Transcript of an Excerpt from

*A Uniting Aspiration: The Political Evolution of John Lennon’s “Imagine”*

He wipes a tear from his cheek, as his glistening eyes gaze upwards in hopes of finding his friend somewhere, ignoring the thousands in front of him. Accepting that he now only reigns in memory, the performer closes his eyes and continues to sing his memory’s legacy.

While the lyrics undoubtedly contribute to the music’s significant influence, “the meaning of a song cannot be reduced to words on the page” (Storey 131). Storey further argues that the specific “sounds around the words” and the overall performance of a song considerably enhance its meaning (131). In particular, Bowie’s tribute, performed on the last show of his Serious Moonlight tour in 1983, grants “Imagine” a different message. As the performance finishes, the singer repeats the last stanza—“You may call me a dreamer/But I’m not the only one/I hope someday you’ll join us” (Lennon 23-25)—with a new melody, emphasizing the myriad of others in anguish who thirst for the very dream Lennon depicts. Moreover, Bowie echoes the last line, “And the world will live as one,” (Lennon 26) for a total of seven times; this repetition results in an emotional climax and resolution, leading the audience to this universal mission. Though the lyrics remain the same, Bowie’s rendition largely shifts the song’s focus from criticizing war and current political establishments to uniting as humanity for the sake of prosperity and harmony itself, stripping the work of its controversial political commentary.

Bowie invites his audience to “be lost in music,” dismissing the song’s original intended message, which would explain how “one can enjoy songs with politics which one would reject in another context” (132). Rather than focusing on what Bowie says, the audience instead fixates on what the singer feels: aspiration for global unity.

One may certainly claim that it is not actually Bowie’s performance itself, but rather the performance’s context that begets change in the song’s meaning. Perhaps Bowie’s audience would not have comprehended the politics of “Imagine” anyway, as the singer was to perform a tribute, which featured trumpets and saxophones as part of Lennon’s commemoration. What one may overlook, however, is that this rhetorical situation is in fact what adds to the performance’s emotional integrity and thus, largely evolves the theme of the work. Storey declares that “the pleasure and power of popular music is not in the performance of emotion but the emotion of performance” (132). Because the tribute took place on the night of his beloved friend’s assassination, Bowie becomes teary eyed and his voice begins to choke, demonstrating the emotional depth and authenticity of the song, which only further steers attention away from its political controversy. George Simms, one of Bowie’s back-up singers notes the night of the commemoration:

Normally we’d be slap-happy, talking and laughing, but that night there was absolute silence because of all the emotion of doing a tribute to John Lennon—especially knowing that David was a friend of his and that David was speaking from his heart...Nobody wanted to break the silence; it was like a sledgehammer into your chest.

Perhaps this emotional legitimacy is why “Imagine” has now become “a response to tragedy” (Waldman 1) more than a campaign for political activism in popular culture. Though Lennon
remains a musician first, his legacy falls incomplete without the acknowledgment of a highly active politician who devoted substantial dedication and commitment into campaigning for peace—only to meet a violent end himself. Due to the singer’s own tragedy, Lennon’s work functions as an unfulfilled dream left for coming generations to now satisfy; rather than accumulating political support, “Imagine” lasts as a beacon of hope for when the world grieves together.

“Imagine” bears an extensive history in its interpretation by popular culture. Originally perceived to condemn the nation’s political climate, its audience now depends on it as hope for the day man’s violent conflict ultimately resolves. However one may perceive the song’s message, it has revolutionized the way in which musicians, as well as consumers, engage and respond to politics and tragedy. While this “pop song” has made significant sociopolitical impact, popular music on the whole is still subjected to a vast amount of disapproval and disgust due to its perceived simplicity and unoriginality. Works of highly esteemed classical composers such as Bach, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky are considered remnants of “high culture” because of their unmatched musical complexities. However, perhaps musical complexity is not the sole factor for determining the overall prestige of a work. Though it may be “standardized” or “promote passive listening” (Storey 119), as argued by German philosopher and social critic Theodore Adorno, popular music nonetheless possesses the same capability to constructively influence younger generations as classical music. We must recognize and thoroughly acknowledge the dignity of popular music in order to continue the production of provoking and liberating work, encouraging aspiring musicians to continue to serve and inspire listeners in ways artists such as John Lennon have.