

# America

THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN AND CULTURE



## THE NEW AGE OF PROTEST MUSIC

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FEBRUARY 17, 2020

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John W. Miller  
January 25, 2020

After the 2016 election, Heather Ehart Hinkel, a college administrator in Frederick, Md., struggled with people fighting about politics on her Facebook page. A registered Republican opposed to President Trump, she counted friends in both parties.

So on Inauguration Day 2017, instead of commenting, she posted a feminist anthem: "Sisters Are Doin' It for Themselves," by the Eurythmics and Aretha Franklin.

"Music seemed to be a palatable way to keep my political views accessible in a way that wouldn't cut my friends off from me," she told me.



Friends of all political persuasions loved it, and sent requests. Hinkel posted more, by everybody from Tracy Chapman and Patti Smith to Tom Waits and Bruce Springsteen. A diverse community rallied around suggesting songs. And people stopped unfriending each other, she said.

*Several political artists have been nominated for Grammys this year, including Rhiannon Giddens, bluegrass outfit Che Apalache and Kenyan folk singer J.S. Ondara.*

In a divided country on an overheated planet, we need tunes to overcome.

Political music peaked in the United States in the 1960s. It never went away. As pop music diversified, “within each of the styles grew a desire to sing about and to listen to music of social change, whether that was hip-hop, rap, reggae, country or rock,” Noel Paul Stookey—of the 1960s protest music icons Peter, Paul and Mary—told me.

Luckily for this despairing era, we are living through a renaissance in protest songs, and their creators are more diverse, creative and international than the Greenwich Village strummers of yesteryear. In both private and public spheres, music can still be our hammer.

On Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011, a guitarist named Ramy Essam led protesters in song he called “Leave,” helping to bring down President Hosni Mubarak. In Russia, the feminist punk rock collective Pussy Riot trumpeted opposition to President Vladimir Putin. For the Women’s March in 2017, singers organized a choir online to perform MILCK’s “I Can’t Keep Quiet.” In December, a Chilean song protesting rape culture called “A Rapist in Your Path” went viral, sung at protests around the world.

Last year’s “Song of Our Native Daughters” is a brilliant album celebrating the history of African-American women, recorded by four banjo-playing women of color, including Rhiannon Giddens, one of Americana music’s biggest stars. Giddens was one of many political artists who was been nominated for a Grammy this year, along with the bluegrass outfit Che Apalache and the Kenyan folk singer J.S. Ondara, a Kenyan immigrant who moved to Minnesota partly out of love for its native son Bob Dylan.

*In both private and public spheres, music can still be our hammer.*

Hip-hop might lead the fight. In “Alright,” Kendrick Lamar raps faithful resilience: “But

if God got us then we gon' be alright." Childish Gambino's "This is America" captured the pain of racial dysfunction. In "The Whitest House," Jasiri-X protests the current administration.

And, of course, Spotify and YouTube make it easy to pull up the 1960s classics my mom and Uncle Earl played throughout my childhood, like early Bob Dylan or Barry McGuire's "Eve of Destruction." Those songs made me fall in love with music as a pulsating, soul-boosting weapon: To make things better, sing out!

A song commanding three minutes stands out in a bad-tempered, short-attention-span world. A song begs to not be interrupted. A song can be beautiful, even if you don't agree with its argument. When Bruce Springsteen premiered his anti-police-violence anthem "41 Shots" in 2000, it sparked controversy. "You get killed just for living," he sings. In recordings, the cheering beats out the boos; the message sticks

The Egyptian Essam told me he became a protest singer after attending marches and thinking the chants would be empowered with a melody and a beat. In the social media age, "songs can travel the planet in no time," he said. "We will not find people repeating speeches but we can guarantee that there might be millions of people at the same moment singing the same song." And music can persuade. "People have told me it was my songs that drew them out in the street to see what was really going on," said Essam, who worships Woody Guthrie and Johnny Cash. "It's one thing to post something on Facebook, it's another to go out in the streets and ask for your rights."

*In modern protest music, musicians often seem to be protesting not particular policies, but polarization itself.*

That spirit is universal and timeless. As the all-American troubadour Pete Seeger wrote in 1955: "We need thousands of new songs these days: humor, to poke fun at some of the damn foolishness going on in the world; songs of love and faith in mankind and the future; songs to needle our conscience and stir our indignation and anger."

In modern protest music, musicians often seem to be protesting not particular policies, but polarization itself.

The 2016 presidential election shook the British folk punk singer Frank Turner. Social



media appalled him. “A disaster,” he called it in a long email conversation. “A cesspit, a tragedy, for our civilization.” The result of his meditations is an album called “Be More Kind.” It’s a lovely work full of catchy tunes—and a warning about the precipice we are perched on. Turner said he thinks the album is more “social” than “political.”

““Be More Kind,”” he said, “is a record about how we relate to each other, the nature and tone of our collective political discourse, how we conduct our disagreements, rather than about the specific content of those disagreements.”

*Like many musicians, including Dylan in his heyday, Frank Turner resists the label of protest singer as too limiting.*

In the title track, Turner sings: “In a world that has decided/ That it’s going to lose its mind/ Be more kind, my friends, try to be more kind.”

Like many musicians, including Dylan in his heyday, Turner resists the label of protest singer as too limiting: “Songwriting, and art more generally, is a broad and versatile river.”

Political music is often associated with hippies and the antiwar movement. It is not inherently left wing. In the 1950s, Ferlin Husky, also known as Terry Preston, sang “Let’s Keep the Communists Out.” In their 1962 song “Weapon of Prayer,” Charlie and Ira Louvin praised foreign intervention by the U.S. military. Merle Haggard’s “Okie From Muskogee” protested 1960s youth culture. Although some critics have postulated that Haggard was singing ironically, it became a rallying cry for conservatives in the 1970s. “We don’t burn our draft cards down on Main Street,” he sang.

### **A Brief History of Music Activism**

The history of protest music is intertwined with three categories of activists: labor, racial minority and Christian social justice.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, a Presbyterian pastor from Owego, N.Y., has written hundreds of political hymns, about everything from gun violence to immigration, which she publishes on her website. She has appeared on PBS and BBC, and her September 11 song “O God, Our Words Cannot Express” was made into a music video featuring Noel Paul Stookey.

Gillette pens new words to existing hymns. "People in churches love to sing traditional tunes," she said. "And you don't have to worry about copyright." When people go to church, she said, "they're not leaving the outside world behind them. They've heard about a shooting or a hurricane or a flood." People have told her they changed their minds about an issue after hearing her hymns, she said.

In seminary, "I was taught to teach a sermon with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other," she said. "Social justice should really be called Biblical justice."

For centuries, music has been used to make political points.

*Modern protest music got its start in the early part of the 20th century, when marchers on labor's picket lines needed something to say.*

According to Donan Lyndsey, author of *33 Revolutions*, an authoritative and brilliant history of protest tunes, the first protest song was John Ball's sermon during the 1381 Peasants' Revolt. "When Adam delved and Eve span/ Who was then the gentleman?" he sang, as an argument that the Garden of Eden was, idealistically, classless.

Modern protest music got its start in the early part of the 20th century, when marchers on labor's picket lines needed something to say, and it was more fun to sing than shout.

This labor strand of political music was picked up by America's two great troubadours, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, who met in 1940 and shared a fascination with the ballads, hymns and folk songs of a rural America groaning its way through the Great Depression and a looming world war. Guthrie's album "Dust Bowl Ballads" pioneered a new wave of political storytelling for everyman. In the liner notes, John Steinbeck wrote that Guthrie, who famously wrote "This Machine Kills Fascists" on his guitar, represented the "will of a people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit."

It was on a trip to Tennessee in 1947 that Seeger discovered "We Shall Overcome." That song found a place in the other great music-fueled struggle of the century: civil rights for African-Americans. Songs like Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" and James Brown's "Say It Loud- I'm Black and I'm Proud" sit atop one of the grandest canons in popular music.



*In the 1960s, such civil rights-inspired protest music helped make folk, for a brief shining moment, the music.*

In the 1960s, such civil rights-inspired protest music helped make folk, for a brief shining moment, *the music*. Dylan and Joan Baez sang at the March on Washington. Peter, Paul and Mary topped the charts. Three-part harmonies were sexy. In 1964, Phil Ochs, a singer who had studied journalism at Ohio State, released a popular album called "All the News That's Fit to Sing," possibly the summit of politically engaged folk music.

The times *were* a'changing. We would sing and sing and love and milk and honey would wash over the land. "We went to church, but it was protest music that made me think about how to turn Christian ideas into activism," my mom, who grew up in a Catholic neighborhood in Baltimore in the 1950s and 1960s, told me.

Noel Paul Stookey said his generation got interested in "music that mattered" as it grew up. They were "looking to make the world a better place," he said.

*Under President Barack Obama, protest music became part of the administration's political brand.*

That social justice commitment of pop music faded in the late 1960s, after Dylan famously went electric and bands celebrated drug trips instead of preaching social change. But other genres picked up the baton. In his 1971 classic "What's Going On?" Marvin Gaye sang: "We don't need to escalate/ You see, war is not the answer/ For only love can conquer hate." Musicians expanded the scope of their activism. Loretta Lynn sang pioneering feminist anthems about divorce and the pill.

More recently, under President Barack Obama, protest music became part of the administration's political brand. Obama frequently quoted or sang classic protest tunes, directly paraphrasing Sam Cooke's 1964 masterpiece "A Change Is Gonna Come" in his 2008 victory speech. Pete Seeger played the inauguration, and the White House hosted Lin-Manuel Miranda in a debut "Hamilton" recital.

Now, in opposition to an administration far less invested in supporting the arts, protest music has found its antiestablishment place again. And there is a reason to bring back the 1960s classics: Writing a good political song isn't that easy.

*There is a reason to bring back the 1960s classics: Writing a good political song isn't that easy.*

The tricky part is pitching it “right between platitudes and being overly specific,” said Turner, the British folk punk singer. But, he said, “there is something about the right words with the right rhythm and melody that is ‘just so’ and pulls you out of your ambivalence.”

For example, said Turner, “the sentence ‘the times they are a’changing’ isn’t especially profound. Dylan’s delivery of it was, somehow; and somewhere indefinable in there lies the magic of the craft.”

It is instinctive, he said, “to look for songwriter to be that [moral] voice, but they don’t want to do that all the time.”

For Joe Troop, a bluegrass singer from North Carolina, protest music is a way of integrating his worlds. Troop is a bluegrass traditionalist steeped in gospel and other iterations of the old school. He is also gay and an immigrant, having moved to Buenos Aires in 2010.

His response to this swirling whirl of identities has been to make music that spoke to all of them. The result is a sparkling fusion band called Che Apalache, fronted by Troop and including three banjo students from Buenos Aires.

The group has been nominated for a Grammy for its album, “Rearrange My Heart,” which includes two protest songs, “The Wall,” and “The Dreamer.” On the bluegrass circuit, the band sometimes encounters hostile audiences.

In “The Wall,” Troop uses Christian language to protest the border wall with Mexico: “To love thy neighbor as thyself/ Is a righteous law to live by.”

When I met up with him on tour in Washington, D.C., last year, Troop said he was determined to keep playing his music for all audiences, even those he disagrees with.

“You have to speak people’s language,” he said.

*This story has been updated.*



*This article also appeared in print, under the headline "The New Age of Protest Music," in the February 17, 2020, issue.*

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