

Country singer Oliver Anthony's "Rich Men North of Richmond" promotes antisemitism and racism

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Virginia-based singer Oliver Anthony's "Rich Men North of Richmond" is the latest in a series of right-wing "viral" songs or films in recent months. The song is a provocative collection of reactionary attacks on the poor, disguised with phony populist appeals and denunciations of "rich men" in northern cities.

It follows the financial success of the "independent" film *The Sound of Freedom* earlier this summer. The movie was released by the Christian fundamentalist Angel Studios and attempts to dramatize the exploits of real-life former government agent Tim Ballard, who saves children from human sex traffickers using vigilante methods. The film is popular with adherents of the far-right, crackpot Q-Anon conspiracy theory.

More immediately, "Rich Men North of Richmond" follows in the wake of the fascistic "Try That in a Small Town" released by country singer Jason Aldean in July. Whereas "Try That in a Small Town" was an outright provocation that relied on images associated with lynching, among other things, 30-year-old Oliver Anthony's song adopts a more carefully packaged approach.

"Rich Men North of Richmond" is intended, deliberately it would seem, to suck the listener in.

First of all, the title. While the tune postures as a criticism of the federal government (Washington D.C. is some 100 miles "north of Richmond," Virginia), "rich men" in "northern cities" is a familiar trope to the antisemitic right. Leading Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump has held regular campaign events which target "globalists," a far-right code word for Jews, who supposedly are seeking to attack America.

Moreover, the denunciation of the power "north of Richmond," the one-time capital of the Confederate States of America, evokes a neo-Confederate sensibility that is one of the hallmarks of the fascist right in the United States. Anthony seems oblivious to the history of West Virginia, where he recorded the song for radiowv. It began in a revolt by yeoman farmers in the mountains against the slavocracy (the rich men *in* Richmond, and *south* of Richmond). They seceded from the secessionists, and were admitted during the war as a new Union

state.

Anthony begins by declaring in a "folksy" singing voice that "I've been sellin' my soul, workin' all day / Overtime hours for bullshit pay." Many who have responded to the song are doubtless attracted by these initial sentiments.

The song's real thrust comes through when the singer declares, "I wish politicians would look out for miners / And not just minors on an island somewhere [presumably a reference to the Jeffrey Epstein scandal] / Lord, we got folks in the street, ain't got nothin' to eat / And the obese milkin' welfare."

The bigoted lyrics continue: "Well, God, if you're 5-foot-3, and you're 300 pounds / Taxes ought not to pay for your bags of fudge rounds." This is filthy stuff, straight out of the ultra-right Reaganite handbook, an effort to blame the misery of the poorest, most exploited sections of the working class on their own lifestyle and behavior.

Anthony's song reached number one on the Billboard singles chart as of Monday, a first for an independent song. The YouTube video has been viewed 34 million times in two weeks.

The fascist rabble supporting the song's right-wing message have celebrated it. Republican Georgia congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene wrote on social media that the song was an "anthem of the forgotten Americans who truly support this nation and unfortunately the world with their hard-earned tax dollars." Others have latched on in a similar way.

What accounts for the appeal of such a filthy and repugnant piece of work? Some of the song's appeal lies in the talk surrounding it. Many are simply seeking to see what the hype is all about. In some cases, people have been willing to overlook the song's "negative" aspects in light of the faux populist appeal.

Additionally, the song's success has the markings of a coordinated right-wing promotional campaign. According to the *New York Times*, "the stunning success of Mr. Anthony, whose real name is Christopher Anthony Lunsford, testifies not only to the potency of confrontational works that cater to an audience that believes it is underserved, but also to something

else: the increasing savvy of promoters and fans.”

The *Times* goes on: “Much of the consumer activity that drove the track to No. 1 came via 99-cent digital downloads from outlets like the iTunes Store—an outdated format that is declining in popularity faster than CDs. Despite streaming now accounting for more than 80 percent of music consumption overall, paid downloads are weighted more on the charts, a quirk exploited regularly by pop superfans.”

In any event, the most critical feature of the “success” of Oliver Anthony’s song is what it demonstrates about the present deplorable state of cultural life in America and the enormous vacuum that has been created by the lurch to the right of what once passed as the “left” or “radical” artistic milieu, including its song-writing cohort. If Anthony is able to get away with this fraud, the responsibility lies with those who have almost entirely turned their backs on working class Americans.

The anti-war, protest song milieu long ago made its peace with the establishment. Those who survived became wealthy, and the extent of their lingering “radicalism” found expression in ecstatic support for Barack Obama, the #MeToo campaign and the various “human rights” drives of American imperialism.

The US-led and provoked war with Russia in Ukraine has become a particular focus of these artistic types. Bruce Springsteen and his bandmate Steve Van Zandt have enthusiastically joined the anti-Russia campaign, along with former New Wave singer-songwriter Annie Lennox, the Black Eyes Peas, legendary songwriter Carole King, Elton John, Julian Lennon, k.d. lang, Pearl Jam, Radiohead, Stevie Nicks, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Weezer and many others.

“Standing with” the fascist-infested regime in Ukraine and supporting the Biden administration’s reckless, warmongering policies are much more likely to obsess these layers today, along of course with racial and gender politics. This expresses the class position of these affluent layers, who now identify with America’s “national interests,” i.e., the interests of its ruling elite. The conditions of tens of millions of workers and poor, suffering from low wages, insecure employment, attacks on pensions, healthcare and other social benefits, abortion rights and the danger of authoritarian rule interest them very little.

This creates the “space” for an Oliver Anthony to posture as the spokesman of the “little man,” “the forgotten man.”

The cultural changes have taken place in the general context of the lurch to the right in official politics, including by the Democratic Party. This political graveyard of oppositional politics has become a hotbed of identity politics, as its upper-middle class constituency strives to secure wealth and privileges and seeks to sow every possible division in the working class. In doing so, it gives the far right a welcome entry point to prey on the disoriented.

In response to Anthony’s viral hit, British singer-songwriter

and pseudo-left activist Billy Bragg, in an attempt to revive the fortunes of American trade unionism, released “Rich Men Earning North of a Million,” termed by the media “a pro-union response song.”

Along these lines, all Bragg is able to muster in his song is the pathetic call to “join a union.” The pro-capitalist AFL-CIO, which has defended the profit system at the expense of workers and helped impoverish millions, is one of the principal culprits responsible for the political, economic and moral malaise that has made such songs as “Rich Men North of Richmond” possible.

The appeal to “join a union” is hardly compelling, especially in Appalachia. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, coal miners in the region fought bravely, and many times gave up their lives, to form or defend a union. In the end, their principal organization, the United Mine Workers of America, worked with the coal operators to leave their communities decimated and poor. In the more recent past, the 2021 strike of several thousand Volvo Trucks workers in New River Valley, Virginia, an hour or so west of Anthony’s home in Farmville, was sold out by the United Auto Workers. The UAW forced the striking workers to accept the company’s offer, even after they repeatedly voted “no.”

Truly progressive developments are bursting forth from the seams of American life and internationally. The strike of nearly 75,000 film actors and writers in the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and Writers Guild of America (WGA) has demonstrated some of the healthy and leftward-moving sentiments of masses of people.

The logic of contemporary life is global and all-encompassing, bringing together people from every corner of the planet, overcoming national and parochial barriers. Anthony’s song appeals to backwardness, narrowness and chauvinism, all of which damage and hold the working class back. Antisemitism is a filthy poison that has to be combated whenever it rears its ugly head. There is nothing genuinely “popular” in these sentiments, which only serve the interests of the billionaires and the financial oligarchy as a whole.



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