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David W. Jacobsen's narrative indie album "POTUS" is a comedic achievement

BY JO MOSES ON OCTOBER 27, 2020

In October 2020, indie singer David W. Jacobsen released his experimental album "POTUS" — its primary focus being the lives of the more obscure and the more awful U.S. presidents. The goal of the album is described by Jacobsen as "mixing history with storytelling, providing a humanized view of men who have guided America for better or worse (more often worse)" and in that goal, it succeeds. Take a look at a few of the best songs on the album:

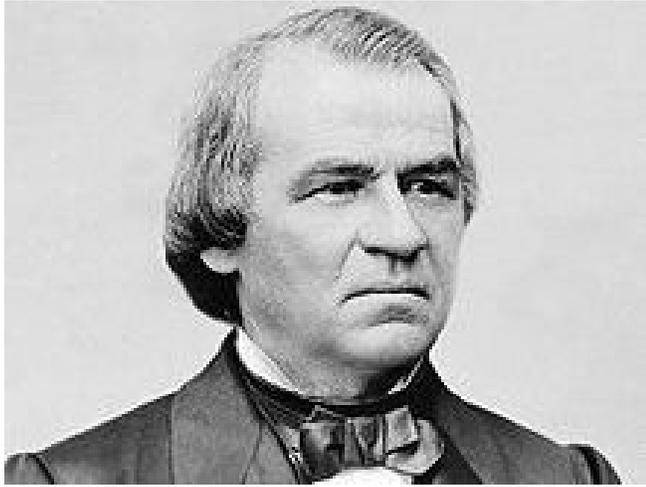
"Swing Around the Circle"

There is a certain ingenuity in doing what "Swing Around the Circle" does; it gives Andrew Johnson his own Disney villain song.

The fast-paced pipe organ ballad, oddly reminiscent of *The Lion King's* "Be Prepared," tells the story of [President Johnson's](#) "ill-fated speaking tour to drum up support in the 1968 mid-term election for congressional candidates that would support him. It did not go well. He was the first president to be impeached and only survived by one vote in the Senate. After being president, he would get elected back to that same Senate that almost ejected him from office, but would die soon after."

[Regarded](#) by Jacobsen as "monstrously racist in a time when most white people were pretty racist to begin with, "Swing Around the Circle" bestows a cartoonishly evil introductory song to the man who engineered the demise of the Reconstruction Era.

Lyric sample:



Andrew Johnson courtesy of Whitehouse.gov

"Samuel Tilden's Lament"

Similarly, "Samuel Tilden's Lament" fits perfectly into a musical. It fits right into the scene where the villain (or maybe even the hero) is defeated, raises their fist to the sky, and asks: Why? Why did it happen this way? The story of Tilden, both the man and the song, is the story of a stolen election that resulted in the false presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes. The narrative of the stolen election is one that carries a lot of resonance after the manufactured losses of Al Gore, Hillary Clinton and the very first Tilden.

As Jacobsen [explains](#) in his song, "The election of 1876 was flat-out stolen. The electoral vote was contested under sketchy circumstances and ultimately, as would happen 124 years later, a small group of people in Washington, D.C. decided who would get Florida's electoral votes. They very likely should have gone to Samuel Tilden, but a backroom deal to withdraw northern troops from the South, allowed for them along with a few other states, to go to Rutherford B. Hayes."



Samuel Tilden courtesy of the National Park Service

"Swing around the circle

You can take your shots at me

Swing around the circle

I care not for my dignity

Do you know how far I've come?"

Lyric sample:

"Rutherford Hayes is on my mind

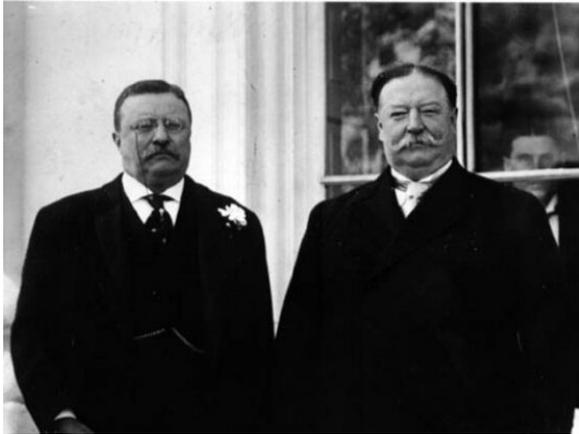
*Been robbed by circumstance and by
time*

I'm acting bitter, we all know why

Rutherford Hayes's job should be mine"

"Crying at Your Grave"

Managing to win the contest of sheer novelty, "Crying at Your Grave" explores an alternate history wherein William Howard Taft and Theodore Roosevelt were lovers. At least, that's how it sounds to me. Jacobsen gives a more general [description](#) of the piece, calling it a "jilted love song." The song is comical, inviting listeners to laugh at Taft's tearful eulogy to his biggest enemy and his dearest love.



Theodore Roosevelt and William Taft courtesy of Encyclopedia Britannica

Lyric sample:

*"I miss our friendship deeply
But I've my own road to pave
Though now we are opponents
I'll be crying at your grave"*

With the resounding success of media like Lin Manuel Miranda's "Hamilton," which portrays the figures that make up our government as flawed heroes, Jacobsen's concept album has the bravery to show our presidents (and almost presidents) for what they really were — flawed villains, worthy not of admiration, but of derision, shame and theatricality.

"POTUS" can be streamed on Youtube and Spotify.

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