



With Trump at a Crossroads, MAGA Rap and Topher Flow On

By Jon Edelman

Social distancing guidelines are still in effect on an early June evening in Lexington, Kentucky, but you wouldn't know it inside the Manchester Music Hall. Fans cluster together near the stage, with nary a mask in sight. Overwhelmingly white and male, the crowd favors American flag shirts, camo shorts, and shaved heads. They've driven up from Florida and flown in from Texas and California. And they're here for some hip-hop.

It's the first night of the Free The Patriot Tour, a concert series headlined by Topher, a 30-year-old Black indie rapper from Kilmichael, Mississippi. His song, "The Patriot," for which the tour is named, has amassed over two million streams on Spotify and lends the night the frisson of rebelliousness essential to any great rap show. "The Patriot" was unceremoniously

yanked from every major streaming platform this past winter, but now it's about to be freed. When the beat drops, the crowd roars.

Their enthusiasm is understandable. "The Patriot" is anthemic, with dramatic piano chords and a soaring chorus taken from a Viking poem about a child being prepared for future wars. Topher, short, stout, and thickly bearded, clad in a red hoodie and a red beanie, starts to rap:

"This is where we make a stand, no more give or take/March around the Capitol, storm the city gates/Putting pressure on their necks until the truth breaks/All walls of corruption, take out all the snakes."

It's easy to imagine the song scoring the trailer for an action movie. And it kind of did. Topher performed the song on January 6th, just blocks away from the Capitol. Then some things happened that Topher did not participate in personally, but that he also does not condemn. By the end of that day, "The Patriot" was off the streaming services.

Cancel culture can be a pain in the ass. Topher had to write a bunch of emails and find a new distributor. But it did little to stop his momentum. Restored to the internet after two weeks down, "The Patriot" went to #1 on Billboard's Rap Digital Song Sales Chart. And Topher's debut album, "No Apologies," which features "The Patriot," topped the iTunes hip-hop chart and went to #9 overall. In fact, Topher and the other rappers supporting him tonight—Bryson Gray, The Marine Rapper and D. Cure, all conservative, and, all but D. Cure, Black—have almost 20 Billboard chart entries among them. They're MAGA rappers, and they're having an impact.

MAGA rappers are a little different from mainstream rappers. For one thing, they don't curse, or at least not much. And they don't rhyme about luxury brands or thug life, except to decry it. They do rhyme about guns, but strictly legal ones, protected under the Second Amendment. And like rappers throughout history, they're not afraid to fight the powers that be. They just think that the powers that be are the cabal of pedophiles and deep state actors who stole the election from Trump. And it turns out that the 45th president and the MAGAverse that he spawned have enough characters, controversies, intrigue and attitude to fill out a whole subgenre, or at least a few years' worth of albums.

Topher's songs are short, many only two verses long. And they sometimes don't have that much Topher in them, with one of the verses being handled by a MAGA guest rapper. The beats are trendy if somewhat derivative. But, most importantly, the songs are memorable. And while the subject matter is sometimes insane, the lyrics aren't entirely witless. Take "Circle Back," Topher's song mocking Joe Biden press secretary Jen Psaki's stock deflection. Topher's rhymes ("Is it better if we send you the questions far in advance?/Honestly, all we really want is

answers ‘bout your mans”) are straightforward, but not stupid. He’s not Nas, but he’s not Playboi Carti either. In the chorus, Topher sings to Psaki directly, and his words are interlaced with press conference audio of Psaki telling reporters that she’ll circle back to them when she has more information. The juxtaposition is funny, and the crowd loves it.

Some of what the crowd loves is a little harder to watch, though. A particular hit is “Facts Are Racist,” Topher’s song about what he sees as the real problem with Black people—Black people. Over a hypnotic whistle loop, he raps, ““Everyone whine about racists/When they not the biggest problem we facin’/Take a real look at the nation/Single motherhood inflation.” He bounces on his knees, spitting emphatically: “Group of young boys I saw jumping a lady/She only 15, left her bloody and shaking/You ain’t even gotta ask/It’s Black on Black on Black on Black!” A sociologist might say that these bars lack context, but “Whoo!”’s burst out from the audience. It’s undeniably catchy, far more palatable than an interview with Larry Elder, the Black conservative pundit whose words inspired the song’s chorus: “Y’all be like/facts are racist/Why y’all say this?/You know it’s true/Y’all just hate it.”

When the song finishes, someone in the audience yells, “I’m tired of these ignorant parents!”

“Ay, me too, son!” Topher replies.

Topher’s experiences with his own parents were foundational to his conservatism. Born Christopher Townsend, he was raised by a single mother on food stamps and resented some of her choices. “She would go party with people on the weekend all the time,” Topher says in an interview. “It’s one thing if you’re in a situation and you’re doing everything you can, but it’s another thing if I see you wasting four or five hundred dollars a month on alcohol. We do have money. It’s just that you’re not making the right choice. So, I decided that I’m going to do better and make better choices.”

Although blues was the dominant music in Mississippi, Topher gravitated to hip-hop. His favorite rapper was Eminem, who held a special place in Topher’s heart for the way that he wrote about his difficult relationship with his mother. (So potently, in fact, that she sued him for defamation.) Topher had experimented with writing and releasing his own songs since he was 15, but it was more of a hobby than an all-consuming passion. He put out about five songs a year, mostly Christian rap, although he did dabble in more traditional secular hip-hop when he was a student at Mississippi State. “I made a couple songs just to try to fit in with the party scene. I tried to cuss and it sounded wack. I was like, ‘This is just not a façade I can keep up,’” he says. “Not if I’m trying to maintain my relationship with Christ like I’m supposed to.”

Topher's relationship with Christ—he was raised a Missionary Baptist—had given him some conservative beliefs. But although Topher was against abortion and gay marriage, he didn't identify as a Republican growing up. "No one really talked politics when I was a kid, but everyone complained," he says. "I asked my mom one time, 'Why do you vote Democrat?' She told me, 'It's just what we always do.' So, I was like, 'That's not an answer.'"

Although Topher had begun to question the traditions he was raised with, he still voted for Obama in 2012—or probably would have if he had submitted his absentee ballot in time. (To Topher's credit, he's consistent on the subject of voting restrictions—he believes that the system needs to be secure and blames himself for not knowing about the deadline.) Topher's political evolution didn't really get started until, in an attempt to make a better choice for himself, he joined the Air Force.

"People think you go in the military, they brainwash you about being loyal to the country and stuff like that," he says. But, for Topher, his training as a cryptologic language analyst in Monterey, California represented a different kind of cultural shift. "I went from a 99% Black to 99% white environment," he says, exaggerating a bit. "I had this preconception that white people think you're a criminal. The only white people I knew about were the ones [I was] told were racist or the ones that's in movies."

But Topher found that white people were different from what he expected. "I didn't feel like I had to walk around on eggshells," he says. "I didn't feel like I had to avoid walking behind someone because they may think I'm about to steal their purse. People treated me like family. For the first time, people supported my music. I was just like, 'What the heck is going on here?'" The lesson for Topher was the danger of making assumptions. And pretty soon, he found even more of them being challenged.

Like most of Black America, Topher was outraged by the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old Black man, by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. "The news said he had his hands up, and LeBron James and them said he had his hands up. I was like, 'Man, they're just out here shooting Black men down for nothing,'" Topher says. "When the truth came out that Mike Brown didn't have his hands up...that he actually attacked the officer and tried to take his gun and that the officer fired in defense, in my head, I was like, 'No, you deserve to be shot, bro,'" Topher says.

The lessons from Ferguson are complex. While an FBI investigation corroborated Wilson's version of the story, which Topher echoes, a separate report by the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division found that the Ferguson Police Department was systemically racially biased. However, Topher's takeaway was simple. "Once again, I assumed something,"

he says. “I just assumed celebrities would be honest. I assumed the media would not lie. So that’s when I started being like, ‘What else have I been assuming? Have I been assuming that Democrats were for Black people?’”

Topher started doing what everyone who became conservative in 2015 seemed to be doing: his own research. “Instead of me assuming, let me go look at the platforms and see what they’re talking about,” he says. “And I’m like, ‘Wait a minute. Republicans are anti-abortion, I’m anti-abortion. One’s more pro-God...I’m for prayer in school’...And as I did this, I was like, ‘Oh, OK. I don’t even really rock with the Democrats like that. I rock more with Republicans.’”

When it came time to choose a presidential candidate, Topher was initially drawn to Rand Paul and Ted Cruz. But then Trump entered the scene, like a whirlwind, or an emcee. “I finally saw a candidate who was just saying what was on his mind. He didn’t care about the delivery. Trump can cuss people out and whatever, just be raw.”

To Topher, Trump’s bluntness, his coarseness, was proof of his authenticity. “I didn’t feel like I was being swindled,” he says. “Whether I agree with him or not, I know that’s what he really, truly felt. Obama and others are well-spoken. They know how to sway you with words. So, I was like, ‘Nah, I ain’t want that.’”

Topher finds Trump to be far more inspirational than Obama. “Obama was the cream of the crop type of Black person to me,” he says. “Obama wasn’t a person who made me believe I could be anything I wanted to be in this life. It was Trump because Trump was not a politician. He wasn’t nobody. It was Trump who had no experience, coming in and just killing it. A lot of people said it was a laughingstock, but to me, it was like, ‘OK, you can be anything you want in America.’”

Of course, Trump was far from nobody. He was a lot more of a somebody than Obama, whose background—Black, single mother, not a lot of money—is a lot more like Topher’s. Trump is a product of the Ivy League, just like Obama. More importantly, he’s a billionaire (probably) whose family has been wealthy for generations. And although he had never run for elected office before becoming president, Trump had been a political player for years, hobnobbing and making campaign contributions. This mattered little to Topher. “The average person was not going to be Obama,” he says. “But the average person could be Trump.”

Besides, Topher believes that Obama was wealthy, too. “His stepdad was rich,” Topher says. “I remember his mom married, like, one of the richest people in the world. What’s his name? Sam? I actually looked it up, and I was like, ‘Oh, I didn’t know that.’” (Barack Obama’s stepfather was named Lolo Soetoro, not Sam, and he was not one of the richest people in the world).

Topher's vote for Trump in 2016 was met with derision from his circle. "Within the Black community, it's not fun to explore conservative values openly or consider yourself a Republican. It comes with a lot of vitriol that, if you don't have the guts for it, you might just vomit on yourself and run away," Topher says. "I would just touch on a topic and get so many negative comments. I'd have family members like, 'Yo, you need to be quiet. You don't need to be talking about stuff like that.'" A childhood friend with whom he had been making music for close to a decade stopped talking to him. "And so, I kinda just backed down," Topher says.

However, Topher found a comfortable place to speak about his beliefs when he tried a platform that none of his family and friends used: TikTok. He posted a video on what he saw as misinformation about Trump's plan for SNAP benefits and found a surprisingly warm response. He even started building a following. "I was like, 'This may be a place where I can kinda express some concerns of mine,'" he says.

But Topher didn't truly take off until he merged his music with Trump. In February 2020, Charlie Puth, the Billboard-topping pop star behind "See You Again," was posting snippets of simple, catchy beats, and TikTokers were adding their own lyrics. Topher, wearing a MAGA beanie and looking like a cuddlier Rick Ross, posted a video rhyming about his preferred candidate:

"Forget the small talk, man, I wanna know/Tell me right now who you voting for/I ain't gotta guess when your skin is Black/Somehow we still all vote Democrat/Think about the reasons, 'cause it's more than plenty/All aboard the train, Trump 2020." The verse went viral, tallying almost 3 million views.

"Tik tok is becoming more Republican and it's great," wrote one commenter.

"I'm a democrat and that was 🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥," wrote another.

"It was a rubber meets the road type moment," Topher says. "I've always wanted to talk about politics, but I've always wanted to do music, too. And I felt like I found my passion and my purpose. I want to be more *in* this. I want to be more *of* this."

Topher got more in and of this by joining the Conservative Hype House, a group of right-wing TikTokers who brainstormed content together and shared it for their 1.5 million followers. He released more songs, cannily capitalizing on viral moments in the MAGAverse, often involving celebrities. When Terry Crews, the Black "Brooklyn Nine-Nine" actor, was being pilloried for his Tweets suggesting that Black Lives Matter could morph into a Black supremacist movement, Topher released a song in his defense: "I questioned BLM, and that's all it took/Now they call me Uncle Tom, you ever read that book?" Crews posted a video of himself striding down a street to the song, and it was viewed 4.6 million times.

Topher followed up with songs defending Chris Pratt, who was criticized after declining to appear at a Biden fundraiser with his “Avengers” castmates, and firing back at Snoop Dogg, who had criticized Black conservatives in an Instagram post. Topher racked up hundreds of thousands of TikTok followers and started to get recognized when he went to Trump rallies. But none of his songs were as successful as “The Patriot,” when he released it last December.

Topher views the backlash against “The Patriot” as unjust, and he considered suing the platforms for violating his freedom of speech and for lost wages. He insists that the lyrics are metaphorical, although it’s unclear what the metaphor is. Nevertheless, the crowd in Kentucky understands it perfectly, and they shout the last word of every line with him.

When the song is finished, the crowd isn’t ready for the show to be over. Their cries of “One more!” dissolve into a thundering chant of “USA! USA! USA!” Topher steps offstage, but the crowd screams until he returns. They didn’t get the encore they were seeking on January 6th at the Capitol, but they’ll get one tonight.

“We’ll run it back,” Topher says, emerging from the wings. “‘The Patriot,’ one more time!” The DJ cues up the pianos once again, and Topher spits:

“Tens of thousands on my right, thousands by my side/War between good and evil, watchin’ our fists collide/Battle for our freedom now, to the streets we ride/Flags waving all around, patriots full of pride.”

A fat white woman in the front row raps along fervently, her head and shoulders jerking with every syllable. Her right arm stretches towards Topher, bobbing furiously to punctuate his words, her words, a picture of hip-hop communion. The chorus hits, and the crowd joins her, raising their arms and sweeping them from right to left, united and ascendent for a few minutes more, singing along.

“Man, that sounds so lovely!” Topher says.