

The Role of Protest Music in Social Movements and Youth Activism Across Eras

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ABSTRACT

Through its powerful lyrics, catchy melodies, and accessible instrumentation, protest music has historically been a medium used to challenge systems of oppression, promote social changes, and unify people behind common causes. This study analyzes the role of protest music in socio-political movements, especially its usage by youth. From the Civil Rights Movement's anthems like "We Shall Overcome" to the Chinese Umbrella Movement's "Raise the Umbrella," protest music has been a pivotal tool for mobilization and solidarity. The structure of protest music, specifically the melodies and other musical elements, makes it a powerful medium to evoke emotions and lasting impressions socially. Across many decades, from folk and rock to hip-hop and reggae, the evolution of protest music consistently shows its adaptability and enduring power. Youth subcultures leveraged music to form resistance movements in these decades. More recently, the digital age has further amplified the reach of music and social media, thus, protest music has spread more rapidly globally, disseminating powerful messages in the Black Lives Matter and Arab Spring movements. In conclusion, protest music, driven by youthful activism and digital tools, continues to be a force for social change, illustrating its resilience and enduring ability to inspire change across different socio-political movements.

Introduction

Protest music is a potent medium for expression and resistance because it incorporates explicit or implicit themes that challenge current socio-political realities, promote change, and unite people behind a common cause. It includes themes of fighting against systems of oppression, supporting social change, and creating rallying calls for people to take action together. Additionally, it is significant because it may convey strong ideas in an impactful and concise manner, inspiring a large audience and promoting group action. Protest music has historically served as a vital component of many socio-political movements by giving the voiceless a sense of community. For example, songs like "We Shall Overcome" were anthems during the US Civil Rights Movement, giving those battling for racial equality power and togetherness. These songs were rallying cries that assisted in organizing activists to gain broader public support and provided consolation and hope.

Similarly, in more recent times, music was a vital component of the Chinese Umbrella Movement, which saw demonstrators calling for democratic reforms in Hong Kong express their aspirations and disappointments. Songs like "Raise the Umbrella" became icons of solidarity and resistance, boosting protesters' spirits and spreading their demands to a worldwide audience. Protest music reflects the global fight for justice and human rights that cuts beyond historical periods and geographic boundaries. Through an analysis of how young artists and activists use music as a tool for resistance and empowerment, the study sheds light on the transforming power of youth voices in the fight against social injustice. Young people have often been at the forefront of protest, writing songs that speak to their peers and motivate them to take action. This is seen throughout history, as young people have continuously expressed their complaints and goals through music, from the student demonstrations of the 1960s to more recent movements such as Black Lives Matter. This paper will highlight the contributions of young artists and activists in shaping the soundtracks of their respective movements, seeking to underscore the enduring power of protest music as a catalyst for social change and the unique role that youth play in this dynamic and impactful form of artistic expression.

Structural Analysis of Protest Music

The distinctive structural components of protest music enhance its potency as a vehicle for social and political commentary. Protest music's fundamental purpose is spreading strong messages about injustice and calling for change through its form and content. Protest music frequently has honest and moving lyrics that touch on essential subjects like political oppression, economic inequity, and racial inequality. This honesty guarantees that the message is understood and profoundly impacts the audience. Protest music's repetition and melody's simplicity further increase its potency. Large crowds can more easily understand, remember, and sing along to simple, repeated tunes, which increases the songs' impact and spread. Neuman (2020) asserts that these melodic qualities guarantee that protest songs are enduring and quickly disseminated throughout communities, turning them into anthems of mass resistance. (In an analysis of protest music in South Korea, Soo Kyung Park identifies melodic patterns that frequently appear, and while they reference pieces such as *Morning Dew* (1971) or *Don't Worry Dear* (1991), the messages correlated with these patterns can be widely connected to protest music. Park states that a more comprehensive pitch range during a chorus section allows listeners to follow the message of resistance and feel greater emotional expression. In addition to the minor key most commonly used to convey sadness/melancholy, vocal roughness, and volume contribute to a mourning mood, as a quality similar to shouting allows listeners to express emotional feelings. Protest music is made particularly powerful through its lyrics, as we often see words in songs used to unify or rally a group. In addition to the direct usage of revolutionary music, the perception of music as an innocent form of entertainment allows it to become an even more vital source of advocacy, as hidden meanings through metaphor or double entendre allow messages to be safely spread (Neuman, 2008).

Another critical component that makes protest music accessible and participatory is its instrumentation. Standard instruments that are easy to get and play, such as harmonicas, light percussion, and acoustic guitars, are often used in protest music development and performance. This allows a broader range of individuals to get involved. Martinelli (2019) points out that using approachable instruments democratizes music production, enabling participation in the protest even by people with no background in music. The folk music traditions of the 1960s protest movements, where the acoustic guitar became a symbol of grassroots activity, demonstrate this openness.

Furthermore, protest music frequently incorporates the musical and cultural customs of the groups it speaks for, giving the song a more profound cultural significance that increases its impact and relatability. For example, Freddy Aguilar's "Bayan Ko" in the Philippines effectively connected current problems with historical resistance by repurposing a nationalist hymn to protest against Ferdinand Marcos' tyranny (Lockard, 2014). Protest music can connect with listeners deeper and strengthen their sense of identification and unity when it draws from cultural heritage. Pop music is particularly effective as protest music since it is easily accessible in production and outreach. Pop music can be produced and circulated quickly due to its simplicity and broad appeal, facilitating rapid and extensive dissemination of messages.

Additionally, social media and digital platforms have expanded the reach of protest music, as Aronson and Box (2018) point out, enabling musicians to engage with audiences worldwide and rally support for various causes. Furthermore, Tuohy's (1999) discussion of musical nationalism sheds light on how protest music organically fits into larger socio-political contexts. Similar to protest music's initial goals, musical nationalism sought to advance public education and widely disseminate ideas. Protest musicians can increase the transformative power of their music by making it widely accessible and culturally relevant. This allows listeners to feel more united and purposeful. It is clear from structural analysis that protest music's structure, message, instrumentation, and cultural integration are all carefully considered to maximize its effectiveness as a vehicle for social change.

Evolution of Protest Music

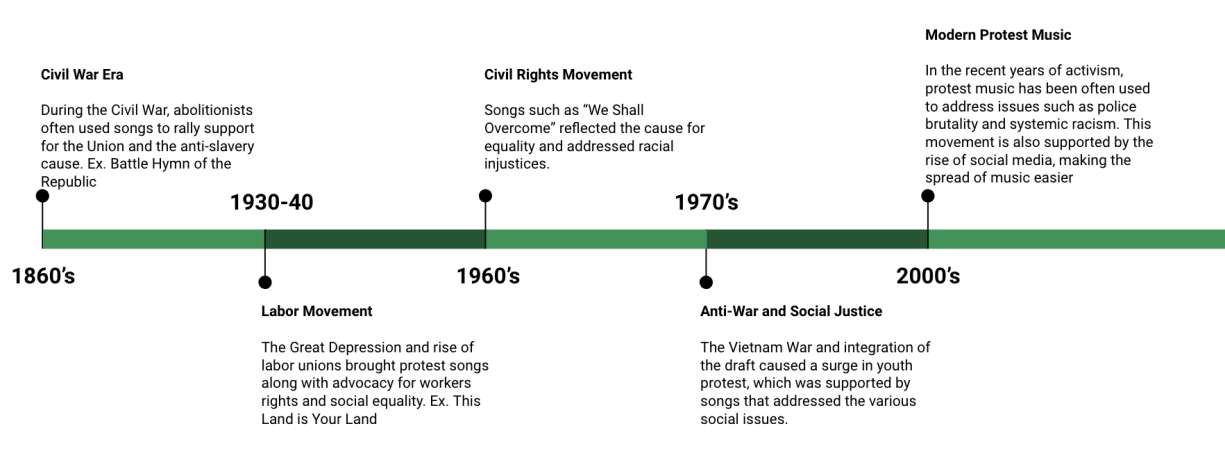


Figure 1. Timeline of Protest Music Eras

Protest music's growth demonstrates its persistent ability to expose injustices and inspire audiences to take action, and its influence is made visible through the many different genres over the years, including folk, rock, punk, hip-hop, reggae, and more. Each genre has contributed its own sound and cultural context to the cause and added to the intricate web of resistance by incorporating current concerns and traditional customs. Furthermore, all genres of protest music aim to promote social justice and change, regardless of stylistic variances. This cross-genre solidarity in social commentary and change-agent agitation highlights how music is a universal weapon for empowerment and resistance. For example, folk music has a long history of addressing social and political issues, as it is frequently seen as the foundation of protest songs. Folk music's long history of being used as a protest tool has influenced many other genres to take up resistance-themed messages, as is evident in protest movements worldwide. This is seen through Hakka singers in Taiwan, such as Chen Yongtao and Lin Shengxiang, who have advocated for political and environmental reform through their music. Drawing from the Hakka tradition of shan'ge, or mountain songs, Lin tackled modern concerns through his albums like "At the Foot of Meining Mountain" and "The Song of the Anti-Dam Movement," as well as his live performances with his band Guan Zi Yinyue Keng. Frequently poetic and calming, these songs never back down from cutting criticism, even if it's delivered subtly, as they capture the fine line that exists between cultural pride and social activism (Tse-Hisung Lin, 2011).

Protest music became prominent as early as the 19th century, essential to the abolitionist struggle against slavery and the developing sentiment surrounding the Civil War. African American communities and traditions gave rise to spirituals and work songs, which enslaved people often used to communicate their suffering and hope for a better future. Songs such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Go Down, Moses" inspired people with their subliminal messages of resistance and liberation. Later in the 19th century and in the early 20th century, Folk music evolved as a potent protest instrument as the labor movement gained strength. Simple yet moving lyrics were utilized by musicians such as Woody Guthrie to highlight the difficulties faced by the working class. By drawing attention to the suffering of the underprivileged and marginalized, Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" questioned the idea of American luxury and set a powerful message about equality throughout the nation (Blakemore, 2017). Folk music was a significant component of protest music during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. This period became iconic for its powerful protests and advocacy for racial equality. Alongside prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr, performers like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez published songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "We Shall Overcome" to reflect the aspirations of the young generation that aimed for equality and justice (Jaeger, 2010). Music during this period was also utilized with marches, rallies, and sit-ins. As the 1960's went on, rock musicians such as _ used their

platform to challenge societal conventions and political injustices. Rock music became a potent vehicle for protest due to its emergence alongside anti-war campaigns and the feeling of counterculture during this era. Protest music continues to change as the twenty-first century progresses, adopting new styles and tackling modern problems. Protest music has always reflected the times, encapsulating every generation's struggles and goals. Furthermore, it unites voices in the continuous battle against injustice and is a crucial force for change because of its constant adaptation to new sounds and cultural situations.

Youth Subcultures and Music as Resistance

Youth subcultures have historically leveraged music as a powerful resistance, particularly during pivotal social and political movements. During the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the counterculture, heavily populated by the youth, fervently opposed mainstream values and fought for civil rights and social justice. This period saw the baby boom generation come of age. Technological advancements in music production and distribution played a crucial role in facilitating more significant participation in protest music (Wilkowski, C.). Iconic figures like Bob Dylan emerged with protest songs such as "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are a-Changin'," which became anthems for the civil rights and anti-war movements, inspiring a generation of young activists to engage in social change (Wilkowski, C.). The Vietnam War era further highlighted the role of youth in driving anti-war sentiments through music, as young people used protest songs to express their opposition to the war and their desire for peace. This trend of youth-driven musical resistance continued across the globe, as seen in the mass protests against Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, which was sparked by the Act on Protection of Specified Secrets in Japan on December 6, 2013. During these protests, youth presence marked a significant shift, particularly among students who had previously been concerned about job opportunities in 2011-2012. Forming groups like Students Against the Secret Protection Law, these young activists held demonstrations featuring hip-hop music and college rappers, drawing significant attention and participation from their peers. For instance, on June 30, 2014, about 40,000 protesters gathered in front of Abe's residence, using drum beats reminiscent of the Drums of Fury protest. In Shibuya, the protests incorporated J-pop and R&B to appeal to young, fashionable crowds, showcasing the strategic use of popular music to mobilize and resonate with youth. In Indonesia, the 1990s saw a surge of interest among the youth in Western cultural genres such as rap, punk, and hard rock. This musical shift led to several groups that provided new social spaces for young people to identify with and opened avenues for social protest. Adopting these new musical genres allowed younger revolutionaries to reject traditional social norms and authoritarian governments (Bodden, M.). However, the Indonesian government often attempted to subvert these revolutionary mindsets. President Sukarno banned Western rock and roll due to its use by revolutionaries to criticize the government, while rap music was criticized as contrary to Indonesian interests. Under General Suharto's New Order Regime, public discourse and cultural production were tightly controlled through censorship and bans on major popular culture outlets, highlighting the government's fear of the potent combination of youth and music in fomenting dissent. Youth subcultures across different historical periods and regions have consistently used music as a form of resistance, from the civil rights and anti-war movements in the United States to student protests in Japan and the adoption of Western genres in Indonesia.

The prominent presence and influence of youth culture can also be seen through the rise of rock music in the 1950s and 1960s, which marked a revolutionary period in musical history.

Mainly, rock music provided a powerful platform for youth to express their dissatisfaction with societal expectations and confront issues of race and class. Furthermore, in *Rockin' in the Free World: Popular Music and the Politics of Freedom in Postwar America*, Nicholas Tochka identifies that the core values of rock music contribute to this revolutionary sentiment through messages of individuality and self-expression. The countercultural movement of the late 1960s, epitomized by events like the Woodstock Festival, saw it become the soundtrack of a generation of teenagers committed to civil rights, anti-war protests, and alternative lifestyles. The genre particularly appealed due to the feeling of rebelliousness in an otherwise conformist society, allowing adolescents to distinguish themselves and find an outlet for emotions. While rock became a symbol for certain groups, it initially brought about concern as theories emerged

over communist origins and its adverse effects on listeners. Despite this, its enduring presence from Elvis Presley to the modern day reflects a desire for revolutionary music and its lasting effect on protest. Youth have expressed their dissent by engaging with diverse musical genres and creating vibrant, dynamic spaces for collective action and identity formation.

Digital Age Activism: Social Media and Protest Music

Social media has completely changed how protest music is produced, distributed, and listened to in the digital era, giving youthful activists effective means of swiftly and effectively reaching a worldwide audience. Young people are heavily represented on social media, which has helped messages spread quickly and significantly impacted movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM). Furthermore, since this campaign against police violence against African Americans has brought these issues to light, protest music has been crucial in raising attention and support for issues of racial injustice and police brutality. For example, contemporary musicians like Kendrick Lamar, Lauryn Hill, J. Cole, and Beyoncé have dramatically enhanced the message by using their platforms to highlight these societal issues through their music (Patterson, M.). The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong is another evidence of how social media may revolutionize contemporary activism. Images and videos of the protests were extensively shared on social media during this campaign, garnering attention and inspiring support from people worldwide. The dual-edged character of digital technologies in activism is highlighted by the fact that video surveillance was used to identify and intimidate demonstrators, posing threats to them as well (Ruhlig, T.). The pro-democracy uprisings known as the Arab Spring, which began in late 2010 and spread throughout the Arab world, highlight the significance of digital tools in contemporary revolutions. The Arab Spring organized protests, disseminated information, and promoted protest songs using social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, in contrast to pre-digital age movements that relied on radio, leaflets, and word-of-mouth. These platforms enabled the movement to reach a larger audience more quickly, significantly improving its efficiency in organization and coordination.

Additionally, social media helped activists communicate more effectively, which helped them spread the word about their cause and garner support from people worldwide (Frangonikolopoulos, C. A., & Chapsos, I., 2012). The 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations are another example of how social media has influenced protest music. Social media posts during these protests commonly included music as background, emphasizing the themes of resistance and protest. Many musicians wrote songs about problems like police brutality and systematic racism, which helped supporters get together despite the absence of in-person events caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These messages spread widely thanks to social media, inspiring people who live in many parts of the world to act together and feel united (Sadler, O.). Digital age activism has been profoundly altered by social media, primarily through protest music, which has enabled rapid and widespread dissemination of messages, and social media platforms, which have empowered young activists to mobilize support and raise awareness on a global scale.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the influence of protest music across various historical periods portrayed in this paper shows that music can catalyze social change. From the Civil Rights Movement to 1960s rock, and decades of passionate protestors, protest music has consistently united people against social justice. The evolution of protest music demonstrated its adaptability and resilience through the last century, from its origins in folk traditions to its modern manifestation in hip-hop, punk, and other genres. In addition, the digital age has revolutionized how protest music can reach a global audience quickly and effectively. Social media has become a medium where protests and new ideas could be more widespread. It was also found that youth activists use this medium to drive social change and cultural identities. The continued involvement of youth activists in musical expression amplifies large movements therefore remaining a vital driver of ongoing socio-political movements.

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