual guardian of workers and immigrants and inflamed conflicts with the IRA into widespread violence.

Meanwhile, profit-seeking corporations found they could more effectively exploit workers by moving factories to global zones of underdevelopment. As the decade ended, a rare double-dip recession paired rampant inflation with rising unemployment. Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, full-financialization, and renewed threats of nuclear war were in the air. Godfrey Reggio's end card for *Koyaanisqatsi* featured a series of definitions of the Hopi word that provides the 1982 movie's title:

1 crazy life.
2 life in turmoil.
3 life out of balance.
4 life disintegrating.
5 a state of life that calls for another way of living.[8]

This concisely captures the affective dimensions of the deadlocked times. As to where or how to bring into being this other way of living, no one was quite sure. Margarethe von Trotta's 1981 masterpiece *Die bleierne Zeit* allegorizes only the dead end, through the tale of two sisters, one revolutionary, one liberal. At the film's end, Marianne the radical terrorist has been murdered by the state in prison, and her sister, feminist journalist Juliane, can't convince any papers to even investigate Marianne's killing.

Such unpropitious times demanded new anthems. But ironically, these same times so troubled the traditional economic, political, and affective conditions of possibility for the creation of such anthems that the culture industry seemed at a loss. What could be done?

Amedeo D'Adamo claims new pop anthems became "critical," by which he means they sought to redeem an abandoned American democratic spirit via constructive criticism: his central example is, oddly, the Anti-American camp of "Young Americans."[9] D'Adamo locates this spirit in everything from Woody Guthrie to Beyoncé's cover of "At Last" for the Obamas. But it is unclear whether Guthrie's America is Beyoncé's or whether all

pop anthems ever did or ever ought to launder the reputation of the US empire, whether in liberal or reactionary terms.

So just rebranding nationalism as critical won't hack it. In fact, between the late sixties and the early eighties, pop music anthems splintered and proliferated in manifold directions. There were not only critical anthems but counter-anthems, national collapse anthems, internationalist anthems, subcultural anthems, pure pop antipolitical anthems, and anti-anthems. Some were nihilistic, some utopian, some intended for small DIY communities, some for the unrestricted transnationalism of major label or diasporic distribution, some a flight from the anthem altogether, born out of the same spirit that inspired Donald Fagen to profess that "anthemic rock music is inherently fascist—anything intended to move huge masses of people is politically offensive to me."[10] These multifarious forms were often politically and aesthetically opposed to one another, and even had contradictory expressions in style and substance, and so cannot be too hastily lumped together. The present book articulates the form's politics and poetics, with "Under Pressure" representing both its culmination and inflection point.

To begin with, the late sixties/early seventies churned with counter-anthems: these critiqued nationalism, militarism, and moralism and expressed the hope that the youth culture could imagine and manifest an alternative nation. And in negative mode, Jimi Hendrix's famous rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock stripped the anthem of its traditional,

ideological lyrics and interpolated the sounds of machine gun fire, screams, and wails into the anthem. The song called on the crowd at 1969's Woodstock to demolish the old national culture and build an entirely new society. Jazz bassist Charlie Haden described a similar scene in the notes to *Liberation Music Orchestra* (1969), in which anti-Vietnam delegates sang "We Shall Overcome" at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago: "Unable to gain control of the floor, the rostrum instructed the convention orchestra to drown out the singing. 'You're a Grand Old Flag' and 'Happy Days Are Here Again' could then be heard trying to stifle 'We Shall Overcome.'" On the album bearing these notes, Haden and his band of out-jazz all-stars extended the idea, offering versions of Spanish Republican partisan and workers' songs, civil rights anthems, and an ode to Che Guevara to help listeners "creat[e] a better world, a world without war and killing, without racism, without poverty and exploitation."[11]

In the UK, the distance traveled from Bowie's "Changes" (written and recorded in 1971) to "All the Young Dudes" (written and demoed by Bowie, given to Mott the Hoople in 1972) represents the speed at which history was moving. In "Changes," Bowie had proclaimed that the "children . . . trying to change their worlds" are "quite aware of what they're going through," and he commanded the old guard step aside for their youthful betters. These "children" were, Bowie sang elsewhere on *Hunky Dory*, "the start of a coming race." But only one year later, in "All the Young Dudes," the youth revolution had already stalled out:

And my brothers back at home with his Beatles
and his Stones
We never got it off on that revolution stuff
What a drag, too many snags.

This completely abandons *Hunky Dory*'s visions of an American-style ascendant global youth culture. What's more, it's telling that Bowie shrugs off the breakup of "that revolution stuff" with such flippancy—he might have been lamenting a hole in a sweater or sock. In one year, then, the ambition and hope of a global utopianism has been reduced to a subcultural celebration of the minor pleasures to be found flouting the conventions of a strictly national, English, culture. In "All the Young Dudes," Bowie contracts the frame of reference, scaling back what counts as meaningful political and social action. The song invests its jouissance in distinctions of taste and minor deviation from national cultural norms. Bowie finds pleasure in demotic Cockney slang ("funky little boat race [funny face]"), minor deviations in sensibility (the championing of T. Rex over Beatles and Rolling Stones), and the small thrills of petty crime (shoplifting from Marks and Spencer). In another particularizing, localizing gesture, he name-checks his real-life London friends Freddie Burretti and Wendy Kirby.

Here was one of the many moments in Bowie's career when a hardwired faddishness allowed sociological foresight into the near future. Through *aesthetic* premonition that the Stones were passé (before *Exile!*), Bowie receives a glimpse of the *political*

shortcomings of the New Left. In short, Bowie was so attuned to transformations in style, he often got a preview of coming changes in the economic and political base.

Already in 1971, Bowie was proclaiming "Rule Britannia is out of bounds." But this feeling was limited to the kooks of Haddon Hall. By 1974 it had become general. On *Diamond Dogs*' "We Are the Dead," the lament of English Tommies from the poem "In Flanders Field"—*we are the dead*—has shockingly become universally applicable. Bowie's "we" statements describe collective dependency, compromise, and confinement:

- We're fighting with the eyes of the blind.
- We feel that we are paper, choking on you nightly.
- We're today's scrambled creatures, locked in tomorrow's double features.
- Because of all we've seen, because of all we've said, we are the dead.

These pronouncements are delicately poised, still applicable to national subjects but now also transnational agents ("press men," "financiers") and subjects (consumers of media spectacle and its "twenty-four-hour service"). In Bowie's new global collapse anthems, the only bonds are trauma bonds, born of a shared subjection previously experienced only by particular groups (e.g., young English soldiers) but now commonly experienced as living death.

Meanwhile in 1970 America, Curtis Mayfield had already seen the future first with "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below, We're All Gonna Go." In contrast to the counter-anthem, such national collapse anthems are purely negative. The utopian possibility for another, better nation is registered by its total absence. "Don't Worry" is an infernal vision: America is damned, beyond salvage. Civil society's drugged and hysterical, the well's poisoned, politics has been replaced with clout-chasing, everyone's exploited, and police, judges, and juries are shot through with the same corruption.

President Richard Nixon's mantra "Don't worry, worry, worry, worry," an anthemic utterance of the old sort, in Mayfield becomes pure gaslighting. A year later, Marvin Gaye sang of America as a land of social death: "The way they do my life / this ain't living." And three years after Gaye's *What's Going On*, Bob Dylan would be crying of an "idiot wind, blowing like a circle 'round my skull / from the Grand Coulee Dam to the Capitol," in the process turning Guthrie's New Deal anthem "Grand Coulee Dam" inside out. The old American national culture was now conceived in these inverted anthems via infernal terms. These songs—stirring, alternately melancholic or rampaging in tone, still addressing the nation in elevated tones—kept the stylistic shell of the old anthems while smashing up their affirmative ideological positions, replacing them with sign-changing travesties, bleak sociological figures, and grotesque menageries.

In the UK of the second half of the seventies, the national collapse anthem would culminate in punk manifestoes: the Sex Pis-

tols' "God Save the Queen" and "Anarchy in the U.K."; the Clash's "Remote Control," "English Civil War," and "London Calling"; Crass's "Systematic Death"; the Ruts' "Babylon's Burning"; Discharge's "A Look at Tomorrow"; and so on. In less florid language and with more rage than hymnal meditation, these songs also inverted and negated the propaganda songs of British national unity, modernizing rather than abandoning their sound structure entirely.

As Paul Gilroy argued of the period in *"There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack,"* various genres of reggae, Rastafarian ideology—from Bob Marley to Brother D and through to early Yellowman—mocked the inward, defensive self-definitions of postcolonial Britain and their sense of the nation as a closed system that rightly belongs to "whites," not "immigrants." They favored cross-racial and cross-class appeal, with its utopian, "syncretic," and diasporic form and contents.[12]

At the same time as the above counter-anthems and national collapse anthems were germinating, another form, the *anthemic* pop song, was also being born. When Lester Bangs uses the word "anthemic" to describe English garage rockers the Troggs' "I Can't Control Myself" in 1971, he's sheepish: he calls the adjective "pretentious" and himself "brassy" for using it. This, along with his scare quotes, shows that *anthemic* was then an unfamiliar and recent coinage. It might not be the first deployment of the term in the modern sense, but it's *early*. The word and concept *anthemic* allows Bangs to wax poetically in his next paragraph about the

Troggs' "sexual anthems" and the supposedly "truly democratic attitude about fucking" in their song "Give It to Me."[13] The Troggs' singer, we are told, cares about his partner's pleasure: Bangs here sets the bar for erotic equality pretty low. His frivolous conflation of teen sex with democracy shows that the anthemic's relation to politics is more tenuous that the anthem's. This pop form sounds like an anthem but in contradistinction to, say, Gilroy's reggae, carries no message. With the term *anthemic*, Bangs is conceptualizing a minor anthem, without world-historical stakes, a political neutralization and formal hollowing of the old form's scale and scope.

This is where Queen reenters the story. The band first charted with 1974's *Queen II* but didn't break big internationally until 1975's *A Night at the Opera*. Though Queen is now best remembered for "Bohemian Rhapsody," not everyone recalls that *A Night at the Opera* ends with a compact (1 minute, 12 seconds), sprightly instrumental: "God Save the Queen." This Brian May claimed was a tribute to Hendrix's rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" six years prior. It also cites the expected conclusion to a British night at the opera: the orchestra playing the anthem.

It represents the anthem as entertainment, in other words, as *anthemic*: just another song, the occasional for a virtuosic guitar workout, a fun but neutralized version. Deideologized of both its traditional meaning and Hendrix's, it is an English product made for easy global export. Neither patriotic nor unpatriotic, not a turbulent counter-anthem nor antagonistic negative national anthem, it excites most as a brilliant translation of an old song

into a seventies rock guitar instrumental. It's a heuristic closure device for *A Night at the Opera*, an expression of neither propaganda nor high art.

A minor anthem, which cites the national context blankly, the song burdens the listener with no ideology. It's of a piece with Brian May's Elektra Records letter jacket in the video for "Somebody to Love" and Freddie Mercury's comparison of Queen's music to Bic razors and used tissues: "They can listen to it, like it, discard it, then on to the next. Disposable pop."[14] Queen created anthems manqué. To reverse Joy Division's phrase, they have the feeling but have lost the spirit. From Jimmy Buffett's "Margaritaville" (1977) to Charli XCX's "Anthems" (2020), the anthemic form yearly grew in power, swelling toward the hegemony it possesses in the culture industry today.

By the second half of the seventies, the pop anthemic increasingly took on international shapes. The apolitical anthem, embracing its commodification as pure pop, was instrumental or used the restricted vocabulary of an internationally accessible Globish English. Here ABBA was the pioneer. They sang with recognizably Scandinavian accents but with a completely nonthreatening, defanged, and endearing exoticism. Few concrete specifics of Swedish life or politics entered the music. The band ABBA was different but not threatening, and its deviations from standard English endearing, not provocative.

The counter-anthem and the national collapse anthem also took on international dimensions post-1968. The broadcast of

"All You Need Is Love" (1968), during an early televised satellite simulcast, begins with the fanfare of "La Marseillaise," turning the French national anthem into the intro for a global counter-anthem. Expressing the utopian hopes of the time, the Beatles self-consciously position their own song as an international counter-anthem, cosmopolitan not national. In experimental music, the left-field electronic recombination of the world's national anthems in Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Hymnen* (*Anthems*, finalized 1969) was a more bracing manifestation of the same planetary impulse.

But John Lennon's "Imagine" (1971), inspired by *The Communist Manifesto*, puts a negative sign in front of "All You Need Is Love." It itemizes all we *don't* need for the world to live as one: "religion," "countries," or "possessions." In Lennon's trajectory alone from 1967 to 1971, from the Beatles to his early solo career, we hear a transition from an internationalist celebration of already-existing love to an abolitionist utopianism: a better international order can be figured only in dreams and the imagination. These songs are of a piece with modernist poet W. H. Auden and cellist Pablo Casals's "Hymn to the United Nations" (also 1971). In this internationalist collaboration—an "ode to world peace," as the *New York Times* called it—Auden strikes the "elated, optative" imperative: "Let music for peace be the paradigm." But at the same time, he begrudgingly acknowledges that "with words we lie, can say peace, when we mean war."

In Nigeria, Fela Kuti epics like "Water No Get Enemy" (1975) and "International Thief Thief" (1979) straddled the line between

geopolitical counter-anthems and anthems of global collapse. In a just world, water would be an inalienable human right and kept unpolluted, uncommodified, and free for all: a universal resource. But "International Thief Thief" articulates the global realpolitik that keeps even elemental substances like water hoarded, degraded, and politically manipulated. In this world, direct colonial brutality has given way to informal corporate colonialism:

> *Many foreign companies dey Africa*
> *Carry all our money go*
> .....
> *They go dey cause confusion*
> *Cause corruption*
> *Cause oppression*
> *Cause inflation.*

All are achieved via elite capture: the grooming and bribing of African leaders until they serve the interests of foreign multinationals: "Commissioner, Permanent Secretary, Minister, Head of State."

Others in the late seventies and early eighties dodged anthemic forms entirely. Whether because it seemed politically suspect for crowds to sing in unison or because anthemic music increasingly began to feel embarrassing, genres as wide-ranging as new age and no wave, minimalism, dub and *kosmische*, ambi-

ent and free jazz tended to avoid the bombastic monumentality of anthemic music for tranquil, slowly mutating process tones or skronking horns, slowly churning bass loops, repetitions with minor variations, or atonal meanders. Even disco, as it mutated into boogie and "disco not disco," lost its grand live strings and huge choruses. In many of the cutting-edge genres and modes of the era, the pop anthem was only a present absence.

On the smaller-scale, anthems were also being written for DIY labels addressing subcultures and scenes beneath the national and transnational ones. One example is Red Krayola's single "Born in Flames" (1980) for Rough Trade Records. A mock anthem for Lizzie Borden's near-future feminist film of the same name, the song is laced with leftist slogans delivered with varying levels of seriousness. Its audience was intentionally limited to a fraction of a fraction: absurdist weirdos with a penchant for critical theory.

American hardcore bands like Bad Brains, Minor Threat, Black Flag, and Dead Kennedys initially had no interest in mass pop crossover. Anthems like "Straight Edge," "Banned in D.C.," "Nervous Breakdown," and "California Über Alles" sought audiences in local DIY niches, youth subcultures, and class fractions, while actively antagonizing those outside of them. Of course, these niche anthems became more broadly popular only after their historical moment had passed.

In all the subgenres of funk, soul, and boogie, newly modified by adjectives like *outsider*, *personal*, *private*, *lo-fi*, and *basement*

and now avidly sought by music collectors, micro-anthems were proliferating. These were records pressed locally just once and in small runs. On tape, home-recording pioneer R. Stevie Moore had begun *Bedroom Radio* on WFMU and was just about to launch his Cassette Club; underground tape-trading in the burgeoning thrash, speed, and black metal scenes was bubbling up to the surface. These networks of listeners and musicians were bound together by anthems never meant for prime time.

The same musical minorness could be found anywhere on the globe. These included a variety of different interventions in non-rock and rock-adjacent genres, from factional roots reggae (Rex Harley's ode to Grenadian insurgents in the Marxist New Jewel Movement, "Dread in a PRA" [1979]) to the alternative-lifestyle shadow plays of goth kicked off by Bauhaus's "Bela Lugosi's Dead" (1979), Horace Tapscott and the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra's minimal spiritual jazz-piano-and-small-chorus take on "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (1979, the "Black national anthem"), or Serge Gainsbourg's divisive cod reggae twist on "La Marseillaise," "Aux Armes et cætera" (1979). These and other experiments were anti-universalist anthems, intended not for easy, universal co-optation but for some tinier vanguard subculture, minor either in taste, political experience, or communal affiliation.

In this wave, when a known anthem like William Blake's "Jerusalem" was covered, it was to completely rewrite its meaning. Like Gainsbourg's "Aux Armes," Mark Stewart (post – Pop Group) turned to reggae, specifically dub, for a 1982 cover to crack wide

open the sort of traditional nationalist version you might hear after the BBC Proms. Meanwhile, in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1981, Flying Nun Records released the Clean's "Tally Ho!," a strong contender for the first "indie rock" anthem. By 1981, more and more DIY anthems were being produced for niche, sometimes subhistorical audiences. Anthems were no longer just for divinities, nations, and international mass movements.

This was the field of historical forces ca. 1981—political, aesthetic, and social—out of which Queen and David Bowie's pop anthem "Under Pressure" emerged. New pop anthems were spinning out in multiple, often contradictory modes, united only by the shared sense that new experiments in this social form were necessary. Necessary because the old collective bonds were broken, and the old forms that had helped secure and produce them (for better *and* worse) no longer had the power to do either.

But what's this have to do with "Under Pressure"? Well, despite the inherent imprecision of such specific dating, it might be said that 1981, the year the song was released, was year zero for our own contemporary historical moment. As Fredric Jameson recently re-periodized the 1980s in 2016, "It seems to me that everybody recognizes some kind of postmodern break, whatever name they give it, *that takes place around 1980 or so*, in the Reagan/Thatcher era, with the advent of economic deregulation, the new salience of globalization."[15] The world of this "postmodern break," dawning then, has been wholly subsumed as second nature today. And in the realm of pop, by 1984, the corporate

recording industry had already locked music down, consolidating what Michaelangelo Matos has felicitously termed "the golden age of corporate synergy."[16] Not coincidentally, 1981 was the year the pop anthem started congealing into its two regnant forms: rousing anthems of the private writ large (e.g., "'Heroes'") and world-encompassing anthemic entertainment without any content whatsoever (e.g., "We Will Rock You"/"We Are the Champions").

So, by returning to "Under Pressure," we return to a pop anthem from the moment of our present moment's emergence. "Under Pressure" offers us concepts, diagnoses, and structures of feeling from a moment when the destruction of our collective lives and the corruption of our institutions (primarily but not limited to state and corporation) were in the offing but not yet felt and assumed to be irresistible, inevitable, and irreversible. "Under Pressure" represents the collision of Bowie's and Queen's opposed experiments with collective being.

"Under Pressure," like all great pop anthems, attempts to process the contradictions and conflicts built into communal life. No matter how much we try to retreat or subtract ourselves from the necessity of collective existence, we need others. Pop music's contribution is to model and inculcate in us the rudiments of future social glues.

In other words, anthems work by "providing reference points for an experiment which exceeds our capacities to foresee."[17]

But such "experiments" in pop are as much practical as utopian: songs like "Under Pressure" renew the search for useful forms of sociality.

It should go without saying that I'm not claiming that we are only *x* number of pop anthems away from staving off the apocalypse. Rather, the point is that without the affective affirmation and imaginative negation produced and provided by works like "Under Pressure," it will be much more difficult to imagine that structural change is possible. When it comes to popular aesthetic forms, none articulates the problems, symptoms, and scales of collective breakdown, or generates more experiments (in thought and feeling) toward remedying that breakdown, than the pop anthem.

But what made "Under Pressure" a work that so powerfully represented its era that it still has things to teach us today? Going into the recording of "Under Pressure," Bowie and Queen represented two conflicting versions of this pop anthem ("'Heroes'" vs. "We Will Rock You"). In combative collaboration, they needed to produce a third style: "Under Pressure" is both a combination of and a sound outside Bowie's and Queen's other productions. Working together required the invention of new ways of working, recording, writing, and performing. But it was also because both Bowie and Queen were savvy students of the history of pop music genres, of the behavior and tastes of crowds and mass life. This added a second-order, conceptual dimension to the song.

The strange, dense, hybrid character of "Under Pressure" is also a historical phenomenon—it can be considered the culmination of fatigue with more immediate forms of pop anthem.

This context spurred Queen and Bowie to build a layer of self-critique into their anthem. Finally, the unique genesis of the song, recorded spur-of-the-moment in Switzerland and remixed a week later in NYC, meant that the released version would of course be a second-order interpretation of its impromptu Swiss raw materials. Not only was there a week's gap for the artists to reflect on what they would do with the initial tracks, but in the mixdown, a whole new anthem stepped into view.

What's more, Bowie's and Mercury's peculiarities as artists blended and clashed throughout the development of the song. For example, Bowie's penchant for avant abstraction interrupts Mercury's love of melodramatic excess, while the two had a shared obsession with glam camp rhyme. It was this dynamic, fraught, and contradictory collaboration that gave the song a complexity and enduring frisson that still powerfully sounds today.

But because "Under Pressure" is a composite work—critics have described its "cut-and-paste feel"—it juxtaposes and interrelates competing modes of the pop anthem, without being reducible to any one.[18] Like most of the anthems cataloged above, it is rousing and catchy and articulates a collective struggle on a grand narrative scale. But as we will see, it is neither a national anthem, a counter-national anthem, a niche anthem, an evacu-

ated pastiche, a straightforward hymn, nor a fight song. And due to its ambiguous, multifarious status, its volatile vortexing of all of its genre's touchstones, even the best critics, like Ned Raggett, have settled for dubbing it "anthemic" and calling it a day.[19]

Philosopher Simon Critchley's *Bowie* doesn't mention it, and Shelton Waldrep's academic study *Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie* references it only once; Chris O'Leary's *Ashes to Ashes* deems it powerful but suspect, a "sad hippie song beneath its cannonades and arias," trumped up by its two singers' enthusiasm "into being far better than it deserves to be."[20] It's not featured in the recent Bowie documentary *Moonage Daydream* or the Queen biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Hardcore Queen fans are more appreciative of the song's merits than Bowie's. Even Bowie himself got into the judgmental spirit years after the song's recording, claiming to be embarrassed by some of the song's lyrics, and said the track "stands up best as a demo."[21]

Yet despite this touchy avoidance (cut with condescension) by critics, the song is well known and well loved by non-critics and casual fans. It's a karaoke and radio staple, Vanilla Ice took its bassline from famous to super-famous in 1990, and boilerplate-brained Bill Gates recently named it a desert island disc (gauchely and anachronistically associating it with "disco days with a bit of weekend fun"[22]). In *Happy Feet Two*, a children's movie so dire its writer said he'd rather be shot in the head than write a third installment, corporate cartoon penguins and walruses cloyingly duet "Under Pressure," and it themes an incredibly irritating

Minions trailer. So it's the sort of song CEOs namedrop to playact as men of the people and movie studios cravenly insert into cash grabs. It's been loved to the point of overfamiliarity.

Like all great pop, "Under Pressure" is easy to enjoy and difficult to interpret. Many critics have perhaps tamped down their enthusiasm of "Under Pressure" to avoid being thought middlebrow. While triangulating the song's cultural capital is fun, it does not begin to interpret the song. It's more interesting to think about the song as a zone where mass enjoyment and critical interpretation meet and misrecognize one another.

Any complete reading of "Under Pressure" must account for the contradictory space where popular fandom's breezy assessments meet more elaborated readings of the song's historical context and aesthetic form. So this book will treat "Under Pressure" as a nexus of contesting interpretations and uses—the site where popular and critical discourse touch, converse, and contradict one another. As we'll see, this sort of fraught relation is already built into the form of the song itself, in the "duet" and "duel" of Bowie and Mercury's performances and in the two visions for the song smashed together into the song's "compromise" issued version.[23]

To untangle the significances of "Under Pressure," I've chosen to follow what we might call the song's three primary keywords, in the order they appear—*pressure*, *streets*, and *love*—devoting a chapter to each. As these terms are enmeshed and interwoven in the song, it may seem procrustean and too literal-minded to

parse them this way. But as "Under Pressure" is a song that accumulates power and meaning as its duet form develops, following its unfolding from beginning to middle to end is essential.

And to do so, we first have to clear the detritus of the song's contemporary meaning—the result of so many corporate captures, dilutions, travesties, and cynical citations—the now automatic and accepted manipulations of the musical past by today's culture industry. Any pop music critic's first role is to recontextualize, reinterpret, rehistoricize, and so redeem a past work and lift it out of its weakened state as dead metaphor.

If a song like "Under Pressure" is to again have meaning for us today, a double action must be performed. First, its roots in and relations to its own historical moment must be redescribed. For its aesthetic and affective potential to be reactivated for contemporary listeners, it needs to be reheard in such a way that burns away the ice of long misuse and unhearing. Once this is done, the song's historically situated meaning can be put back in touch with the crises and concerns of our present.

In doing so, we'll trace the intertwined relation between the modern pop anthem, collective politics, and the dominant institutions of state, corporation, and civil society in the past forty years. It's my belief that a close reading of "Under Pressure" will reveal the pop anthem to be a pivotal clearinghouse for the collective imagination.

The pop anthem, as the most ambitious and affecting producer of collective sentiment, and the only pop genre that pretends to

conceptualize society in toto, is both a bellwether for the state of collective politics and a means for thinking and feeling beyond its present limits. And as no song both critiqued and embodied the contradictions and techniques of its genre more thoroughly, all theories of the popular anthem must go through Bowie and Queen's "Under Pressure."

NOTES

Lyrics, unless otherwise noted, are the author's transcription.

Introduction

1. Horid, "Queen Deserves."

2. May, "Queen Guitarist Brian May."

3. Benitez-Eves, "Roger Taylor"; Jones, *Mercury*, 194.

4. Thompson, "Liner Notes."

5. James, *Black Jacobins*, 317–18.

6. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, chap. 14.

7. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 175.

8. Reggio, *Koyaanisqatsi*.

9. D'Adamo, "Ain't There One Damn Flag," 126, 140.

10. Donald Fagen, quoted in Borrelli, "Steely Dan Singer."

11. Haden, back cover notes.

12. Gilroy, *"There Ain't No Black."*

13. Bangs, "James Taylor Marked," 61–62.

14. Freddie Mercury, quoted in Clerc, *Queen All the Songs*, 55.

15. Fredric Jameson, quoted in Baumbach, Young, and Yue, "Revisiting Postmodernism," 144; italics mine.

16. Matos, *Can't Slow Down*, 3.

17. Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 48.

18. Blake, *Is This the Real Life?*, 258.

19. Raggett, "Under Pressure."

20. O'Leary, *Ashes to Ashes*, 170.

21. O'Leary, *Ashes to Ashes*, 168.

22. Gates, "Bill Gates's Desert Island."

23. Pegg, *Complete David Bowie*, 241; May, "Exclusive."