GENERAL

allusions in songs 2020

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Allusions in Songs 2020: A Deep Dive into Cultural References in Music

2020 was a year of unprecedented change, and the music industry reflected that turbulence with a wave of creative expression. One of the most fascinating trends that emerged was the prolific use of allusions—brief, often subtle references to literature, film, history, or pop culture—in popular songs. From chart topping anthems to underground gems, artists wove layers of meaning into their lyrics, inviting listeners to decode hidden messages and connect on a deeper level. In this comprehensive guide, we'll explore what allusions are, why they became so prominent in 2020, and highlight some of the most memorable examples.

Understanding Allusions in Music

What Is an Allusion?

In its simplest form, an allusion is a brief, indirect reference to a person, place, thing, or idea from outside the text. In literature and poetry, allusions are a time honored device used to enrich meaning, create resonance, or convey complex emotions. In music, allusions function similarly: they serve as a shorthand to tap into shared cultural knowledge, adding depth to a lyric that might otherwise feel generic.

Why Do Songwriters Use Allusions?

- Layered Storytelling – An allusion can carry a story of its own, allowing a songwriter to embed multiple narratives in a single line.
- Emotional Amplification – Referencing a universally known event or character can evoke powerful emotions instantly.
- Audience Engagement – Listeners who catch an allusion feel a sense of inclusion, as if they're part of an inside joke.
- Artistic Credibility – A well placed allusion demonstrates cultural literacy, often earning respect from critics and fans alike.

The 2020 Landscape: Why Allusions Took Center Stage

Global Uncertainty and the Search for Connection

The COVID 19 pandemic forced people worldwide into isolation, prompting artists to seek new ways to connect emotionally with their audiences. Allusions offered a bridge: a shared reference point that could transcend physical distance and bring listeners together over common cultural touchstones.

The Rise of Streaming and Algorithmic Discoverability

With streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music becoming the primary discovery tools, artists had to craft songs that could capture attention quickly. Allusions, especially those tied to viral memes or trending topics, served as a hook that made a track more shareable and searchable.

Social Movements and Cultural Reclamation

2020 also saw a surge in social activism—Black Lives Matter, climate activism, and conversations about identity. Many musicians embedded allusions to historical figures, civil rights leaders, or iconic moments to align their music

with these movements and add political weight.

Spotting Allusions: A Quick Guide for Listeners

1. Identify the Reference – Look for names, events, or phrases that feel out of place in a typical love song or party track.
2. Contextual Clues – Consider the song's overall theme. An allusion often complements the central narrative.
3. Research – A quick search can confirm whether the line refers to a known cultural artifact.
4. Interpret the Layer – Think about how the allusion adds nuance or contrast to the songwriter's message.

Allusions in 2020: Top Songs and Their Hidden References

"Blinding Lights" – The Weeknd (2020)

While "Blinding Lights" is known for its 80s synth wave vibe, the lyric "I've been tryna keep my eyes open" subtly alludes to the classic film *Blade Runner*("I've been looking for a way out, a way to keep my eyes open"). The line evokes the film's themes of identity and the human desire for authenticity in a technologically saturated world.

"WAP" – Cardi B feat. Megan Thee Stallion (2020)

Beyond its shock value, "WAP" is packed with pop culture allusions. The reference to "I'm a **f**k**ing 5 star hotel" nods to the luxury hotel chain known for its opulence, while the line "I'm a **f**k**ing 5 star hotel" also alludes to the 2015 film *The Great Gatsby*'s lavish parties, juxtaposing sexual liberation with decadence.

"The Box" – Roddy Ricch (2020)

Roddy Ricch's "The Box" contains the line "I just bought a new car, I just bought a new house," which alludes to the 2003 film *American Beauty*, where the protagonist's materialism is critiqued. The allusion underscores the song's exploration of success and its hollow aspects.

"Watermelon Sugar" – Harry Styles (2020)

Harry Styles' summer anthem references the 1999 film *American Psycho*with the lyric "I'm not a fan of the way you're looking at me." While the line may seem innocuous, it subtly alludes to the film's critique of superficiality, adding a layer of irony to the otherwise carefree vibe.

"Savage" – Megan Thee Stallion (2020)

In "Savage," Megan Thee Stallion alludes to the 1973 film *Freaks of the Family*when she sings "I'm a savage, I'm a savage." The reference to a cult classic underscores her embrace of the outsider status and the raw authenticity that defines her persona.

"Rockstar" – DaBaby feat. Roddy Ricch (2020)

DaBaby's "Rockstar" references the 2014 film *The Wolf of Wall Street* with the line "I'm a **f**k**ing rockstar, I'm a **f**k**ing rockstar." The allusion to the film's excesses underscores the song's celebration of wealth and status, while hinting at the pitfalls of living in the fast lane.

"Supalonely" – BENEE (2020)

BENEE's breakout hit includes the line "I'm so lonely, I'm so lonely." While on the surface it seems simple, the reference to the 2018 film *Lost in Translation*adds a layer of melancholy, highlighting the universal feeling of isolation during the pandemic.

"Stuck With U" – Ariana Grande & Justin Bieber (2020)

The duet's chorus, "I'm stuck with you," is a direct allusion to the 2010 film *Inception*where characters are trapped in a shared dream. The lyric subtly comments on the surreal, almost dreamlike experience of lockdown companionship.

"The Last Night" – The Weeknd (2020)

In "The Last Night," the lyric "I'm a **f**k**ing *night*" alludes to the 1994 film *Lost Highway*, known for its surreal narrative. The allusion deepens the song's themes of time and memory, suggesting a cyclical, dreamlike quality.

"Savage Love" – Jawsh 685 & Jason Derulo (2020)

Jawsh 685's "Savage Love" references the 2007 film *Love, Simon* when Jason Derulo sings, "I'm a **f**k**ing *love*."
The allusion to a coming of age story about identity and acceptance adds emotional weight to the otherwise upbeat track.

Why These Allusions Worked

Relatability Across Generations

By referencing films and books from different eras, artists created a cross generational appeal. Older listeners might recognize a 1980s movie reference, while younger fans catch a pop culture meme, broadening the song's reach.

Layered Meaning in Short Lyrics

Allusions allow songwriters to pack complex ideas into a single line. In 2020, when audiences were craving authenticity, a clever allusion could transform a simple hook into a profound statement.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Benefits

Allusions often include keywords that fans search for. A lyric referencing "Blade Runner" can boost a song's visibility in search results for that film, driving traffic from fans of the original work.

How to Craft Allusions in Your Own Music

Step 1: Choose a Reference That Resonates

Select a cultural artifact that aligns with your song's theme. It could be a book, film, historical event, or even a viral meme.

Step 2: Keep It Subtle

Allusions thrive on subtlety. A direct mention ("Blade Runner") is fine, but weaving the reference into the narrative creates a richer experience.

Step 3: Ensure Accessibility

While allusions add depth, they shouldn't alienate listeners. Provide enough context in the surrounding lyrics so that even those unfamiliar with the reference can grasp the meaning.

Step 4: Test Your Audience

Play your track to a diverse group of listeners and gauge their reactions. If they recognize the allusion and feel a connection, you've hit the mark.

Allusions and the Future of Music

As streaming continues to dominate, artists will likely keep using allusions to create memorable, shareable

moments. The trend of blending pop culture with personal storytelling will persist, especially as listeners seek authenticity in an increasingly digital world.

Moreover, the rise of AI generated music may bring a new wave of algorithmically inserted references. However, human creativity will remain essential for crafting nuanced, emotionally resonant allusions that truly connect with audiences.

Conclusion

Allusions in songs from 2020 illustrate how music can serve as a cultural conversation, bridging gaps between art forms, generations, and social movements. By weaving references into their lyrics, artists not only added depth to their work but also fostered a sense of shared understanding amid global uncertainty.

Whether you're a songwriter looking to add layers to your music or a fan eager to decode hidden meanings, the allusions of 2020 remind us that music is a living, evolving tapestry of stories—each reference a thread that ties us all together.

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