

Credit: The New York Times (11 January 2017)

Juliet and Jackie Evancho, Bonding as Targets in a Trump Media Frenzy

By Katie Rogers



Juliet Evancho, 18, and Jackie Evancho, 16, at their home in a Pittsburgh suburb. Credit Ross Mantle for The New York Times

PITTSBURGH — The two sisters know what people call them. “Traitor,” complete strangers write online. “Queer,” whisper other high school students.

Jackie Evancho, a 16-year-old singer who rode success on NBC’s “America’s Got Talent” to international stardom, has become the target of intense criticism over her decision to perform the national anthem at Donald J. Trump’s presidential inauguration on Jan. 20. Juliet Evancho, 18, has always defended her little sister, but she is dealing with blowback of another kind. Juliet came out as transgender in 2015, and her family is suing the school district over her right to use women’s bathrooms.

As the girls curled up next to each other on a sofa in their family living room in a Pittsburgh suburb on a recent evening, the pressures on them — and their devotion to each other — came into sharp relief.

Juliet, who has tagged along to Jackie's performances for years to cheer her on — including at the National Christmas Tree lighting ceremony with President Obama in 2010 — said she would not travel with the family to Washington to celebrate her sister's singing at the Capitol. Juliet said that she had become careful about "literally" everything to avoid fueling more criticism. Next week, she said, she has "prior engagements."

Jackie gently interceded.

"It's just a personal event, I guess," she said.

"I definitely will be there," Juliet said, struggling with the words.

"In spirit," Jackie offered.

"In spirit," her sister agreed.

The girls, in a rare interview, insisted that Juliet's absence had nothing to do with the polarized politics surrounding the inauguration.

Whether Juliet was even invited to the inauguration is unclear. The girls' father, Mike Evancho, said he did not yet know if the whole family, including both parents and Jackie's three siblings, had received tickets.

Boris Epshteyn, a spokesman for the Trump inaugural committee, did not respond when asked if the entire family had been invited.

As the inauguration approaches, Jackie and a handful of other performers face unusual scrutiny from a divided nation intent on knowing their motives and political leanings. Some former members of the Rockettes have questioned the willingness of current members to dance for Mr. Trump as planned, and an online petition has circulated asking the Mormon Tabernacle Choir not to sing for him.

Two of Jackie's past collaborators have also squelched talk of performing at the inauguration: The Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli denied that he would perform at the event. David Foster, the producer and composer whom Jackie calls her "musical father," was invited to perform but declined, and did not respond to a request for comment.

With just over a week until Mr. Trump's inauguration, Jackie remains the only solo act committed to perform. The president-elect and the singer have crossed paths before, when she performed at an event at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Fla. She described Mr. Trump as "very polite," and said that she decided for herself to accept the offer to sing at the inauguration.



From left, the Evancho siblings: Jackie, 16; Juliet, 18; Rachel, 13; and Zachary, 14. Credit Ross Mantle for The New York Times

“I just kind of thought that this is for my country,” she said. “So if people are going to hate on me it’s for the wrong reason.”

On social media, where people have a direct line to the sisters’ Twitter and Instagram accounts, a torrent of comments have faulted Jackie for performing for Mr. Trump while having a transgender sister. Her critics are homing in on the gay rights record of Mr. Trump’s vice president-elect, Mike Pence, who as governor of Indiana signed into law a religious freedom act that was widely denounced for allowing discrimination against gay people.

Jackie, a high school junior who is poised beyond her years but who described herself as so shy that she had only one close friend, diplomatically insisted that she can “100 percent” support her sister’s fight for legal rights and sing for Mr. Trump at the same time.

“For me it’s not political,” Jackie said of the bathroom lawsuit. “It’s just accepting people for who they are.”

The criticism lobbed against Jackie has drawn a pointed rebuttal from Mr. Trump and his inaugural committee, which has struggled to lock in performers for the festivities. The president-elect posted on Twitter last week that Jackie’s album sales had “skyrocketed after announcing her Inauguration

performance.” (Sales of her latest album, “Someday at Christmas,” did rise sharply, a Billboard analysis found.)

And Mr. Epshteyn, the committee spokesman, admonished those who have attacked Jackie while calling her the “best and brightest of America.”

“It is deeply saddening that we are at a place in our discourse where those eager to honor America at the inauguration of a president are subjected to hatred and ridicule,” Mr. Epshteyn wrote in an email.

Mike Evancho and his wife, Lisa, who have declined most news media requests regarding the inauguration, have tried to ignore the controversy over their daughter’s career-defining performance opportunity, while steeling themselves back at home to continue their lawsuit against the Pine-Richland School District.

Mr. Evancho, who would not disclose who he voted for in the national election, said that presidential politics did not influence the family’s decision to support Juliet.

“We’re fighting this discrimination at the high school,” Mr. Evancho, 47, said of his eldest daughter. “It doesn’t matter who’s going into the office, we would still fight that fight.”

Juliet, who has high cheekbones and long brown hair, plans to pursue modeling. Now a senior, she also wants to spend the year after high school advocating for gay and transgender rights. She said that the inauguration had turned her into a touchstone for young people who are unsure of how to come out, but she doesn’t want her actions to be seen as political.



Jackie Evancho in a recording studio in Pittsburgh last month. Credit Ross Mantle for The New York Times

“I’m getting out and advocating,” she said. “It’s not really for any superpolitical aspect when it comes to a presidency.”

In the meantime, the sisters are trying to maintain a normal life at Pine-Richland High School. They have several classes together each day; they both try to focus in math class but excel in art. When Juliet first came out, Jackie volunteered to go to the school office with her sister whenever she was called a slur. But things are better lately: This fall, Juliet was elected to homecoming court.

“I definitely have friends,” Juliet said. “It’s just the only people that I truly trust in my life are my family.”

After a delivery man showed up with a pizza, all four siblings congregated in the kitchen. Jackie started humming bars of “The Way We Were.” Her brother and sisters joined in.

Before arriving home that evening, Jackie had spent most of the day recording that song, along with the hymn “How Great Thou Art,” for her coming album, an untitled project she plans to release this spring. She has carefully considered how she can take her singing career from classical crossover, where it has been firmly planted since she performed the aria “O mio babbino caro” on “America’s Got Talent.” Riding on her popularity, her 2010 release, “O Holy Night,” made her the youngest solo American artist to go platinum.

Working on her new album has been a welcome distraction from the requirements of singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” live as a polarized nation watches. If she stops to think about this for even a moment, she said, she gets butterflies in her stomach.

A ferocious news media environment has been hazardous for many celebrities associated with Mr. Trump. But Howard Bragman, who has worked in entertainment public relations for nearly four decades, said that Jackie’s young age was likely to allow her to perform without the same degree of criticism that older musicians might face.

“I think she’s probably a pretty sympathetic figure,” he added. “If people start attacking a 16-year-old girl, they’re going to look bad.”

For the first time, Jackie wants to share songs with the world that she has written with two co-writers, and she said the thought of this makes her almost as nervous as singing at the inauguration.

“They’re like darker topics,” Jackie said of the lyrics she has written. Referring to one of her musical inspirations, the singer Lana Del Rey, she said, “They have Lana-esque feels.”

Juliet, the keeper of secrets regarding any boy drama or school angst, is among the few people who have been allowed to listen to those songs.

“I never worry about Jackie when it comes to singing,” Juliet said as her sister gazed at her from across the couch. “I’m more worried what people say and if it gets to her.”

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