

## Backgrounder for “Why Build the Wall” by Anais Mitchell

One of the songs in CT’s January to May repertoire is “Why We Build the Wall” by Anais Mitchell. The song, composed in 2010, later became part of a large musical production called *Hadestown*.

At first glance, given the racially infused actions of President Trump to block legitimate asylum seekers, including the separation of children, the very thought of the construction of a border wall is shocking. It represents an affront to our values and morals. This is precisely why CT has chosen this song. As a social justice seeking choir, it is important to sing out our repudiation of the very idea of wall building and exclusion.

To understand the intent of the song let’s look to the composers observations. Anais Mitchell’s thoughts are well expressed the following article.

Ten years ago, I wrote a song called “Why We Build The Wall” for the very first [draft](#) of a music theater piece called *Hadestown*. It is a retelling of the Greek myth of Orpheus, the great musician/poet who tries to rescue his wife Eurydice from the Underworld. It’s set in a darkly political, Americana dreamscape—the Underworld is not the land of the dead, but something like a company town—a walled city whose citizens engage in mindless, soulless work in exchange for the security promised by their boss-king Mister Hades.

In “Why We Build the Wall,” Hades indoctrinates the workers in a call-and-response song: “Why do we build the wall? / My children, my children / Why do we build the wall?” And the workers answer: “Why do we build the wall? / We build the wall to keep us free / That’s why we build the wall / We build the wall to keep us free.”

*Hadestown* has been evolving slowly over a decade. At this point, “Why We Build The Wall” is an old song; I never expected it to feel new again. And then [Donald Trump](#) came along. It wasn’t just that Trump made the building of “the Wall” central to his initial platform, it was the call-and-response style chants at his rallies:

“Who’s gonna pay for the wall?” says Trump.  
“Mexico!” chants back his supporters.

Suddenly, it felt like the song was speaking directly about today’s politics. People began to ask if it was written in response to the Trump campaign, when in reality, both Trump and the song were simply tapping into the same folk archetypes. There is nothing new about the Wall. Political leaders have invoked it time and again to their advantage, because it works so well on people who feel scared.

By walling others out, the citizens of *Hadestown* wall themselves in—to hell. Eurydice quickly regrets her decision.

America, too, has a choice coming up. I’ve taken to saying, when I play “Why We Build the Wall” now at my own shows: “This song is ten years old... Any resemblance of any contemporary political figures to the King of the Underworld is purely coincidental.”

But we all know the Underworld Boss/King archetype when we see him. Let’s not elect him President.

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- ❖ For more information talk to your Music Section Leaders or contact Heino Nielsen, Acting CT President ([h.nielsen@rogers.com](mailto:h.nielsen@rogers.com)).

- ❖ This article will be posted on the CT website from which singers can download and print a hard copy.
- ❖ CT invites members to listen to a YouTube version of the song. One way to do that is to click on the following link: <https://collagelab.wordpress.com/2011/09/15/why-do-we-build-the-wall/>