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Beacon Beats: David W. Jacobsen's 'POTUS'

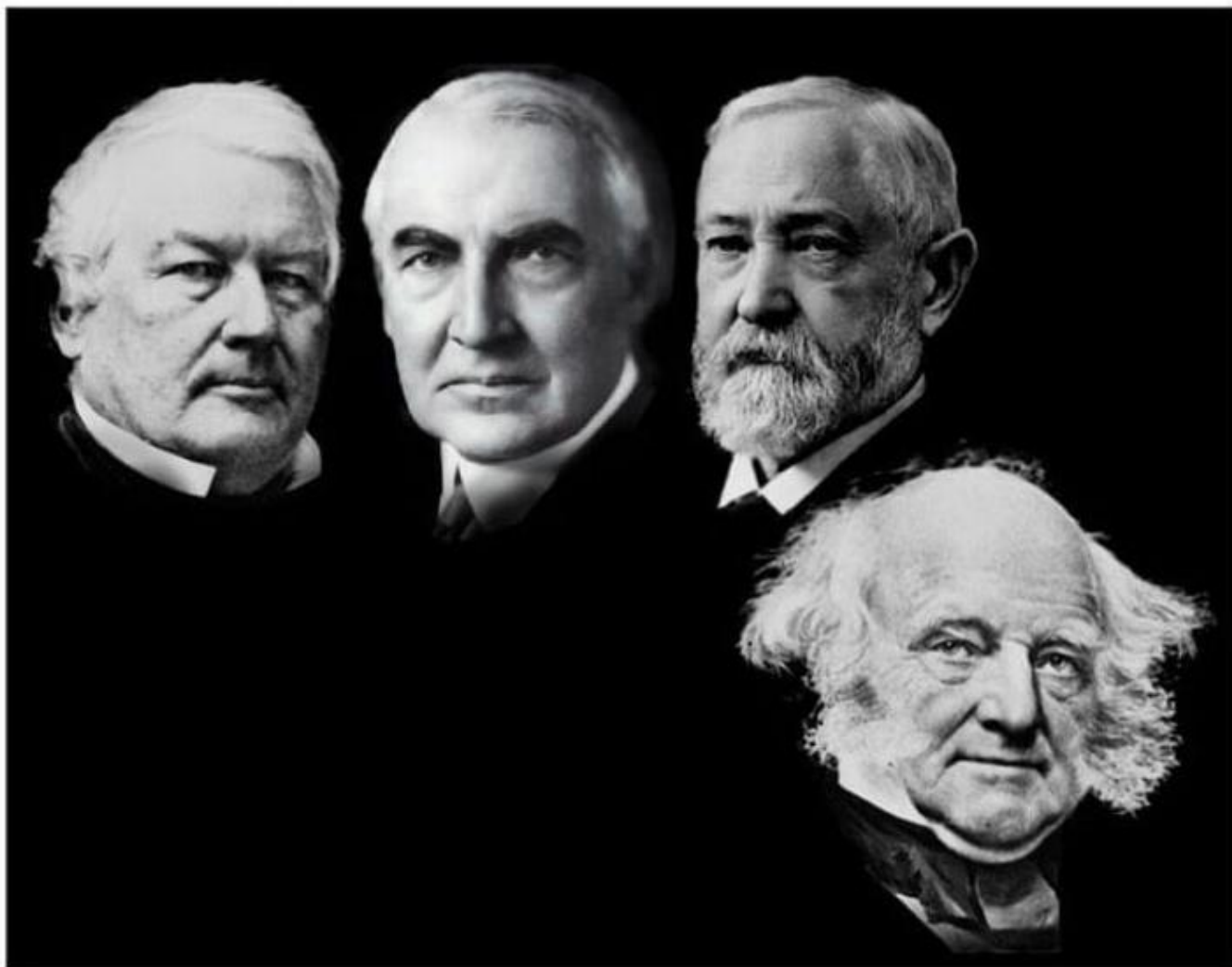
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POTUS David W. Jacobsen

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Courtesy of Spotify

On this special President's Day edition of Beacon Beats, we're looking at "POTUS," a historical folk album by indie singer/songwriter David W. Jacobsen, which was released last year.

"POTUS" aims to explore past U.S. Presidents by situating almost every song as a first-person narrative from different Presidents that provides insight into their individual lives and Presidential struggle.

The Presidents featured in "POTUS" are those which are lesser known, written about or even come with the baggage of their presidential choices. Jacobsen called them "overlooked or awful." These are Presidents which we may not admire today, but that still contributed to the America we live in, which Jacobsen acknowledges.

The album begins with "1799," one of the strongest songs on the album musically, and one where Jacobsen accomplishes his goal of adding humor to history. The song plays on Prince's iconic song "1999," following the same beat and lyric pattern. "1799" focuses on the rocky relationship between John Adams and Alexander Hamilton before the election of 1800.

One song on the album that stands out is "Samuel Tilden's Lament," which feels less like a lament and more like an angry outburst. Compared to the rest of the album, "Samuel Tilden's Lament" is harsher than the rest. It's angry, it's out there, it's in your face folk rock, where much of its surrounding album is relaxed folk.

We're left to wonder: what audience did Jacobsen have in mind with this album? He could be writing for underground folk lovers, or history buffs, or even fans of the hit musical "Hamilton," or maybe teachers in general? It's anyone's guess.



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Though where Jacobsen differs from Hamilton is in his approach to these Presidents. While “Hamilton” seems to romanticize the historical figures that star in the musical, “POTUS” takes an honest approach, even criticizing and poking fun at these past presidents for their misdoings.

“POTUS” ends with “The Unforgiven,” a song that combines disco and folk in a new and experimental way. In the style of the Bee Gees or ABBA, Jacobsen writes about Ford’s controversial pardoning of Nixon, where Ford himself is conflicted about the tough decision. In the end, they are both “unforgiven,” according to Jacobsen.

Jacobsen’s dedication to this album is admirable. It’s clear that many hours were spent reading, researching and even traveling, in order to make this album as historically accurate as possible. I can imagine it’s no easy task to place oneself in the mind of a President who’s been dead for dozens or hundreds of years.

This is an album where listeners can learn something about a lesser known President, and learn from their own perspective, as Jacobsen puts himself in their shoes.

With a little bit of research on the listener’s part, they can expect to understand the Presidents in a new and realistic way.

Madelyn Muschek