

## **Hail to the Candidates**

**The presidential election has inspired an outpouring of original songs, from calypso to country music.**

**By JOHN JURGENSEN**

While many election officials expect voters to turn out in record numbers this November, Americans have already produced many recorded numbers about the candidates.

The 2008 presidential campaign has generated a range of original songs, from a country paean to John McCain to a bluesy tribute to Joe Biden. The soundtrack to the race includes songs that are celebratory or satirical, by amateurs or high-profile professionals, including the Obama-baiting "He Will Barack You" ("You think you're an ace, you got no case") and "I Picked a Girl," which borrows a recent pop hit to skewer Sarah Palin ("It felt so wrong, she leaned so right"). The outpouring is being fueled in part by technology and cultural phenomena that didn't exist when the country last picked a president. Since then, YouTube and other Web sites for user-generated content have made it possible for any creative impulse to be widely seen or heard. That's encouraging today's musicians to emulate political troubadours of generations past, whose fight songs (often written to the tune of familiar folk songs) were handed out as sheet music at rallies.

"This is an old American tradition, revived with D.I.Y. flair for the 2008 cycle," says James Miller, a former rock critic and current professor of political science at the New School for Social Research in New York.

Barack Obama is ahead by a big margin in the song count, based on the offerings from YouTube, iTunes and other online sources. CD Baby, a Web store where any musician can sell CDs or downloads, lists more than 20 releases that endorse Sen. Obama; there appear to be none for John McCain.

"Obama's demographic is young and liberal; the profile of the entertainment industry is young and liberal," says Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. This past week, the Obama campaign began selling a \$30 compilation CD through its Web site that includes songs from Stevie Wonder and John Legend.

Oscar Brand, a folk musician who recorded an album of historical presidential campaign songs, says he's working on a song about John McCain. It's his answer to the 50 or so pro-Obama songs that have been submitted to his folk music show on a New York public radio station. "I try to make my audience aware that there are songs from both sides," he says. An undecided voter, Mr. Brand is leaning toward Sen. McCain.

The campaigns still mostly piggyback on the messages and moods of songs that are already familiar to their bases. At rallies, Sen. McCain has played "Only in America" by country group Brooks & Dunn, a song that closed Sen. Obama's convention address. It was used during George W. Bush's run, too.

Here is a look at some of original songs composed during the 2008 presidential race.

### **Fiddling for McCain**

With a few exceptions, such as a song that rejiggers Eric Clapton's "Cocaine" (sample verse: "Until the war is done, he won't pack up and run: McCain"), the Arizona senator has mostly inspired satirists online. But in the music industry he has the support of country singer John Rich, best known as half of the country duo Big & Rich. To fill what he saw as a need for a McCain rally cry, Mr. Rich wrote a song called "Raising McCain" that highlighted the former Navy pilot's years in a Vietnam prison camp.

Mr. Rich made a video, offered the song on his Web site and even performed it at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul. With its aggressive twang, fiddle solo and repeated play on the phrase "raising Cain," "Raising McCain" seems effortlessly on message, says Ms. Jamieson of the Annenberg School. "What you get is an effective piece of campaign communication."

### **A Catchy Name**

A search on YouTube for songs about Barack Obama yields thousands of results, including Obama Girl's famous love song, attack raps ("The Audacity for Nope"), riffs on the Illinois senator's name and the biggest viral hit of the campaign so far, "Yes We Can," produced by will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas, which has been viewed nearly 9.9 million times on YouTube alone.

Of the most earnest songs celebrating the candidate, a surprising number come from Caribbean singers -- many of whom won't be eligible to vote for him. Jamaican reggae singer Cocoa Tea says, "For me it was the issues that he was articulating. For other people in this part of the world it's the power of knowing that there's going to be a black man in the White House." As for the chorus of his "Barack Obama," the singer says, "It's more catchy than saying 'John McCain.'" The Mighty Sparrow, the Grenada-born singer known as "the calypso king of the world," has also been prolific. His "Barack the Magnificent" has a laid-back vibe, but drops references to the Jack Abramoff scandal and the Foreign Relations Committee.

### **Moose-Shootin' Mama**

Though she was named Sen. McCain's running mate only about a month ago, the Alaska governor is on track to rival Sen. Obama as the subject of song. Dozens of tunes have been posted to the Web so far -- most of them parodies. For country singer and supporter Pat Garrett of Strausstown, Pa., musical inspiration struck three weeks ago via email. When a doctored photo of Gov. Palin posing with a rifle made the rounds online, Mr. Garrett's webmaster (an Obama supporter) wrote, "That's a moose shootin' mama." Mr. Garrett seized the line, dashed off some lyrics and sang the results on the voicemail of a Nashville record executive. A few days later, he was in Tennessee cutting the track. Featuring the lines "Drill, baby, drill, 'cause we're paying way too much. Maybe what this country needs is a woman's touch," the track was rushed out to radio stations and posted for sale online.

Over the years, Mr. Garrett has had more success selling sheepskin coats from his headquarters on Interstate 78 than scoring hit songs. Now, the McCain/Palin team is talking with Mr. Garrett about a "Moose Shootin' Mama" ringtone and streaming the song on an official Web site. "I've been wanting to hit a good lick for many years," Mr. Garrett says, "and we may have hit one."

### **Biden's Blues**

Except for an unflattering parody called "Fightin' Joe Biden," posted by an online comedy team called Red State Update during the Democratic primaries, the Delaware senator hadn't inspired much music until a band from his home state tuned up. Nothin' But Trouble, a bar band that gigs regularly around Dover and Baltimore, has released a song called "Joe Biden Blues" online. The lyrics celebrate Sen. Biden's political pedigree while poking fun at his admitted tendency to grandstand. "Give him a Georgia, Iraq or Iran/You can bet that the man got a plan/Give him a problem that no one can solve/And he'll fix it on C-SPAN," sings bass player Greg Haughey.

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