

protest music

not a genre, not a
style, but a method of
engagement



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For many, music is more than just something to listen to, it's a way to express grief, pain, anger and truth. These words have been synonymous with how people have felt while suffering from racism, oppression and injustice throughout history. While searching for change and accountability, musicians have used protest music to critique administrations, express their feelings and call for societal change.

"Songs express values; they articulate and encapsulate cares, what we stand for and what we stand against," said Theodore Trost, The University of Alabama New College professor who specializes in music and social protest. "Probably the most typical kind of popular song and even religious song is the love song because love is a value people long for and try to hold onto, but there is much in our society that undoes love. Protest songs arise to oppose this injury to both the self and to society."

Protest music has spanned across history dating back as far as the 18th century, yet one of the most notable periods of protest music was the civil rights movement.

In an article for PBS, Bernice Johnson Reagon, a composer, song leader, scholar, social activist, and producer, said while discussing protest music during the civil rights movement, it's important not to think of protest music as a strategic move of the movement.

"Like the collective breath of the movement, they were a natural outpouring, evidencing the life force of the fight for freedom," said Reagon.

One example of this outpouring of "life force" is "Strange Fruit," a 1939 song originally written as a poem by Abel Meeropol, also known as Lewis Allan, in 1937. The poem "Bitter Fruit" stemmed from Meeropol seeing a picture of the lynchings of two Black men. Two years later, Jazz sing-

er Billie Holiday recorded those lyrics, and one of the most notable protest songs was born.

According to Biography, Holiday didn't enjoy singing "Strange Fruit." It reminded her of her father, who was turned away from a hospital because he was Black and later died of pneumonia. Even though the song brought back terrible memories for Holiday, she did it to remember her father and remind people that the discrimination he faced continued to happen to other Black people decades later.

"['Strange Fruit'] preserves a portrait of America that we still have not come to terms with despite the civil rights movement and despite the work of the Equal Justice Initiative, for example, or the Legacy Museum in Montgomery," said Trost.

This was a movement that developed over decades during which a repertoire of songs emerged, including John Coltrane's "Alabama," Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam," Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" and Mahalia Jackson's performances of several gospel songs like "How I Got Over" at the March on Washington.

However, protest music didn't only exist during the civil rights movement.

Jennifer Caputo, The University of Alabama New College and New College life track senior instructor who specializes in music and social protest, said music has been utilized throughout history in different social movements, labor unions, geographical locations and historical periods; for example, during the Holocaust.

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, during the Holocaust, many Jewish people living in ghettos and concentration camps turned to music as a way to preserve their humanity. Operas and art songs were produced and performed by prisoners of some of the camps.

"It helped not only the people who were living under such terrible conditions, and helped them have something to live for, but it also still reminded those who were forced to work as the security forces, soldiers, etc. that these people are human and they're doing human things, they have culture, they're producing music," Caputo said. "So it's one of the things we look at in terms of music, it may not be that the music itself is the protest, but the act of singing the act of performing music makes you human, and it could make others empathize with you as a human being."

Not only did protest music showcase the plight of people who were facing horrific experiences, but it also created a sense of community in times of adversity.

For Anne Powers, a music critic at NPR, her first foray into protest music was an anti-nuclear proliferation rally in Seattle when she was in high school.

At the protest, they sang along to anthems like "My Mom's a Feminist," and Powers has been interested in protest music ever since.

"As I became aware of the diversity and global reach of protest music, I came to understand that it's not a genre or a style, but a method of engagement," said Powers.

Powers said protest music can take the form of spirituals like "We Shall Overcome," pop anthems like Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman," funk breakdowns like James Brown's "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)," punk rants like the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the U.K.," and hip hop joints like Kendrick Lamar's "Alright."

While protest music is a genreless sound that has stood the test of time when discussing protest music and its evolution, it's important to consider an artist's intent.

Powers said music becomes protest music through the intention of the

artist and the passion of the audience who embrace it, and while times change, Powers doesn't believe protest music changes; it's more of a "cyclical presence."

"Protest is always renewing itself within music and taking new shapes," she said.

Trost agreed that he didn't think protest music had changed that much "apart from the appropriation of different musical styles."

He said a number of "good protest songs" appeared in 2020 like Amy Ray's "Tear it Down," Lil Baby's "The Bigger Picture" and Chris Pierce's "American Silence" which all addressed the issues of 2020, but also the historical racism and injustice leading up to 2020.

He said in "Tear it Down," Ray, a member of the Indigo Girls, addresses the nostalgic and false picture of the South that is conjured by films like "Gone With the Wind" and her childhood in the South.

Then Trost explained how Pierce's "American Silence" is a direct appeal to traditional folk protest music, and it questions the "effectiveness of protest music itself." Juggling with keeping the listener's attention and alluding to the unjust things happening to people being arrested.

"A third song that sort of draws the tensions of the whole year together is 'The Bigger Picture,' by Lil Baby. With a majestic assault of words written in the aftermath of the George Floyd killing, the song is an indictment of the 'whole way of life' in America that perpetuates violence, hatred and fear," said Trost. "Lil Baby resolves, in the end, to change things, to make it count while I'm here."

To further highlight protest music during 2020, NPR's own Bobby Carter, Nate Chinen, Shana L. Redmond, Oliver Wang and Powers

collaborated on a series titled "We Insist: A Century of Black Music Against State Violence," a timeline of 50 songs that together constructed a "kind of timeline of an ongoing movement within American music, stretching back more than a century."

Powers said she was specifically looking for songs that would tell the story of how people of color exposed and resisted state violence through song.

"The project grew and changed as I teamed up with my great group of collaborators on the project. We wanted to show that, just as sanctioned violence has been a reality for non-white people from the very dawn of American history onward, so music has told of the horrors official history omitted and helped people sustain energy to fight against such oppression," said Powers.

She said the response to the timeline was "great," and people's engagement with the project inspired the "We Insist: A Timeline of Protest Music in 2020," which documented the songs and videos that defined the summer of 2020 and the months leading up to the presidential election.

Powers said she's always been interested in how music can serve resistance, and creating this timeline in collaboration with other scholars and writers reinforced the importance of protest music in music's history.

However, before the summer of 2020, she said she was sometimes unsure if protest music would ever be central to pop culture again, "especially because younger generations are as engaged with gaming culture and social media platforms as they are with music. You've got to really love something to see it as a means to protest."

Yet, she said during the pandemic, when artists found themselves with more time, all they needed was a prompt.

"Once this new movement coalesced, the floodgates just opened. It's been a very exciting few years. Protest music is now, again, interwoven into many different musical genres and scenes," said Powers.

However, some question the relevance and importance of protest music, wondering if, in this time, it is still relevant and genuine.

"There is likely an implicit protest in many of the songs people listen to; the songs just don't seem to fall into the category, or maybe the category itself is a problem at the moment—in the aftermath of wokeness, or political correctness, or prejudice against the term social justice warrior," said Trost.

Powers said for those who are indifferent about protest music, it's possible they don't realize they're listening to it because "protest can inform all kinds of music and inspire change within the most surprising contexts."

Powers said some protest songs like Tyler Childers, "Long Violent History" where the song's explicit message challenges his white audience to "cultivate solidarity with their BIPOC neighbors," and Lil Nas X's hit record "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)" is a form of protest music because it expresses the message of queer liberation which has been its own movement since the Stonewall Riots, a six day long protest in New York City that served as a catalyst for the gay rights movement in 1969.

In a time where unity is most important, music has brought people together for centuries and continues to do so.

"It doesn't matter if the song is a protest song. If it's a song that is unifying a group of people, it's also empowering, and it's also can become representative of a particular movement or time period or particular message," said Caputo.

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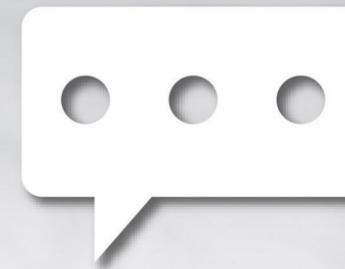
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