

#MeToo smear campaign targets Win Butler of rock band Arcade Fire

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A McCarthyite smear campaign has been launched against Win Butler, a principal singer and songwriter of the indie rock group Arcade Fire, based on unsubstantiated, anonymous allegations of sexual misconduct. The *World Socialist Web Site* condemns this latest attempt at character and career assassination.

An August 27 article in *Pitchfork*, the online music publication (currently owned by global media giant Condé Nast), “Arcade Fire’s Win Butler Accused of Sexual Misconduct by Multiple Women; Frontman Responds,” fired the opening shot. Several former fans or lovers of Butler, all of them adults, asserted that he engaged in what *Pitchfork* calls “inappropriate behavior.” Butler responded that the encounters were consensual and that he did not initiate them.

The article’s approach is both reactionary and absurd. If the criterion of exclusion on the basis of “inappropriate behavior” were to be adopted, which popular group, musician, film star or media personality, past or present, would survive? There would be virtually no music left to play on radio or films or television to be watched.

Nevertheless, summary judgment has come swiftly. Without the slightest regard for due process or the presumption of innocence, radio stations in the United States and Canada abruptly stopped playing the group’s music. Singer-songwriter Feist left Arcade Fire’s upcoming tour, announcing her decision on social media in a lengthy statement that blended pomposity and piety. Have these paragons of virtue stopped to consider the consequences of their actions?

In a public statement, Butler’s wife Régine Chassagne called the musician “a good man who cares about this world, our band, his fans, friends and our family.” She affirmed her love for him, adding, “I know what is in his heart, and I know he has never, and

would never, touch a woman without her consent and I am certain he never did.”

Butler himself, in a statement, told *Pitchfork* that each of the interactions in question had “been mutual and always between consenting adults. It is deeply revisionist, and frankly just wrong, for anyone to suggest otherwise. I have never touched a woman against her will, and any implication that I have is simply false. I vehemently deny any suggestion that I forced myself on a woman or demanded sexual favors. That simply, and unequivocally, never happened.”

The actions by the CBC and other radio programmers are cowardly capitulations to the #MeToo crusade that have dangerous implications for democratic rights. The ongoing witch-hunt has opened the door for prudery, sanctimony and, frankly, hurt feelings to be weaponized in a destructive manner against musicians, actors and others. No one is immune to such accusations. In this overheated atmosphere, a handful of allegations is enough to “disappear” a significant artist.

Pitchfork and its so-called experts complain about the unfair “power dynamics” built into the relationships identified in the article. But what has the unfolding of the situation revealed about the actual “dynamics”? The individual musician or actor at present is virtually helpless in the face of unproven charges. The four accusers, hiding behind pseudonyms, have not been subjected to any scrutiny, much less retribution. Their position, as far as the North American media and political establishment is concerned, is heroic and unassailable.

Arcade Fire has deservedly earned a reputation for musical creativity and a willingness to examine personal and social issues candidly. The backgrounds of founders Butler and Chassagne surely helped

broaden the band's artistic perspective and musical palette. Butler was raised in Texas, lived in Buenos Aires and went to college in Montreal, where he met Chassagne. The latter's parents are of Haitian origin. Unusually for a rock group, Arcade Fire's music has incorporated instruments such as accordion, mandolin, xylophone, violin and French horn. Its lyrics have sometimes been in French, as in the song "Haïti," which refers to the Duvalier dictatorship and its reverberations (Chassagne had relatives murdered by the US-backed regime).

Funeral (2004), Arcade Fire's full-length debut, gained popularity and earned critical praise. Informed by the deaths of several of the musicians' family members, the album explored themes of innocence, loss, resilience and hope. It is marked by melodicism, lush arrangements and a fondness for drama that is occasionally excessive. The band continued to evolve and refine its perspective on albums such as *Neon Bible* (2007), *The Suburbs* (2010) and the ambitious but less satisfying *Reflektor* (2013).

While retaining their distinctive sonic identity, Arcade Fire has essayed styles such as the chamber pop of the 1960s, a Neil-Young-inspired singer-songwriter mode, the synthesizer-driven pop of the 1980s, Cajun music and Caribbean music. Lyrics have handled topics such as religion, environmental concerns, generational change and the class question with sensitivity and humanity.

The #MeToo effort would wipe this out.

The *Pitchfork* article relays the accusations of four people in exorbitant detail. None of the claims rises to the level of criminal behavior. In general, the various accounts, which may or may not even be true, add up to nothing more than ordinary sexual encounters, with all the risks and uncertainties that go along with them. None of the accusers' stories has been verified, and no one has pursued criminal charges. Butler has not been convicted of anything and has been "accused" of very little. The gap between the reported facts and the media hysteria is extreme. The deepening social and economic crisis is only driving maddened petty bourgeois elements into greater fits of "sensitivity," self-pity and self-absorption.

We should recall as well the abuse hurled at Elvis Presley in the 1950s by the moral watchdogs of the time. Presley and others were accused of leading their

devotees "back to the jungle and animalism," of arousing "the lower instincts." Are we returning to those days?



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