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'Rich Men North of Richmond'



Christopher Anthony Lunsford, aka Oliver Anthony

It's a mark of the speed of our mediated times that I am behind the curve in thinking about Oliver Anthony's neo-populist screed "Rich Men North of Richmond." It was "released" (primarily through streaming) in mid-August, and

by Aug. 21 hit the Billboard Hot 100 topping it at No. 1. Anthony is “the first artist ever to launch atop the list with no prior chart history in any form.” [1] The next week, Aug. 28, it repeated at #1. [2]

Anthony instantly found himself famous.

Adopted by right-wing radicals and castigated by the progressive left, he also found himself whipped by the storms of our culture war torn times.

A question about “Rich Men North of Richmond” opened the recent Republican Presidential Debate, while right-wing politicians and MAGA mavens, like Marjorie Taylor Greene and Kari Lake, and right-wing media personalities, like Laura Ingraham, claimed Anthony as the voice of their movement.

While on the left, with almost clockwork efficiency, progressives of various stripes pounced upon Anthony with scorn and derision. As Andrew Levison disapprovingly recounts in *The Democratic Strategist*, “Progressives had two reactions – some fiercely condemned Anthony while others condescendingly lectured him.” [3] “Welfare bashing and conspiracy-tinged” was *Rolling Stone’s* summation; in *The Nation*, Nicholas Leman said, “Rich Men North of Richmond” is “steeped in an evangelical culture of bellicose ideological confrontation.” [4]

Both of which characterizations, with a touch of frustrated anger and sadness, Anthony quickly disavowed. In an Aug. 26 post to his Facebook page, Anthony explicitly rejected both those right-wing media types, who would make him chanter of their anthem, and left-wing progressives, who would claim him as a champion of the working man. He might be that, but he rejects both the politics of Bidenomics and right-wing proselytizers saying:

Corporate news (big surprise) is now trying to twist me into being a Biden supporter. ... That song has nothing to do with Joe Biden, ‘it’s a lot bigger than Joe Biden’ is referencing DeSantis’ response to my song. He talks about needing to get Joe Biden out, as if that would automatically solve all the problems. Biden is a big part of the issue, but it runs much deeper. ‘Rich Men North of Richmond’ is about corporate owned DC politicians on both sides. Though Biden’s most certainly a problem, the lyrics aren’t exclusively knocking Biden, it’s bigger and broader than that. It’s knocking the system collectively. Including the corporate owned conservative politicians that were on stage that night.” [5]

The “stage that night” is the previously mentioned Republican presidential debate.

And, here we are on Sept. 21 sprinting (well, maybe more accurately, hobbling) to catch up.

What's all the fuss about?

I almost wrote "It all began ..." when I realized the perceived warping speed of our mediated times – *it all began* less than a month ago. In that brief span, Anthony has morphed from a working guy venting his frustrations and looking for an opportunity to a media sensation and potential money machine trying to catch his breath, explain who he really is, and make sense of the whirlwind he unleashed.

Based on data from, where else in our mediated age, Wikipedia, the song was first uploaded to YouTube (again, where else in our mediated age) on Aug. 8, and "received over 5 million views in its first three days." [6] As of Monday, Sept. 18, it had over 67 million views and 179,520 comments. [7] The video can be found here.

To say it was an immediate "hit" understates the phenomenon by several orders of magnitude. In its first week it had 147,000 downloads and 17.5 million streams. In its second week, downloads declined but "streaming went up by 31% to 22.9 million.[8]

What elicited such a powerful response?

It was a combination of Anthony's homemade presentation. I am tempted to say "artless presentation," but I suspect Anthony is a bit more comfortable in front of a microphone than he lets on.

Still, the authenticity of his poor-man persona can't be debated. As he says on his website, OliverAnthonyMusic.com, his legal name is Christopher Anthony Lunsford; his grandfather was Oliver Anthony and "Oliver Anthony Music is dedicated to him and 1930s Appalachia; he is a high school dropout; has worked multiple jobs in the paper mills of North Carolina until an injury forced him to quit; he's worked in outside sales; now lives in a 27-foot camper on a piece of property he bought in 2019; and says "there's nothing special about me. I'm not a good musician, I'm not a very good person. I've spent the last 5 years struggling with mental health and using alcohol to drown it. ... I HATE the way the Internet has divided all of us. ... When is enough enough. ... We have lost our way from God and have let false idols distract us and divide us. It's a damn shame." [9]

For the moment, I am going to take Anthony's life story at his word, because if he's lying, he will soon discover the media machine – what's the antique line:

“Those whom the gods would destroy they first glorify,” or something to that effect – will eviscerate him.

Which life story, even with its cliched *Nashville-sound* undertones, when added to the sincerity of his lyrics generated an emotional and visceral response from his new-found devotees. Who, by the way, are not only Americans but a global audience of ordinary people exhausted by the system.

As in this admittedly unscientific sampling of the responses to the song posted on YouTube, which ranged from an old man in Tennessee to a young Black woman to a person in Dublin, Ireland to Australia to a Greek welder:

1. “I’m a truck driver. I’ve heard the hype about this song on the internet and just decided to listen to it. I was not prepared for 1. What an amazing song it actually is. 2. How deep it kicked me in the heart. Everything he said is more true than I wish it was.”
2. “I am from Ireland. This song resonates with people in the western countries. We are sick of these corrupt politicians.”
3. “I am a 43 yo Greek metalworker and i am crying and i dont feel shame for it. Perfect song my brother. God bless you.”
4. “The power in these notes and lyrics are unreal. Oliver, Thank you for this instant classic!”
5. “I’m in Australia and this brought me to tears how accurate the lyrics are, we all needed this song.”
6. “A rare combination of lyrics rich in meaning and a phenomenal singing voice have made this piece of art an anthem for the damaged souls of the oppressed. Thank you Mr. Anthony for sharing your talent with us.” [10]

What do those lyrics sing that so resonates with people?

Here is:

Rich Men North of Richmond

I've been selling my soul working all day
Overtime hours for bullshit pay
So I can sit out here and waste my life away
Drag back home and drown my troubles away

It's a damn shame what the world's gotten to
For people like me, people like you
Wish I could just wake up and it not be true
But it is oh, it is

Livin' in the new world with an old soul
These rich men north of Richmond
Lord, knows they all just wanna have total control
Wanna know what you think, wanna know what you do
And they don't think you know but I know that you do
'Cause your dollar ain't shit and it's taxed to no end
'Cause of rich men north of Richmond

I wish politicians would look out for minors
And not just minors on an island somewhere
Lord, we got folks in the street ain't got nothin' to eat
And the obese milkin' welfare
But God, if you're five foot three and you're three hundred pounds
Taxes ought not to pay for your bags of fudge rounds
Young men are putting themselves six feet in the ground
'Cause all this damn country does is keep on kicking them down

Lord, it's a damn shame what the world's gotten to
For people like me, people like you
Wish I could just wake up and it not be true
But it is oh, it is

Livin' in the new world with an old soul
These rich men north of Richmond
Lord, knows they all just wanna have total control
Wanna know what you think, wanna know what you do
And they don't think you know but I know that you do
'Cause your dollar ain't shit and it's taxed to no end
'Cause of rich men north of Richmond

I've been selling my soul working all day
Overtime hours for bullshit pay [11]

At first, it sounds just like what I suspect Laura Ingraham thought she heard – a blast at liberal elites and “all those others,” to borrow yet another phrase, just like she and Tucker Carlson before her and Rush Limbaugh before either of them daily bark and bray. And the fat shaming line about the obese using food stamps to buy their fudge rounds got the expected racist accusations from the woke left. Yes, Anthony repeats some conspiratorial tropes – like the straight out of Q-anon hint at child molestation in the lines about looking out for minors – and he sounds like a lot of people just venting at the vexations in their life scapegoating those in power.

Still, I think both missed the point.

What resonates with people is, I think, the same thing Harry McClintock discovered almost a century ago in “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” – the anthem of the Great Depression Era hobo camps. A video of McClintock singing “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” can be found [here](#). Anthony’s opening and closing lines “I’ve been selling my soul working all day/Overtime hours for bullshit pay” could also easily be vintage Woody Guthrie decrying “the Man” with his foot on working people’s necks. Although not as profound, a word Anthony would recoil at being used to describe himself, it laments the loss of the spirit Guthrie sang of in “This Land Is My Land,” a video of which can be found [here](#).

What Oliver Anthony sings about, I think, is the lament of folks who think they’re losing or have already lost their culture. The world they were brought up to live in is slipping away; they feel lost; those they turn to for help, some of whom mouth words that superficially seem to say what they want to hear turn out to be using the people like Anthony for their own ends; and, feeling lost, all they want to do is to go home.

If you listen carefully, Anthony’s venting, then, is strangely nonpartisan. He laments, in lines like those about the rich men wanting total control over all that you do and all that you think, that whichever way you turn, there’s someone wanting to use you. Anthony seems to get it that political correctness comes in a variety of flavors, because whether it’s “the woke” telling you about trans-people’s rights or Moms for Liberty telling you about the power of chastity and which books to read, in both cases it’s powerful people, or people seeking power, people seeking total control over what you do and what you think.

I don’t know if Oliver Anthony is a shrewd and cynical hustler, wannabe country singer who has tapped a potentially rich vein in the mine of American popular culture, or if he is a genuine, if a bit naïve, soul venting his frustrations who haphazardly stumbled into the American media machine’s unquenchable appetite for new faces and discovered that he is the face of the moment.

Whichever, hustler or *naif* or some archetypal American combination of both, he will soon learn that discovery comes with a price.

Regardless, Anthony got me thinking. A huge part of our currently polarized – I was going to say politics, but it’s larger than that – culture is that in 21st century America no one listens to one another anymore.

The “anymore” might be wistful thinking, because even a superficial glance at our shared history reveals that Americans have from almost the beginning

talked past one another, our vaunted but fading volunteer and association joining culture notwithstanding. Still, today, aided and abetted by a mercenary media seeking eyeballs and clickbait, a social media-saturated America finds itself devolving into ever more fractious tribes.

The most obvious of those tribes is the urban versus rural split, in which allegedly cosmopolitan urban dwellers look down their noses at their allegedly boorish and bigoted country cousins. Anthony reveals that that is a false divide, because the real split is the ancient split between those that “got” and those that “don’t.” Anthony seems to intuit that right-wing elites might try to talk his language but being members of the tribe that’s “got” they don’t really believe it. Left-wing elites, smugly nestled in their own meritocratic self-regard, are too myopic to even try. They dismiss Anthony out-of-hand.

They’re both wrong.

Although I am a part of a shrinking breed in our culture, as a centrist I try to understand both sides. What Anthony has unwittingly done is to expose the fundamental fracture in the right-wing alliance between urban plutocrats seeking tax breaks and business deregulation and rural folks unnerved by the rapid changes in American culture. Once they discover that they are actually one another’s adversaries, I am not sure what they can or will do about it. Politics can make strange bedfellows, to borrow yet another phrase, and as long as those smug left-wing elitists shower both with disdain they will continue to snuggle in one another’s embrace.

But if I were a left winger, I’d take Andrew Levison’s advice in “The Democratic Strategist.” Levison says “Progressives need to apologize to Oliver Anthony. He understands working people better than they do, he can talk to them better than they can and if Democrats ever want to regain their lost working-class support, they need to shut up and listen to guys like him instead of telling him to shut up and listen to them.” [12]

In fact, we all could take Levison’s advice and stop talking at one another, shut up, and listen to what the other person says with respect and attention. At the risk of an extreme banality, it’s elementary Dale Carnegie – if you want someone to agree with you, then never, ever argue. All that does is erect defensive barricades and counter attacks. It’s the red meat of our disruptive media machine. No, if you want someone to listen to you, then you must first listen to them, understand, as the saying goes, “where they’re coming from,” find mutual ground – those common objects of our love I’ve mentioned in numerous other **Book Notes** – and proceed from that rediscovered sense of common purpose.

No, it’s not easy, but what other choice do we have?

But it all begins by listening to one another.



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“Oliver Anthony YouTube Screenshot” at **jacarandafm** available at [Oliver Anthony's 'I Wanna Go Home' makes history within day of release \(jacarandafm.com\)](#) accessed September 17, 2023.

End Notes

1. Trust, Gary. “Oliver Anthony’s Music’s ‘Rich Men North of Richmond’ Debuts at No. 1 on Billboard Hot 100,” at **Billboard** (8/21/23) available at [Oliver Anthony Music’s ‘Richmond’ Debuts at No. 1 on Hot 100 – Billboard](#) accessed September 17, 2023.
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3. Levison, Andrew. “TDS Strategy Memo: Progressives Need to Apologize to Oliver Anthony” in **The Democratic Strategist: Political Strategy for a Permanent Democratic Majority** (August 2023) available at [tds_SM_levison__Oliver_Anthony.pdf \(thedemocraticstrategist.org\)](#) accessed September 17, 2023.
4. Ibid.
5. Cf. “Oliver Anthony Music” on **Facebook** (August 26, 2023) available at [\(3\) Facebook](#) accessed September 17, 2023.
6. [“Rich Men North of Richmond”](#) at **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, available at [Rich Men North of Richmond - Wikipedia](#) accessed September 18, 2023.
7. [“Oliver Anthony – ‘Rich Men North of Richmond’](#)” at **YouTube** available at [Oliver Anthony - Rich Men North Of Richmond - YouTube](#) accessed September 18, 2023.
8. [“Rich Men North of Richmond”](#) at **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, available at [Rich Men North of Richmond - Wikipedia](#) accessed September 18, 2023.
9. [“A Message from Oliver”](#) at [OliverAnthonyMusic.com](#) available at [About - Oliver Anthony Music](#) accessed September 18, 2023.
10. See “Comments” at [“Oliver Anthony – ‘Rich Men North of Richmond’](#)” at **YouTube** available at [Oliver Anthony - Rich Men North Of Richmond - YouTube](#) accessed September 18, 2023.
11. Lunsford, Christopher Anthony, “Rich Men North of Richmond,” lyrics, data from **Musixmatch** available at [rich men north of richmond lyrics - Search \(bing.com\)](#) accessed September 17, 2023.
12. See Levison, *cited above*.

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