SOFTWARE & TECH

Allusions In Songs 2020

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The Art of the Nod: Understanding Allusions in Songs from 2020

The year 2020 was a watershed moment for music. As the world grappled with a global pandemic, social justice movements, and political upheaval, songwriters turned to a powerful tool to add depth and resonance to their lyrics: the allusion. An allusion, a brief and indirect reference to a person, place, thing, or idea of historical, cultural, literary, or political significance, allows artists to layer meaning without lengthy explanation. In 2020, **allusions in songs**became a key mechanism for artists to connect with listeners on multiple levels, offering commentary, nostalgia, and a sense of shared cultural understanding. This article explores the rich tapestry of allusions found in songs from 2020, examining how they enhanced storytelling, engaged audiences, and reflected the unique anxieties and hopes of that tumultuous year.

Why 2020 Became a Fertile Ground for Allusive Songwriting

The conditions of 2020—isolation, collective trauma, and a hunger for connection—naturally pushed artists toward deeper references. Listeners were not just passive consumers; they were actively searching for meaning and community. An allusion acts as a secret handshake, rewarding the informed listener with an "aha" moment of recognition. In a year when live music was impossible, these lyrical easter eggs fostered a sense of intimacy and shared knowledge between artists and their fans. Moreover, the heavy presence of political and social discourse meant that many artists used allusions to critique or comment on current events without being overly didactic. From the Black Lives Matter protests to the US presidential election, music from 2020 is peppered with subtle and overt nods to the era's defining moments.

Historical Allusions: Echoes of the Past in a Modern Context

One of the most common forms of allusion in 2020 music was the reference to historical events or figures. By drawing parallels between the past and the present, artists could comment on contemporary issues with the weight of history behind them.

George Orwell and Dystopia

The year 2020 frequently felt dystopian, and many songwriters made direct references to George Orwell's *1984* . For example, in a track that resonated with lockdown-weary audiences, an artist might allude to "Big Brother" or "doublethink" to critique government surveillance or conflicting pandemic messaging. These **historical allusions in songs 2020**helped articulate the anxiety of living through a time when reality felt stranger than fiction. Listeners, many of whom were already familiar with Orwell's work, immediately grasped the critique, making the song's message more powerful.

Ancient Greek and Roman Myths

Mythological allusions remained a staple. Lorde's solar-powered album may have been a 2021 release, but 2020 saw the rise of songs referencing Icarus (flying too close to the sun), Sisyphus (endless futile labor), or

Pandora's box (unleashing chaos). For instance, a popular alternative track used the story of Persephone's descent into the underworld to metaphorically describe a season of depression and isolation. These timeless stories provided a universal language to express personal and collective struggles, making **mythological allusions in songs 2020** a natural fit for the year's emotional landscape.

Literary Allusions: Borrowing from Books and Poetry

2020 also saw a surge in references to classic and contemporary literature. Songwriters often lifted phrases, characters, or themes from novels and poems to add intellectual heft to their lyrics.

Shakespearean References

William Shakespeare remained a rich source of allusion. Taylor Swift, known for her literary references, continued this trend on her 2020 album *Folklore*. In the song "Illicit Affairs," the line "you taught me a secret language I can't speak with anyone else" subtly echoes the forbidden intimacy found in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Othello*. More explicitly, the song "Hoax" contains imagery that recalls the tragic lovers of Shakespeare's plays. These **literary allusions in songs 2020**elevated pop music to a form of poetic storytelling, blurring the line between low and high art.

Contemporary Novel References

Some artists looked to modern literature. The band The 1975, in their 2020 album *Notes on a Conditional Form* , referenced the novel *Brave New World*by Aldous Huxley. The song "If You're Too Shy (Let Me Know)" includes the line "you got a beautiful face but you got nothing to say," which can be interpreted as a critique of superficial society—a central theme of Huxley's dystopia. Such references invite listeners to explore the source material, creating a deeper engagement with the music.

Pop Culture Allusions: Nods to Movies, TV, and Music History

Perhaps the most accessible allusions are those to popular culture. These references create a sense of shared experience and often serve as homages or satirical commentary.

Film and Television

In 2020, the song "Levitating" by Dua Lipa became a massive hit, and its music video and lyrics are filled with pop culture nods. The line "I got you, moonlight, you're my starlight" evokes classic Hollywood romance, while the video's aesthetic borrows from 1980s sci-fi films like *Blade Runner* and *The Fifth Element*. Similarly, The Weeknd's album *After Hours* is steeped in cinematic references, particularly to Martin Scorsese's *After Hours* (1985) and the neon-drenched crime thrillers of the 1990s. These **pop culture allusions in songs 2020**create a sensory experience that goes beyond sound.

Music History and Previous Songs

Sampling and lyrical quotation are forms of allusion. In 2020, many songs referenced earlier hits. For instance, "Savage Love" by Jawsh 685 and Jason Derulo heavily sampled a beat from a 2000s pop song. More subtly, Taylor Swift's "The Last Great American Dynasty" references the real-life story of Rebekah Harkness, effectively creating a song about a historical figure that also alludes to Swift's own narrative of being publicly maligned. By referencing a previous song or artist, musicians position themselves within a lineage, honoring their influences while staking their own claim.

Political and Social Allusions: The Soundtrack of a Movement

Given the seismic events of 2020, it was inevitable that music would become a vehicle for political and social commentary. Allusions allowed artists to address controversial topics with a layer of subtlety.

The Black Lives Matter Movement

Following the murder of George Floyd, songs from 2020 directly and indirectly referenced the struggle for racial justice. Beyoncé's "Black Parade," released in June 2020, is filled with allusions to Black history and culture. The lyrics mention "I'm goin' back to the South" and "we built it from the ground," referencing the African American experience of migration and resilience. Lil Baby's "The Bigger Picture" alludes to the protests, the legal system, and the feeling of being unheard. These **political allusions in songs 2020**gave voice to a collective anger and demand for change.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic itself became a rich source of allusion. Many songs written during lockdown describe isolation, anxiety, and longing, often using metaphors that allude to being trapped or suffocating. For example, "willow" by Taylor Swift includes the line "life was a willow and it bent right to your wind," which can be read as an allusion to the flexibility required during a crisis. Some artists explicitly referenced "masks" and "distance" in their lyrics, while others used the imagery of a "storm" or "fever" to allude to the pandemic without naming it directly. The **social allusions in songs 2020** created a diary of the global experience.

Religious and Mythological Allusions: Seeking Solace and Meaning

In times of crisis, many turn to religion and mythology for comfort. 2020 saw a noticeable increase in songs that referenced biblical stories, saints, or spiritual concepts.

Biblical References

Kanye West's 2020 album *Jesus Is King* (released in 2019 but still influential in 2020) was explicitly religious, but other artists used biblical allusions more subtly. The song "How to Get Away with a Prayer" by a indie rock band might reference the story of Job to discuss undeserved suffering. More generally, references to "heaven," "hell," "angels," and "devils" permeated the charts. In Dua Lipa's "Physical," the line "you gotta feel it in your bones" can be read as a secular variation of a religious awakening. These **religious allusions in songs 2020** provided a framework for processing the year's existential dread.

Norse and Egyptian Myths

Beyond Greco-Roman mythology, 2020 also featured allusions to Norse and Egyptian myths. Songs referencing Ragnarok (the end of the world in Norse mythology) became popular, as did imagery of the Egyptian underworld. These references added a global and ancient perspective to the contemporary moment, reminding listeners that humanity has always faced cataclysms and survived.

Case Studies: Deep Dives into Specific 2020 Songs

To fully appreciate the power of allusion, let's examine a few iconic songs from 2020 that rely heavily on this technique.

"Blinding Lights" by The Weeknd

The Weeknd's smash hit from the album *After Hours* is ostensibly about a tumultuous relationship, but its allusions extend far beyond the personal. The song title and chorus evoke a sense of literal and metaphorical blindness, alluding to the overwhelming glare of Las Vegas and the moral blindness of a hedonistic lifestyle. The music video and album art allude to films like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Casino*, embedding the song in a web of pop culture and historical references. The lyrics "I can feel the poison" allude to toxic relationships and addiction, both literal and figurative. The Weeknd masterfully uses **allusions in songs 2020** to create a layered narrative about fame, excess, and redemption.

"The Man" by Taylor Swift

Lover," The 1989 anthem remained a potent anthem throughout 2020. The song is a direct allusion to systemic sexism in the music industry and society at large. Swift imagines what her career would be like if she were a man, referencing cultural archetypes (the "alpha male") and historical figures. The line "I'd be a fearless leader" is an allusion to her own album *Fearless* and also a critique of double standards. The music video further alludes to male power structures, featuring Swift in full drag playing caricatures of powerful men. This song is a textbook example of how **social allusions in songs 2020** can drive a conversation about gender equality.

"WAP" by Cardi B featuring Megan Thee Stallion

While primarily a celebration of female sexuality, "WAP" is also rich with allusions. The song's title and lyrics reference an acronym that gained viral traction, and its explicit content was a conscious allusion to the tradition of raunchy rap songs by male artists. The music video features a house of mirrors and snakes, alluding to the Garden of Eden and the demonization of female desire. By referencing classic horror and fantasy imagery, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion asserted their power and agency. The song's allusions to earlier artists like Khia (who had a similar song in the 2000s) placed it in a lineage of unapologetically sexual music by women. These **pop culture allusions in songs

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