

Roger Waters “Us + Them” concert film takes on global issues

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For nearly five decades, the iconic rock musician Roger Waters has made it clear that he has something to say about big social and political questions. Going back to the 1970s, when he was the bassist and primary creative force of the rock band Pink Floyd, Waters has consistently voiced from the recording studio, concert stage and interview chair his opposition to imperialist war, state repression, inequality and bigotry.

Recently, Waters has been one of a very few rock superstars to speak out publicly in defense of WikiLeaks editor and founder Julian Assange. Last April, following the eviction and arrest of Assange, Waters gave an interview to RT from New York City in which he denounced the US, UK and Ecuadorian governments for their conspiracy against the journalist. The rock musician and activist also said, “There should be a general strike in England to prevent him from being extradited.”

In July, Waters made a video on Facebook where he called Assange “the great hero of freedom of the press ... who has been disgustingly and roundly turned upon by the United States, the United Kingdom and all the other purveyors of imperialism around the world.” On September 2, Waters held a mini-concert outside the UK Home Office in London—where he performed the Pink Floyd classic “Wish You Were Here”—with the support of Australian journalist John Pilger, to demand that Assange be released immediately from nearby Belmarsh prison.

Although the assault on the WikiLeaks journalist does not make it into his new film “Roger Waters Us + Them,” it is known that Waters projected “Resist the attempted silencing of Julian Assange” and “Resist Internet Censorship” onto the video screens prior to many of the concerts on his recent tour.

With his new concert film—which opened for limited screenings internationally on October 2 and 6—Waters takes his use of musical performance as a means of political expression to a new level. The live concert film footage was shot from the three performances in Amsterdam in June 2018 during the “Us + Them” world tour.

“Us and Them” is the title of a song from the 1973 Pink Floyd album *The Dark Side of the Moon*. The original song lyrics concern divisions in society between the front ranks and the generals, between the youth and the police and between those “with” and those “without.” By replacing the word “and” with a plus sign (+), Waters is challenging the present-day growth of anti-immigrant and xenophobic hatreds being encouraged by the political establishment around the world and, as he says on stage, “there is only one human race.”

The treatment of “foreigners” is a central topic of Waters’ 2017 album *Is This the Life We Really Want?*, and several numbers from that studio work are performed in the film to good effect, including “Déjà Vu,” “The Last Refugee” and “Picture That.” Among the main visual themes woven into the film is the desperate condition of the world’s refugees fleeing war, poverty and repression. There are also clips of young Palestinians confronting armed assault by Israeli troops in the West Bank.

An important part of the film is the close-up shots of audience members, many of whom are too young to have been born before Pink Floyd’s songs reached their height of mass popularity. However, these young people are seen singing along with others in the crowd who are their parents’ or grandparents’ age.

Roger Waters, who is now 76 years old, has always attracted large international audiences because of the compelling instrumentalism, melodies and lyrical themes of his music. The universality and popularity of Waters’ music across multiple generations is a testament to his conceptions about art and society.

Speaking recently with *Rolling Stone* about the film and the enduring relevance of his work, Waters said, “I’m glad the film turned out to have a humane and political message ... I believe music is a very powerful art form and that it can be used as a political tool, as well as a source of entertainment to keep the masses quiet.”

Whether it is the abstract concepts in the songs from *The Dark Side of the Moon*, such as “Time,” “Money” or “Brain

Damage,” or those from *Animals*, which are based loosely on the characters in George Orwell’s novel *Animal Farm*, or the themes of alienation from the massively popular *The Wall*, Waters has been able to apply these messages at each stage of political development over the last four decades.

It is remarkable, for example, that the 1977 song “Pigs (Three Different Ones)” applies with precision to the billionaire (Pig One), TV personality (Pig Two) and President (Pig Three) Donald Trump, or that the word “welcome” from the 1975 song “Welcome to the Machine” can be converted into a message of greeting to immigrants arriving from other lands, or that the song “Another Brick in The Wall Part 2” [We don’t need no education] from 1979 can become a metaphor for the US prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

As with previous Pink Floyd and Roger Waters tours, the “Us + Them” concerts—which had 157 dates before more than 2 million people in Europe, the Americas and Australasia between May 2017 and the end of 2018—provided the audience with a multimedia experience. The performances of both Pink Floyd’s and Roger Waters’ solo works were accompanied by elaborate staging, video and laser light projections and a large inflated pig that flies over the crowd.

The concert film features a 94-foot-wide LED video screen behind the band as well as a huge projection screen grid that descends from the ceiling over the center aisle of the Amsterdam arena. This multimedia structure contains 16 large scrolling video screens and projects three dimensional holographic objects above the audience. Among these 3D objects is a simulation of the Battersea power station, with its four huge smokestacks, which was famously depicted on the cover of Pink Floyd’s 1977 album *Animals*.

Waters uses these displays throughout as a massive canvas onto which high resolution video images reinforce the messages of his music. The screens are also used to capture close-up live video of the musicians on stage, which are at times overlaid on top of the thematic imagery.

Concert films can be problematic in that they often fail to adequately capture the atmosphere of a live event and leave movie audiences restless. However, the live performances by the “Us + Them” band—featuring Waters on bass, acoustic and electric guitars and lead vocals—and the film production of Sean Evans come together in one of the more effective concert movie experiences in recent memory.

Of note are the lead electric and acoustic guitar performances of Dave Kilminster, the lap steel guitar contributions of Jon Carin and the lead vocals and guitar work of Jonathan Wilson. Those familiar with the music of Pink Floyd and Roger Waters will agree that these musicians do an excellent job of capturing the sounds and feelings of

the original studio works.

Also memorable is the moving duet performed by backing vocalists Holly Laessig and Jess Wolf on the song “Great Gig in the Sky.” Their reinterpretation of the soulful improvisation by Clare Torry on the original studio version is captivating. The song begins with the recorded spoken words of Gary O’Driscoll—doorman at Abbey Road Studios in 1972-73—who says, “I am not frightened of dying, any time will do.”

Waters’ latest concert film represents a development over his previous cinematic works such as “In the Flesh—Live” (2006) and “Roger Waters The Wall”(2014). The music and imagery are powerful and inspiring. The film evokes a range of emotions such as anger and sadness, but also provides a sense of hope that the world’s problems can in fact be solved.

As explained in our review of his 2017 album *Is This the Life We Really Want?*, the period of political and ideological reaction that began in the late 1970s have frustrated Roger Waters. The four decades of suppression of the class struggle and the absence of mass social and political movements have led artists like Waters—who have been outraged by the domination of the right-wing and the crimes of imperialism—to arrive at pessimistic conclusions.

With “Us + Them,” however, Waters shows both a genuine sympathy for the condition of the oppressed internationally and, by denouncing directly the reactionary “us” versus “them” nationalism directed against migrants and refugees, he captures something of the universal struggle required to overcome the wars, repression, poverty and inequality contained in the music and imagery of his live performance.

As was evident in his call last April for a general strike in Britain to free Julian Assange, Roger Waters is beginning to align himself with the one universal social force capable of resolving the problems he so aptly describes: the international working class.



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