Orchestrating Public Opinion

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Paul Christiansen: So, Jim, I was wondering what got you into this kind of work, because most people enter it through communication studies/media—that was my undergraduate background—I know that you studied art. Were you approaching it initially from a more aesthetic than technical perspective?

Jim Cole: I would say so. I was interested in art initially at a young age, starting in college and during college I started drifting more into broader, more liberal arts stuff—I got interested in history, a wider range of things. And then, more on my own time, I was primarily interested in filmmaking. By the end of school I was more doing that on my own, sort of checking the boxes with art, although I still loved doing it and was still serious about it, I felt that my attention was drifting elsewhere.

PC: So I assume studio art, as opposed to art history.

JC: Yes, studio art—painting, specifically. But I would say that I also had a relatively in-depth background in music, too, because my dad of course was a music professor and my brother is now a music professor and it’s sort of in our family, and I played piano from a young age. When I would do a film project, I would write my own music and play in it and all of that. So I came at moviemaking with a particular interest in the interdisciplinary aspect of it. The visual aspect obviously related to the painting that I was doing, and I was interested in writing too, so that was part of it, and music was of course a big part of it, and editing in some ways is the most important part of making a film or commercial. I come at editing in a way that’s really informed by music. There is a lot of focus on the interplay between the music and the image and rhythmic timing, crescendos, all that sort of thing. I think of it that way and I can’t help it because music was what I had on my brain first.

PC: Well, it's so much a part of the film aesthetic, editing, isn't it? How can you have a film without giving careful thought to editing? One thinks of Eisenstein and what he did for film through innovations in editing ...
JC: And that particular school of thought for filmmaking, the idea of montage that Eisenstein championed, is very related to the genesis of modern political advertising. Montage is more important in political advertising than in almost any other type of advertising, the juxtaposition of two images to create an effect, even if the viewer sometimes doesn’t realize it’s being created. And I would also say—we should talk more about this later—I think music in particular as one of the many elements in any sort of moving picture, commercial, movie, whatever ... for most audiences, especially audiences that aren’t professional musicians, that is much harder for people to parse, I think. People are more able and inclined to analyze visual images, they’re certainly more inclined to analyze parts like text and information that’s coming at them. The music kind of sneaks in and makes an end-around. Most audiences don’t even realize what is actually happening, but they somehow find themselves thinking, “Oh, I like this ad” or “I agree with this” or “I disagree.” And sometimes it’s just the musical sounds that are doing it. And if you strip the music out of it, you’d be left with a very unpersuasive ad.

PC: [nods profusely] In the published interview, you’ll read “PC: [nods profusely].”

JC: [chuckles]

PC: I mean, that’s why I’m writing this book, because people who don’t have musical training are just not equipped to understand what’s being done to manipulate them.

JC: That’s right. And I think music, more than any other element, is able to do that. For whatever reason, it’s just like exposure to TV, movies, or whatever. Or written material. Most people are just more equipped to comprehend and break down and have some defense against visual images, text, and that sort of thing.

PC: And at least in my mind, even though there is some deficit there as well, audiences typically have a fair amount of visual literacy, whereas they tend to lack musical literacy.

JC: And that is interesting and I’ll have to think a lot more about why that is. I’m sure you’ve been thinking about that more than I have. But I do think that’s true. It seems to be true to me. So anyway, just to wrap up background stuff, I got out of school, made independent movies, for a while did a couple
of features, mid-budget, but significant enough that we had Hollywood crews and all of that, and I still want to do that, that’s still sort of my ultimate dream. But I realize now it’s really more of a side hobby.

PC: You did that film with [former University of Southern Maine theatre professor] Minor Rootes, right?

JC: Yes, I did. And then after that, based on the festival success of that, we got a half-million dollar budget and were able to do a Western out in Montana, and we had B-level actors, but still sort of name actors, professionally still a somewhat modest crew. So I had a chance to do a feature movie that way. But then when I was editing that, I realized I hadn’t budgeted anything to pay myself at all. So I took some corporate video jobs on the side and that developed into a pretty thriving commercial business. But I was always more interested in politics, because I think at least some of the time it does have arguably social impact, so it felt a little more interesting to me at the time. Also, it turned out to be sort of recession-proof, just because people will always want to be elected things.

PC: Absolutely.

JC: And will always want their issues to come out on top. So it really doesn’t disappear. So as a business, it’s made sense to me. I’m still doing non-political advertising as well, but political is where our company is grounded the most. I say “we,” because it is me and two other guys. Where we’ve grown the most, what I find the most personally interesting, still is now probably 80% of what we do, which has happened in the last three years. It went from 10% to 80% of what we do. Last cycle [the 2012 elections] we were really, really busy, and it’s almost all political ads.

PC: Do politics dictate which kinds of ads you agree to produce? For instance, maybe you and your other two colleagues might have personal views that would make you say, “I’m not going to do a ‘No on 1’ ad.” Or so on.

JC: Within the confines of being generally partisan, which we first of all are personally and also have to be, because everyone asks, they’ll want to
know who you work for, you can't just be a mercenary. I'm sure some people somewhere in the world do it, but it's not really workable. There are, I'm sure, lots of issues on which good, conscientious liberals could disagree, but we haven't been in that position too much. Pretty much it has been party-line stuff, so it hasn't been that hard to take or not take. It's more dictated by capacity, because we still are a small company. How much can we take on and still give people our full attention? One thing we don't do is subcontract out our editing. I do all the editing myself, I select all the music. If I don't write it, I find it. I film everything. We send a second camera in, but I'm there, so we don't have the capacity to do that many video campaigns at the same time. Not yet anyway.

PC: That makes sense. But you could envision being approached by, say, a 527 (tax-exempt) group where you might say, "No, just don't agree with that, so I'm not going to do that."

JC: Absolutely, absolutely. We've certainly been approached by ... I have to not use any names ... non-political clients that we have a good relationship with who want us to do some work, even a one-off sort of thing for someone, a candidate that is on the other side of the fence. That is still very moderate, not the most despicable person to me in the world, but we still wouldn't do it. Even if it would jeopardize the professional relationship, the non-political relationship, with someone who, say, is high up in an ad agency that had a branch that needed a production team. We just wouldn't do that. And honestly, even if no one would know that we produced it, even if it was through the layer of the ad agency, we still wouldn't want to do it. For ideological reasons, I guess.


JC: We did her web videos. So we had a media consultant that did her TV ads that ran in Massachusetts. Frankly, at that point in time—and maybe it's debatable now—that was a little bit beyond our pay grade. We were not proven enough yet to take on a hotshot US Senate candidate race. We had done at that point much more ballot issues, less candidate work. That's changing now. But we were hired by her media consultant (who did her TV ads) to do her web ads. So anything that you would have seen on her site is a web video that we produced. And the media consultant was Mandy Greenwald, who did Hillary Clinton's campaign, she's pretty high up the
ladder. So yeah, we did that. The biggest thing we did to date was the marriage initiative in Maine.

PC: Right.

JC: We were the media consultant for that, the Yes on 1, pro-gay marriage. And for that it was not just me being subcontracted to make videos, we were guiding the campaign ...

PC: Those were great ads, too, by the way.

JC: Thank you. That was a high point for us.

PC: What I liked about the campaign was that it was kind of a down home—this is what typical Mainers would think. Because my feeling is that although Mainers tend to be somewhat conservative in certain things, there is also a leave-well-enough-alone aspect to their character. To generalize.

JC: Exactly right. There’s a certain streak of libertarianism to their conservatism. That core value of not wanting to tell someone else what to do. And not wanting to be told what to do. That’s where that comes from, of course. And that was a construct that we used in those ads for sure.

PC: What do you think of political ads produced by other people? Have any stood out to you?

JC: I have very different feelings ad by ad. My first response is to be critical because I’m competitive and I want mine to be better than anyone else’s. I think there is an unfortunate reliance sometimes—and this is just a subjective personal preference, but I also think it doesn’t work as well—a reliance on a lot of text, a lot of stock images. I like ads that have real people in them. I tend to not want to do an ad that is just a few newspaper citations and scary music, a mono-level stylistic approach where you have an ad that is trying to scare people into not voting for something or someone. And you have, getting back to what we were talking about, scary music. It’s exactly the same, it’s like right on the nose. And I find that that is not as effective. As far as how I respond to music in ads: In film you would often try to do wistful music in a tragic scene or sweet music in a tragic scene. That sort of contrapuntal approach is lacking in a lot of ads. I miss that. But I think there is some amazing creative stuff. Some of the Obama ads were unbelievable
(as they should be—he has the best people working for him). Particularly (this isn’t strictly music) sound design. There was that one where the camera was panning through factories that Bain Capital had purchased and sold out and we had that audio of Romney singing “Oh say can you see?”

PC: Yes, I’ve written about that one.

JC: It’s pretty amazing. So if I had to think about one last cycle, that was really ...

PC: And he is going out of tune ...

JC: He’s going out of tune, and the reverb matches the space.

PC: Yes. The reverb is brilliant.

JC: So it’s very genius.

PC: He’s singing “America the Beautiful.”

JC: Oh, “America the Beautiful,” that’s right. So I thought that was a pretty stellar ad. I don’t like doing negative ads, especially doing an ad that feels negative, because no one likes watching them. People like to feel positive emotions. We should come back to that because I have more thoughts on that. A tricky thing, though, is that negative ads work. More than positive ones.

PC: Yes, and campaign consultant after campaign consultant will tell you the same thing.

JC: Exactly. You’ve got to thread the needle, though, because it’s so easy to create a backlash and have the wrong effect and that ad, the Obama ad, was so effective. And it had a little bit of humor, of ribbing. You know what I mean?

PC: Absolutely.

JC: Music is able to communicate a lot in a way that people are not even fully aware of. But immediately you’re right there with them. It reminds me

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3 This 2012 ad is entitled “Firms.”
a little bit of what you would do if you were trying to get your cat or dog to take a pill if they were sick, you'd put it in peanut butter or wrap it in one of those toys that taste delicious. It’s almost like this delivery mechanism where you can … well, “put one over on your audience” is probably not a tactful way to describe it, but it kind of does that. I generally do think that a positive emotion is more effective, whether it’s nostalgia or credibility, core emotions that people want to feel, it gives them chills a bit. Or at worst like in a negative ad, “disappointment”—never anger, never hatred, disappointment. It makes you feel good about yourself. You know, “It’s too bad, I like Romney, but he kind of disappointed me.” And then you apply that sentiment to a particular position.

PC: Speaking about positive ads, I watch “Morning in America” and I still get chills, even though I am on the other side of the fence and I understand thoroughly how the music is supposed to work on me!

JC: Paul, I’ll tell you, we had the most liberal client you would believe. We did an ad just after the election for HRC, for the Human Rights Commission, which is a national group promoting same-sex marriage or marriage equality. It was a big budget ad, we had Morgan Freeman do the voice-over, they had Hollywood connections and they got him to do it, and what they said was that they want this to be like “Morning in America.” This is for same-sex marriage.

PC: It’s an iconic ad.

JC: And it’s in late 2012. And that’s still the touchstone reference point. And that’s exactly what we tried to do and it still works. It’s stirring.

PC: You mentioned that you didn’t want to go negative, and I understand that. But Bush’s 2004 “Wolves” is the most remembered ad of that cycle.

JC: It works, yeah.

PC: And [George W. Bush campaign adviser Alex] Castellanos was quoted as saying, “We tested ‘Wolves,’ people got it immediately. ‘Wolves, terrorists, we got it, threat, yep.’” So here is another question for you: Do you feel that

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4 In this interview, “Morning in America” refers specifically to the 1984 Reagan ad entitled “Prouder, Stronger, Better.”
there is an ethical aspect to producing political ads? Because it seems that Castellanos is bragging that he is manipulating people.

JC: If you think you're not manipulating people, you're kidding yourself. That's the whole point. I think that the fulcrum for any ethical considerations is the candidate, the candidate's positions, or the issue. Do you believe it is an ethical issue? The means that you use to get there—short of obviously being dishonest, as long as you're being factual—any emotional manipulation beyond that is the exact reason we're in business. And that's why you have airtime. I don't feel great about it every time, but I think where you make the decision is do you want to do ads for this candidate? Because at the end of the day, it's really to influence policy, to elect someone, or to have an issue win. And that's where the ethical consideration is. Do you believe that this is a cause to get behind or a person to get behind? And if so, then you should do anything within the realm of being factually honest to make it happen. You can probably tell by the way I'm talking about it that I sometimes feel squeamish about that.

PC: Well, Aristotle acknowledges three means of persuasion, and πάθος, appeal to emotion, is one of them. And a legitimate one, not in any way underhanded or out of bounds.

JC: I have felt the feeling before that something was over the line, irritating me—I'm trying to remember what it was. I'm interested in that, too—what was different about that ad. Because it wasn't factually incorrect. I think what made me uncomfortable was ... So a number of the ads we've done are independent expenditure ads, not for a candidate, they're for an issue, and often by a DC-based PAC coming into a rural part of the country, whether it's guns, or public option in health care, labor issues (we get a lot of that), and they love—and I love—to use real people. They'll identify a supporter, someone on their mailing list who is willing to be in an ad, and I think that's great. A person actually from the area, an actual voter. And often a person that has a compelling story to tell. But then they will write a script that is poll-tested language ...

PC: Frank Luntz-approved?

JC: [chuckles] ... and it's not exactly substantively different from the person's story, but it's a word they would never use and it pushes it into this more cutting rhetoric. And I feel bad, I often try to quietly soften the language a
little bit. Because I do feel bad making someone say something in a way they wouldn't say it. That feels slightly unethical to me. And the reason groups like that do that, it's not exactly electoral politics—they're preaching to the choir, they're trying to rile up an aggressive base. So angry language works. It's not about winning over voters that are genuinely on the fence, and I guess I find that sort of thing, winning over persuadable voters, more appealing.

PC: So how do you choose music for ads? Do you compose your own or use pre-existing music or commission some? From what you've said it sounds like you write some of it.

JC: I do. Just for reasons of work flow and ease. Obviously in an election season we would have a lot going on. I try to find pre-existing music, some needle-drop music. There's a bunch of resources. I do have a pretty clear sense from reading a script what kind of music it's going to call for. And the types of music I would use normally fall into maybe four or five buckets of music that I think are going to work. There are kinds of ads that I think I can knock out of the park and do a good job on and seem to have worked in the past. So I try to find something that exists. We don't often commission because we don't often have time. Normally we have to have something done within a week, sometimes within a day or two. It is just not feasible to do that. And I don't think many people do that. Except at the highest budget levels and even then, I think probably not, I think it's needle-drop music for the most part. If I can't find something, then I will make it myself.

PC: It seems as though some music, like “Morning in America,” was written specifically for the one purpose of matching with the images and the voice-over line by line.

JC: I think it probably was, but I think that was not a response ad, it was not in the heat of the campaign. And I don't know this historically—you should check it—but I'm guessing they had that in the works for a bit longer to roll out at the right time. And this may just be the specific races we've done, but we haven't had too much opportunity to do that. It's all been pretty quick. I would like to do that more to be honest. I would love to commission music. So generally I try to find something, if I can't find it, I will just create it at home, like a MIDI keyboard kind of thing.

PC: So a client will order an ad and you will know in the moment, what genre of music you want to use, what instrumentation you want to go with?
JC: Actually, yes. It’s the first thing I think about, along with the visual style to some extent, especially if I can think of an analogue, this is like “Morning in America” style ... or sometimes it’s a movie, not an ad. Often I don’t know if there’s time to make it rocket science, so if it’s the kind of thing that’s going to have a string section that slowly crescendos, right at the very end at 26 seconds when the disclaimer comes off and it’s going to have sort of a bass pulse that gets a little bit louder and usually I try to find or plan on a turn like halfway to 3/4 of the way through when a barnburner line comes through ...

PC: The golden mean.

JC: I’m telling you, it’s a physical reaction. People hear a big loud bass note, even if it’s sub-frequency, people just feel “Ooh, what is happening?” Know what I mean? You can’t help it.

PC: And they are most prevalent in the negative ads.

JC: Yes. And there are other considerations. Is it the kind of ad where we need an audio disclaimer? So someone has to say, “Paid for by ...” Or is it just a visual disclaimer? So does the music have to chill out earlier? Do they want text onscreen for a long time? What is the structure? Does it have sort of a prologue or leadup, so should the music be subdued and then come in at ten seconds or so? So you try to think about it around the script. But the tone is often similar. I don’t like using creepy music in negative ads. And I always imagine the word “disappointed,” and I can’t tell you exactly what “disappointed music” sounds like, but it’s distinctly different from, say, eerie, horror movie-style.

PC: I think I know what you mean.

JC: It makes a viewer feel better about themselves. They don’t want to feel scared.

PC: I think people were ultimately turned off by the terror ads of the Bush campaign in 2004.

JC: And of terror in general. People were scared for so many years—it’s almost like emotional exhaustion at a certain point. It’s still effective, I guess, but it’s off-putting.
PC: It seems to me that Republicans early on saw and were willing to exploit the power of music in political ads. Democrats have been playing catchup all along. I think Clinton understood, and certainly Obama did. But Dukakis? McGovern? And Adlai Stevenson in 1956 didn’t have music in his ads.

JC: I would conjecture that at a certain point in the history of the modern Democratic party, there was a certain entitled obliviousness that assumed that all voters naturally would agree with their perspective. Like of course this is right, it’s common sense. And I agree with those things. And you don’t need to use those dirty tricks. The idea sells itself. Which would be lovely if that was true, but I don’t think it was and it still really isn’t. And I don’t think that Republicans were ever so burdened by that notion.

PC: It seems that Democrats feel embarrassed or ashamed to use manipulative tactics—they want to say, “These ideas just make logical sense” or instead of these tactics, they want to say, “Don’t you people have compassion and decency?”

JC: As a Democrat I completely feel that way, too. I can relate to the impulse. But a key thing to remember always, and this was drilled into our heads in the same-sex marriage campaign in 2012, because it had lost in 2009, so you’re familiar with the history of that, there was a major marriage initiative in Maine in 2009 and it failed. There’s been a lot of soul-searching about what happened there. And what we found to be true—because we worked really closely with a research consultant and they did a ton of psychological research and polling before trying to win marriage in Maine—was that the problem with that is: who are you talking to? You’re not preaching to the choir. There are lots of people who are going to vote for same-sex marriage in Maine, fine. The 2009 ads seemed to be more playing to those people. But they hadn’t really considered that there’s a different audience we need to be talking to, and it’s not people that agree with us. And not everyone does agree with us. No, you’ve got to as a first step acknowledge that there are people who you may profoundly disagree with that you still need to persuade. You have to respect them, because these people are not hardcore ideological right-wingers who will never vote that way, I mean forget that. But there are people who disagree with you but are still fundamentally decent people and that are persuadable. So identifying that is the first principle.

PC: Of course marriage has always changed as an institution over the times. I have a friend, liberal on almost every issue, who just cannot accept
same-sex marriage. He is all for civil unions and equal rights for everyone, but sees marriage differently.

JC: I’m telling you, that was the hardest thing in the whole campaign: how do you get around the civil unions thing, because people still feel good about that. They feel they are decent citizens and good liberals saying I support civil unions and everybody should have the same legal rights. But how do get them that extra step to say that it’s not the same thing? What we emphasized to get at that was we had to go right at the emotional aspect. That marriage is emotionally different.

PC: There you go.

JC: You don’t grow up dreaming that some day your son or daughter is going to have a civil union. You want someday to be at their wedding. We had to make purely an emotional appeal. People didn’t like rational themes, we’re never supposed to talk about fairness or legalities or anything like that. It was just that fundamentally it feels different. It’s a different emotional and spiritual experience that everyone should be able to have. But that was a real evolution for the whole marriage movement. We did a lot of research to arrive at that point. But getting back to music, as I started thinking about that issue and particularly about selling it to people in Maine, which as we’ve said, can be conservative, particularly the parts of Maine we needed to reach were a little more conservative. Portland was going to be fine—we needed turnout, but it was going to be fine—and southern Maine in general. And thinking about what is the tone? What is the key emotion and what is the music that will evoke that? So I’m thinking about pride in the state of Maine, values in Maine. Don’t tell us what to do, we won’t tell you what to do. Fairness, integrity, all these sort of Yankee values. What feeling, that has nothing to do with marriage at all, is going to evoke those feelings? And it was nostalgia. That was sort of the core theme, which would seem to be an appropriate tone for a [same-sex] marriage ad, but weirdly it is. It really seemed to work. So a signature ad, one of the first ads that we did, was of this 80-something-year-old man, a World War II vet. He was a fighter pilot, he has a granddaughter who has a same-sex partner that wanted to get married.5 And we filmed him with his big family at Mother’s Day breakfast

with everyone sitting around the table. They had no real script. He was eating, then he would talk for a minute ...

PC: I saw this one.

JC: And the clue to what makes this guy so appealing—it was nostalgia, American values. He's a vet, this charming old man, he has a Maine accent, and a northern Maine accent, he's from Washington County. And all you have to do is evoke that nostalgia, the way you would feel about this guy if you were seeing a documentary about World War II. Positive feelings and then you apply that to marriage. But you have to apply it right from the beginning, because people don't like feeling tricked. You can't have him talk for twenty seconds about his service and all of a sudden throw marriage in there, because then it feels like sleight-of-hand.

PC: So you start it right at the beginning?

JC: You have him look you right in the eyes and say this is what it's about and then you evoke all of those positive feelings. They can't help it. People leave the ad, anywhere on the spectrum, saying, “I may still not agree with this, but I like that guy. He's a sweet old guy. I wish he was my grandpa.” You know what I mean? And you're left with a positive emotional feeling. And then you build that up in layers over the course of the thirteen ads we did, creating more of those positive impressions over and over again. And you still use the same music, by the way. Once you get that tone ... It was all subdued strings, very backgroundy-anthem feeling, it just felt like nostalgic old America, evocative of those values that everyone is comfortable with and would like to get back to in some ways. It is counterintuitive for marriage, but it just seemed right.

PC: Now did you write that music?

JC: I didn’t. I was going to write music, that was my plan, and then I found a thing that was so perfect that I used it.

PC: So pieces in the public domain?

JC: You pay for the right to use it in broadcast. And then I did actually layer some additional strings over it in some places in certain ads that were a little more intense. So we never really used any negative stuff. We shot some, but
we never used them. But certain ads that needed more punch, I would add a little more of a crescendo. So I’d use the existing chord progression and I would just build it deeper, like another layer or strength, a little bit of meat underneath. Just to augment what I already had.

**PC:** To what extent do clients influence what music is envisioned and ultimately used?

**JC:** Never in my experience do they influence what is envisioned. We don’t really talk about it beforehand, and I don’t really want to. And I don’t like showing rough cuts that don’t have music, or don’t have even color correction, that aren’t as polished, because sometimes they won’t like something without even realizing why they don’t like it. They’re like, “Eh, it doesn’t work.” And oftentimes it’s something that’s going to be fixed anyway in the final draft and polished. They will sometimes kick music back and not like it. Only once or twice have I really gone to the mat on that and pushed back. I did with that Human Rights Commission ad, which was pretty high profile for us. It ran in DC, but it was aimed at a more national audience, and a liberal audience. It’s not trying to influence any pivotal election.

**PC:** So it didn’t only run in DC, did it?

**JC:** The way a lot of these go, they’ll do a token buy in DC, but it’s primarily for web. They want to show that they’re putting it on air, putting some real money behind it so they get press. So maybe it’ll run in DC and maybe one other market. That happens a lot with independent stuff. That was the ad they wanted to be like “Morning in America.” So the music I used is not like “Morning in America,” but it’s evocative of the same sort of thing, and it was actually a little darker. They wanted imagery like the Constitution or Martin Luther King’s March on Washington, they wanted all these big things, but also ideas in there of overcoming oppression, pretty grand stuff. So it was a little more epic, what I used. Not louder or percussive, but just …

**PC:** Sweeping gestures.

**JC:** Sweeping gestures. Part of it was a melancholy tone, because you have to have this sense of overcoming the negative ...

**PC:** So maybe a feint to the relative minor ...
JC: Exactly. Quite a bit of that. And then there’s a key change halfway through and then it ends on a positive, triumphant note. The representative, the person who we were working with, I think is a really smart guy and a sensitive guy, but he’s not a musician. And to him it just sounded too downbeat. He wanted something that was purely light without starting with the dark and moving into the light. And to me that robbed it of the poignancy.

PC: But see that’s the thing. You wanted to have a narrative, a story to tell.

JC: Exactly. And so for that one, I played it for other people to be sure I wasn’t crazy, and they seemed to like it. One of our partners didn’t like it so much, but it’s not really so much his area. So I said to the client, “This is better. I’ll do something else if you want, but I really think you’re going to find this is better, I think it’s powerful, and I know it’s not fully upbeat,” so we agreed to do that. And it was the right choice obviously. I only fought that one because I liked the ad a lot. Often I’ll just say “OK, I’ll try something else.” And clients, because they’re not musicians, they shouldn’t be expected to know. They won’t talk in detail about what they don’t want to hear. “We want more energy, more high energy.” That’s about as specific as you’ll ever get.

PC: I have a friend who sometimes plays saxophone in local commercials. And he once had a client tell him, “I want it more orange” and he had to try to figure out what that the client meant by that.

JC: And that’s only somewhat more inscrutable than “I want more energy.” I guess “faster and louder.” “Orange” is really crazy. I’ve never had that happen. But then, and this isn’t just about music, but about any work for hire that is creative: You have to be a mind reader. You have to listen to someone who doesn’t know anything about music or visual style or anything else say that it makes no sense to them. You have to say to yourself, well, what kind of person is this? What does “orange” mean to this guy?

PC: Yeah, they might think that that means something.

JC: But it might mean something totally different to someone else, yeah. And then once in a long while you play the card, “I understand that subjectively you don’t love this, but in good conscience my job is to tell you what I think will be better, and this is my area, I would suggest that we try this out.” And sometimes I just do two versions and play them side-by-side, one with
theirs and one with yours. And sometimes they will say, “Oh, you’re right. That is good.”

**PC:** Could you give an estimate of what percentage of an ad’s persuasion in your opinion comes from nonverbal appeals or even specifically from music? Maybe that is too difficult a question to answer.

**JC:** I think it’s hard to separate specifically music from, say, visual style, and by that I mean “visual content,” which is more accurate. If you’re doing an ad with a person in it or a group of people delivering lines for the camera, it’s like casting an actor—they have to be charismatic, they have to be likeable. If someone has the wrong face, or they’re wearing glasses that are too thick, you’re screwed—it’s not going to work, no matter what kind of music you have in there for the most part. So all of those ephemeral aesthetic qualities including the music, lighting, the subject, the person, how their voice sounds, is it deep, is it too high—all of these things are important. I’m going to politely say, with respect to scriptwriters and pollsters who have more say in the content, say it’s 50%. I might even speculate that in some cases, it might be 80%. No matter what you say, if you’ve got those elements in place and all working ...

**PC:** Vocal timbre [of the narrator] is important.

**JC:** And how does that relate to the music? Is the editing on pace with the music? Does it happen in a rhythmic way that is sensitive to the music? Do crescendos time with the moment when a key message is delivered? Or a cut? Or a transition from a wide shot to a close shot? Are all those sort of subliminal aesthetic things working together? Do you get that sort of holistic ...?

**PC:** Aesthetic unity?

**JC:** Yeah, exactly.

**PC:** Again, coming back to “Morning in America,” Hal Riney’s voice, the grain of his voice and how it relates to the music, is just so much a part of that ad.

**JC:** I have digitally lowered people’s voices a semitone. To make them sound more authoritative. Or just added a little more bass below 80 Hz or something like that. I do that all the time, you know what I mean?
PC: What would you say about harmonic modulation in an ad?

JC: I think a well timed and well chosen modulation is the same as what I was talking about as a deep bass effect at a particular moment. There's a physical response to that that is primitive and irresistible. If you time that with the right moment of the text in the ad, you just have a response to it, you can't help it.

PC: Some tonal manipulation doesn't even qualify as a modulation per se, there is a moment at the end of the “Wolves” ad where the final F minor chord is digitally altered so that tones slide down microtonally to create a stomach-churning, sickening effect.

JC: Yes, that kind of “warping down.” I have a low frequency sound effect I use sometimes, which is pretty much exactly that. It is barely even tonal, it's just a rumble. But it's a descending rumble. And it's so low you can barely even hear it. It was a sickening sort of effect. I've used that a few times. And you would barely even know—well, you might notice if you listened to it—but most people wouldn't even pick up that it was there. You would just have this weird feeling of unease for a second.

PC: So the reason I am writing this book is that I think people generally have a poor understanding of the ways music and soundscapes in general work on viewers of political ads. You were talking about an aesthetic unity, which I agree the best ads are, but I actually think that very often the other elements are responding to music. This is a new claim. When music is even mentioned in books by political scientists, sociologists, media scholars, and so on, it is usually as an afterthought. The ad is accompanied by such and such type of music and they just leave it at that. Their most careful analysis is almost always reserved for verbal rhetorical appeals and the visual style. But I think music demands attention in a way that the other elements have to subordinate themselves to.

JC: I would actually agree with that.

PC: For instance, that unsettling music in “Wolves” makes you feel bad through an emotional appeal; the narrator and written text tell you about whom you should feel bad, “Kerry and the liberals in Congress.”

JC: That's exactly right. By very definition, making a political ad is hopefully a good collaboration and partnership with politicians and consultants who
come from the world of politics, not from the world of anything aesthetic. And this is very different from people that are creative, and obviously you have to have both of those things working at a pretty high level. I don’t know of many media consulting jobs that are really founded by people who have a creative background. And it’s very often they contract it out. The company will advise on what the message is, the style, and all of that. But pretty much it is left to the production company (and they have no political background or political interests), so they’re not really operating in tandem as much as they could. So it’s really asking a lot of people who have political backgrounds to judge, they don’t have much input on the music. We don’t realize it sometimes. They might reject it, they might say “That’s not good, do something else.” But they don’t go to their production company and say, “Here’s the script. We would like this type of music.” They have more feedback on the visuals, the people who are in the ads, the casting and all of that, because again, I think it’s easier for people to parse or understand that sort of thing. They certainly have more, if not complete, control over the text. That gets lost in the shuffle, but it’s incredibly important.

**PG:** And to me, in many ads music is the most important thing. So it’s odd that it is scanted so much by scholars. It might be because of a general lack of musical literacy with which many people feel uncomfortable addressing music.

**JC:** It is. And the people who are actually choosing the music, especially in good ads, who are creative people with poetic sensibilities and who understand how effective that all can be. Those aren’t the media consultants. They’re not people that you would talk to if you were going to interview someone who printed the ads for whomever. I’m sort of unusual in the sense that I’m a partner in the company, but I also come from a creative background. I do it all, I choose the music myself. I think another guy who did that is Stuart Stevens, who did Romney’s campaign. I believe he has a film or advertising background and a writing background and a non-political ad background. So he was from the creative world and came into politics and not vice versa. He’s written a couple of novels, I think he’s done some filmmaking. I know that he has a background that is not the traditional path for a political consultant at all. He didn’t start as someone’s campaign manager or spokesperson or anything like that. He started out doing some pretty creative work. Getting back to the importance of music, I would suggest that the reason that it may be the most effective and the most impactful part is because it is the least understood and the least talked
about. And again people don’t have that understanding or natural defenses. People don’t like being manipulated, they build up a resistance to any sort of manipulative image, text, phrase. But they don’t have that immunity with music because they don’t have the background or the education.

PC: I would just add that I don’t have an immunity to it either—I just know what they’re doing to try to manipulate.

JC: But if they were trying to use music to persuade you to vote for something you weren’t too sure about or didn’t feel great about, you’d have an immunity to it, right?

PC: Yes, I think so. Only because I know what is going on.

JC: That’s right and you might say, I’m not crazy about this candidate, but I know enough about music to know I’m being played a little bit.

PC: Well, I’d like to thank you for taking the time to talk with me. This is fascinating stuff and will contribute greatly to the book.

JC: Thanks. It was my pleasure.