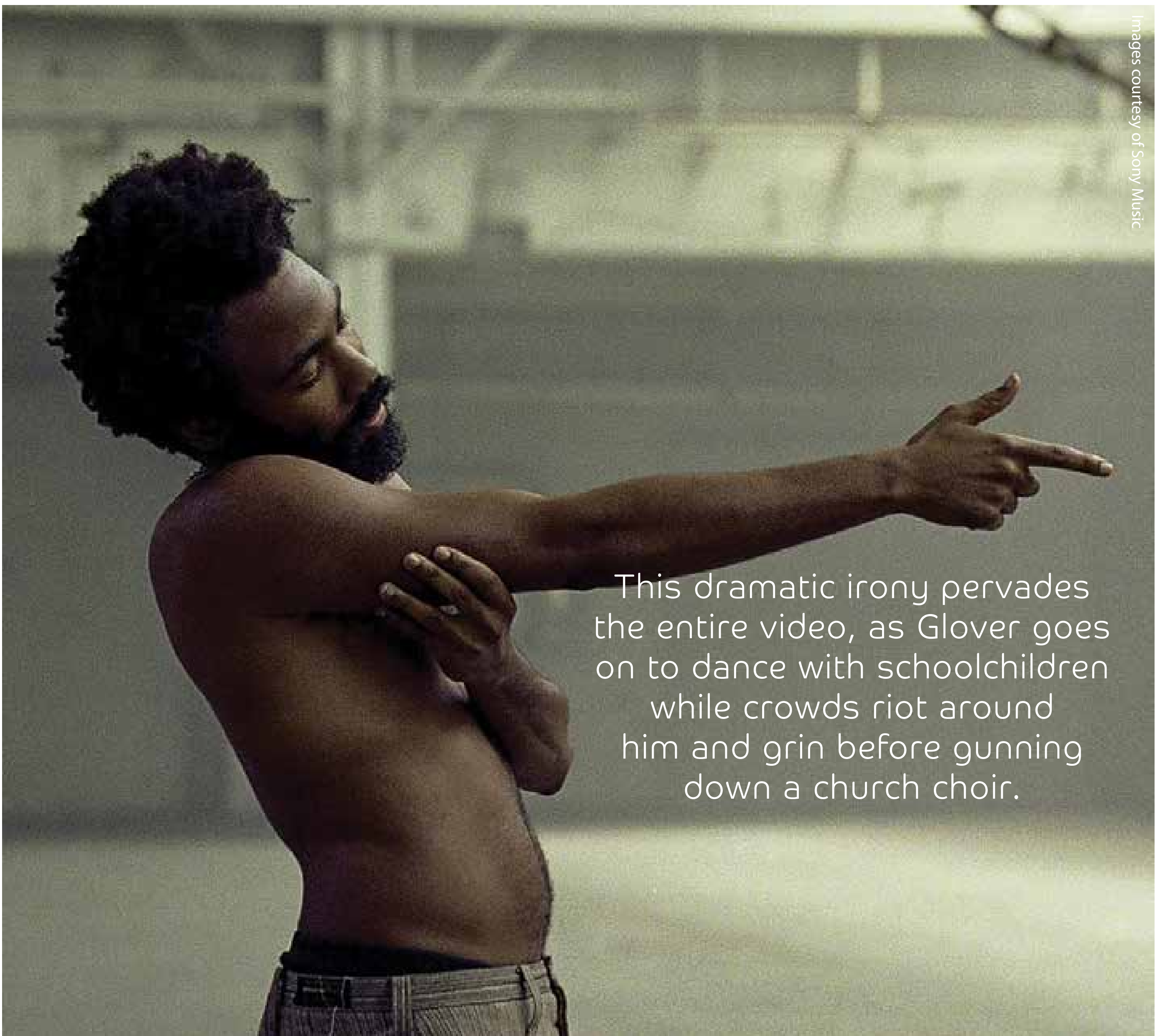
THIS IS AMERICA

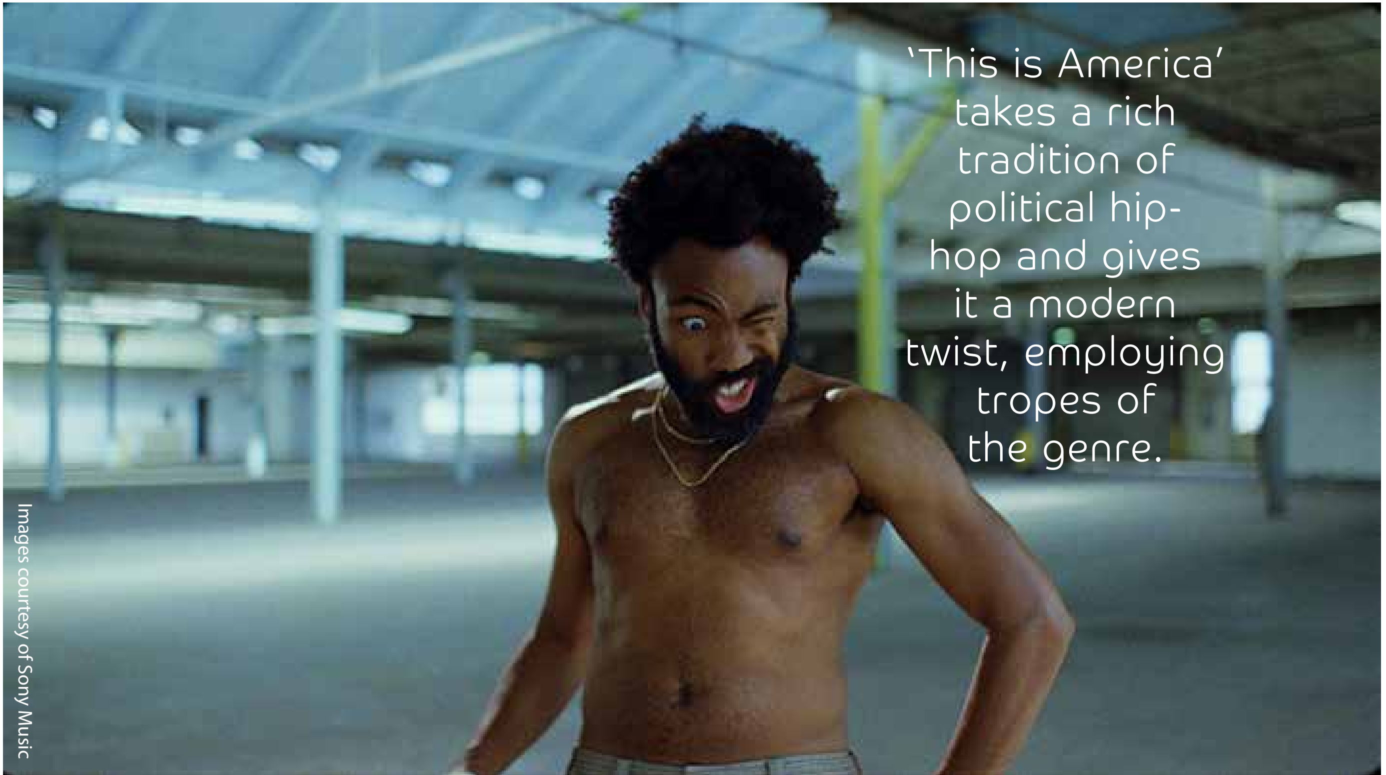
Music, Politics and Protest

Childish Gambino's compelling take on violence and race was a viral hit - but he's not the only rapper that's taking a stand. Hip-hop is rediscovering its political roots, says Tom Gatti.



Images courtesy of Sony Music

Childish Gambino (aka Donald Glover) in his video 'This is America'



The video for 'This is America' begins with a sequence so tonally jarring that it is still shocking the second, third and 10th time you watch it. In a vast warehouse, we hear an African choir chant what sounds like a joyous refrain as a barefoot man plays a finger-picking melody on an acoustic guitar. As the camera pans, we see a topless figure – Donald Glover aka Childish Gambino – standing in the middle of the warehouse. He jerks his body in time to the beat. As he turns and starts to dance towards us, his movements become more exaggerated: his body rolls, he grimaces, pops one eye wide open, and stops behind the seated man, who is now hooded and without his guitar. The topless dancer pulls a gun from thin air, aims for the head, and shoots. As the dead body falls, a rumbling hip-hop rhythm kicks in and Glover turns to the camera, casually saying: 'This is America'.

The four-minute video that follows - directed by Glover's regular collaborator Hiro Murai – was released on May 5, 2018, and watched 12.9 million times in its first 24 hours; since then it has had more than 250 million views. The song went straight in at No 1 on the American music chart (the Billboard Hot 100) and prompted an avalanche of tweets, reaction videos and think pieces, followed by internet users rushing to meme it and then a third wave of commentators piling in to censure those making the memes. 'This is America' quickly became the most talked-about and analysed music video since Beyoncé's 'Formation' in 2016.

The opening of 'This is America' creates a zone of dissonance. The inclusivity of the chanting clashes with the violence of the gunshot; Glover's old-style trousers (similar to those worn by the pro-slavery Confederate army during the American civil war) jar both with his skin colour and the modern warehouse; his racially loaded movements (referencing the 19th-century 'Jim Crow' character that popularized negative ideas about African Americans) seem to contradict the empowering black music. This irony pervades the entire video, as Glover goes on to dance with schoolchildren while crowds riot around him and grin before gunning down a church choir.

Why has 'This is America' become such a viral hit? The violence has straightforward shock value, but the video's real power lies in the uncomfortable but mesmerising tension between

Thomas Dartmouth Rice as 'Jim Crow' in 1832

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its images. Hiro Murai also offers a huge amount of detail: as the camera follows Glover around the warehouse, there is constant movement behind him: cars abandoned or on fire, a white horse, people on a platform filming with their mobile phones. The video demands repeated viewings to catch all of these 'Easter eggs' (hidden messages or features) and audiences have expended great energy decoding them online.

It is useful to know, for example, that the church choir shooting is a reference to the 2015 massacre of nine African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, by a white supremacist, Dylann Roof; or that the abandoned cars recall the black men who have been killed by police during traffic stops; or that the video's conclusion, with Glover running at the camera through darkness, is a nod to Jordan Peele's film *Get Out*. The video's political themes are clear: it interrogates and criticises American gun culture and racism past and present. But its 'message' is not so easily unlocked. In fact, it is deliberately problematic: the video's entirely black cast means that its 'crimes' are all perpetrated by black people; while the dancing – which references styles such as the Gwara Gwara, a South African dance popularised by Rihanna – can be read both as a celebration of black culture and, as Aida Amoaka writes on the *Atlantic* website, as a 'denunciation of the distractions that keep many Americans from noticing how the world around them is falling apart'. Glover's refusal to comment on the video has maintained this ambiguity: 'I don't want to give it any context,' he said to Chris Van Vliet of WSVN-TV.

This absence leads viewers to seek out their own context, recalling Beyoncé's 'Formation', which juxtaposes imagery referencing the New Orleans floods, the antebellum South, and modern police brutality. It even has its own Easter eggs: for example, a fleeting shot of graffiti reading 'Stop shooting us', a message associated with Black Lives Matter. Beyoncé and her director Melina Matsoukas leave it to the viewer to connect the dots, though the video's more conventional aspects– the highly choreographed dance routines and direct-to-camera singing from its star – mean there is less potential for the sort of discomfort so fruitfully employed by Glover.

Although Beyoncé's fame is much greater than Glover's, there is a parallel in their careers (which have recently dovetailed: they lend their voices to Simba and Nala in the forthcoming *Lion King* film). They both spent years playing to mass white audiences: Beyoncé with world-conquering hits such as 'Single Ladies' and mainstream film roles such as *The Pink Panther*; Glover writing for the sitcom 30 Rock and acting in TV shows such as *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls*. In his 2011 song 'Fire Fly' he described himself as 'the only black kid at a Sufjan concert' – that is, a black kid who identifies with white hipsters (in this case via the white indie musician Sufjan Stevens). But more recently their work has put race centre stage: Beyoncé's 'Formation' made headlines for its 'unapologetic blackness', leading to *Saturday Night Live*'s sketch 'The Day Beyoncé Turned Black', which parodied the confused reactions the song provoked in white people. Glover, in a March 2018 New Yorker profile, described how hanging out with his younger brother Stephen – who is 'scarier to white people' and has suffered repeated affronts as a result – made him 'super-black'. He hired Stephen to work on his comedy drama *Atlanta* partly because he wanted to have an all-

Images courtesy of Sony Music

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black writing team – a rarity in the TV industry. The show was notable for its refusal to 'translate' the black experience for a white audience.

Both 'This is America' and 'Formation' were praised for their undiluted blackness, which in a culture of white hegemony is seen as a powerful political statement in itself. But they do not exist in a vacuum: hip-hop has been an inherently political form since its inception as far back as 1971, when Gil Scott-Heron's spoken-word song 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' used the vocabulary of white mass media to satirise its grip on America. The video for NWA's 'Fuck tha Police' (1988), with its images of police harassment, was a prescient comment on a situation that would reach a tipping point with the beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the ensuing Los Angeles riots. The extended version of Public Enemy's 'Fight the Power' video (1989), directed by Spike Lee, juxtaposes clips from the 1963 civil rights march on Washington (at which Martin Luther King Jr delivered the famous 'I have a dream' speech) with a present-day political rally in Brooklyn to end racial violence.

But as gangsta rap took off in the 1990s, violence became interrogated less and celebrated more, and as hip-hop became increasingly mainstream and lucrative later in that decade, politics was more often than not lost in a sea of money, sex and brand names. Around the turn of the millennium, videos such as Jay-Z's 'Big Pimpin' (1999) and Nelly's 'Hot in Here' (2002) caught the spirit of the age: excess.

A decade later, though, things were different. In the US a series of black men had died at the hands of the police – Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner – and as a result activists connected on social media in 2013 to form a movement: Black Lives Matter. As the Obama era was drawing to a close, race relations were worsening: polls asking 'is racism a big problem?' had achieved a record low result in 2009 with 26% saying yes but by 2015, that number had risen to 50% (slightly higher than it was in 1995). This social shift has been reflected in hip-hop videos: from Janelle Monae's simple protest song 'Hell You Talmbout' (2015), which lists the names of black Americans killed by police, to Kendrick Lamar's 'Element' (2017), which draws on Gordon Parks' photographs of black America from the 1940s onwards, the genre has rediscovered its political voice. In doing so it is returning to its roots: just as Spike Lee did for Public Enemy, the Uprising Creative trio behind Rihanna's 'American Oxygen' (2015) spliced together footage from historic civil marches with contemporary ones.

'This is America', then, takes a rich tradition of political hip-hop and gives it a modern twist, employing tropes of the genre both at its most unthinking (dollar bills and guns) and most challenging (dramatically juxtaposed images and dense inter-textual references). Like the best art, it does not provide neat answers but demands that we participate in its meaning – that we also walk Glover's tightrope between dance and damnation.

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