

SALT LAKE CITY WEEKLY

Double Take

Sweet jams, rainbow merch and Pete Buttigieg's excellent oration skills were on display during the presidential hopeful's SLC visit.

By Rich Kane - Feb. 18, 2020



**Mayor Pete does SLC.
Photos by Rich Kane**

Pete Buttigieg has a sweet playlist.

It was blasting from the speakers inside the Union Event Center in Salt Lake City, where some 4,500 supporters of the 38-year-old former mayor of South Bend, Ind., and Democratic presidential candidate showed up to hear Pete Buttigieg speak at a rally and Q&A session on Monday—Presidents' Day—and two weeks before Utah's March 3 Super Tuesday primary election.

So while the crowd waited and waited for Buttigieg to show (note to those new to politics that aren't made-for-TV: these things NEVER start on time), they heard tunes with titles perfectly curated for his campaign stop. It was multi-generational, from Demi Lovato's "Confident" and Florence and the Machine's "Dog Days Are Over" (and you know who the dog is) to Fleetwood Mac's "Never Going Back Again" and the Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again." There was also a token Spanish-language song, Marc

Anthony's "Vivir Mi Vida," because, as he repeats often in his stump speech, Pete wants to be a president for everybody! *Woo-hoo!*

And who knows? Buttigieg arrived in Utah fresh off a win at the Iowa caucuses and a week removed from a strong second-place showing in New Hampshire, and the very pumped Salt Lake crowd, for a spell, made you feel like he could actually topple Trump (if he can get past Bernie Sanders and what's left of a Democratic field that once ballooned to more than 20).



His Utah support was certainly impressive. The rally had to be moved from the Complex, its original location, because the number of people who RSVPed quickly shot past that concert hall's capacity.

On the sidewalk outside the Union, there was Pete swag for sale. T-shirts and ballcaps with the BOOT EDGE EDGE phonetic spelling of his name. Buttons with CHASTEN FOR FIRST GENTLEMAN and GIVE PETE A CHANCE sloganeering. There was also plenty of pride-flag-colored merch for anyone who might somehow not know that Buttigieg is gay. Top, bottom or vers, though, is open for debate.

And while that comment seems like snark, you can expect that the longer Buttigieg stays in the race, the more his sexuality will be explicitly scrutinized, beyond the fact that he kisses his husband onstage, which seemed to rile Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient Rush Limbaugh last week. Buttigieg is already the target of wild conspiracy theories—that he's a secret deep-state CIA operative; that he was responsible for the app fiasco during the Iowa caucuses; even that he's somehow not really gay.

Weirdly, on a fence around the corner of the Union, someone had hung up a banner for QAnon, the bizarre online conspiracy group best known for spreading rumors in 2016

that Democrats were running a child trafficking ring out of a Washington, D.C., pizza joint. When your presence jerks the chain of certifiable nut cases, you must be making an impact.

Sim Gill is on Team Pete. The Salt Lake County district attorney announced his support for Buttigieg earlier that day, and he was at the Union to pluck audience questions for the candidate from a fishbowl.

“He’s a war veteran, a Rhodes scholar, and the mayor of a city where he’s had to deal with practical pragmatic issues and challenges,” Gill told City Weekly before things got started. “Most of all, I love his moral compass. He’s going to be a president for all of us, someone who transcends the current divisiveness we’re facing. I genuinely believe he can go toe-to-toe with Donald Trump and run circles around him.”

Drew Howells was an early supporter and started a Utah for Pete Buttigieg Facebook page in February 2019, which boasts more than 1,800 likes.

“I wanted to hook up with others who were amazed by this guy, and there was no one,” Howells told City Weekly. “Now here we are a year later, with lines wrapping around buildings. It’s a testament to Pete’s message. He’s rational; he makes sense. When I first heard him, I thought, that’s my Jed Bartlet. When he speaks, he’s not talking down to you.”

After the aforementioned wait, plus opening speechifying from Salt Lake City Mayor Erin Mendenhall and Kael Weston, who’s going after Chris Stewart’s congressional seat —Buttigieg has also been endorsed by Salt Lake County Mayor Jenny Wilson and her father, former Salt Lake City Mayor Ted Wilson—Pete finally popped out, to much rock-star-level screaming from the crowd. It appeared to be his standard stump speech, once again dropping his line about imagining how great the day will be when we all wake up and Donald Trump is no longer president. Or on Monday, “When the sun comes up over the Great Salt Lake, and Donald Trump is no longer president.”

If you follow Buttigieg, you could fill in the rest, Mad Libs-style, all red meat for the true believers. Getting Washington to run more like our best-run cities and towns. Putting the tweets behind us. God does not belong to a political party. Knowing the difference between traumatic brain injury and bone spurs. Medicare for anyone who wants it. You can’t love a country if you hate half the people in it. Paying people a living wage for working one job, not several. Common-sense gun laws. Needing to legalize marijuana.

But Buttigieg came loaded with some Utah-specific remarks. He spoke about how he admired Mitt Romney for his much-criticized (among Republicans) vote to convict Trump on the abuse-of-power article of impeachment.

“If your senator, whom I disagree with on all kinds of things, but I think we can agree followed his conscience on this matter because he was more worried about his relationship with his conscience and with his maker than his relationship with the Republican party ... If he was alone in doing that, if he was the only one, doesn’t that say more about what has become of the Republican party today than anything else?”

During the audience Q&A, Buttigieg seemed genuinely excited to answer each question Gill pulled from the fishbowl, whether it was about climate policy specifics or broader queries about changing bigotry and divisiveness—“It would help for us to get a new president,” he answered.

Buttigieg is certainly an effective speaker, and sometimes, as with Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, also excellent orators, that alone can be enough. Especially considering the current White House occupant.

As Howells put it: “Who knew how attractive speaking in complete sentences would be?”