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Where Have All the Protest Songs Gone?

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Senior Honors Project

Faculty Sponsor: Professor Stephen Wood

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The protest of social conditions through the form of music has a rich history. During the 1960's, America saw a popular revival of protest music, which responded to the social turmoil of that era, from the civil rights movement to the war in Vietnam. Countless musicians used their art to protest the social inequities of their time, creating a diverse catalogue of popular protest music, which spoke to the masses of youths crying out for revolutionary change. However, why hasn't a similar resurgence of popular protest music mirrored the contemporary era of social turmoil, including the war in Iraq, global warming, genocide, poverty, and continued discrimination based on gender, race, and sexual orientation? Although protest music unquestionably exists today, it hardly amounts to a flowering revival of musical protest through popular culture. Three main reasons, a differing social response to social injustice, the changed nature of today's music industry, and the changed nature of today's pop culture, account for the lack of popular protest music, today.

The 1960's in America have often be referred to as an age of protest, due in large part to the diversity of protest music, which was popular during that era. The roots of this flourishing of protest music exist largely in the folk music of American musicians during the first half of the 20th century. Folk musicians in the early 20th century, such as Joe Hill, composed labor union protest songs and distributed song booklets, hoping to "fan the flames of discontent" (Rodnitzky 6). During the middle of the 20th century, folk musicians, such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, traveled around the United States spreading their "message music" and becoming involved in political movements. Woody's songs were about the masses, often identifying problems and offering solutions.

Both he and Seeger were central to the evolution of protest music, bringing their folk music to New York City, where it merged with the urban, political left. Seeger was cautious about referring to his music as folk music, preferring the term “people’s music.” He identified the goal of people’s music as the promotion of the people’s cause, through the people’s medium, music. For Seeger, folk music was necessarily participatory; when the needs and goals of the people were sung together by the people, a force was created, capable of defeating alienation. If commercial music, the drug which kept the masses subdued, would retreat, the people’s music could be heard and affect change (Boucher 60-61).

During the late 1950’s, folk music became a popular presence on college campuses, as students became disenchanted with the increasing complexity of jazz and the meaninglessness of rock (Rodnitzky 13). Folk music was a simple, yet meaningful alternative, which would intensify during the following decade in response to the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War, and other social concerns. The protest music which flourished during the 1960’s grew out of these folk traditions, building upon them and expanding them in unique ways.

During the early 1960’s, an interesting phenomenon occurred within music, which would aid the popularity of the protest music movement. Three generally distinct areas of music began to merge; folk music, historically made by the masses for the masses, topical music, often message-oriented songs, and tin pan alley music, the commercial, urban music of the day, all began to meld together (Rodnitzky 4). Perhaps, both record companies and musicians were attempting to capitalize on the social phenomena occurring among young people. Confronted with serious social turmoil, a burgeoning

sub-culture, and a sense of generational revolution, youths who had once looked for heroes among politicians, businessmen, and athletes, turned to folk singers as models of integrity. As large, widespread social movements aided the struggle for civil rights and the protest of the war in Vietnam, popular music was attached inseparably from the protests and culture of young people. In this unique time, pop music spoke to the youth's desire for change, emboldening the disenfranchised and connecting the affluent to the oppressed (Rodnitzky 39).

Everyone from musicians to businessmen to evangelical preachers recognized the power that protest music, when disseminated by the mass media, had over young people. Like religious messages, protest music often appealed to the guilt of the listener, invoking action. Support from radio stations, rallies, concerts, festivals, and music magazines gave this powerful form of music a popular venue. During the 1960's, popular protest music was influenced by and helped to develop an agitated, radical mentality among young people, as youths became more serious and political than perhaps ever before.

As the 1960's progressed, protest music progressed in many diverse directions from its folk roots because of artistic decisions, record company involvement, and a growing disillusionment among young people. Bob Dylan arguably started the shift away from topical, folk-inspired protest music, by amplifying his guitar, employing a back-up band, and rejecting the topical, "finger-pointing" form. As with other moves made by Dylan, many of his contemporaries followed suit.

In addition, record companies, keenly aware of the money to be made off of the popular protest music, co-opted the music. In helping to create the "folk-rock" genre that Dylan pioneered, record companies were able to merge the high school and college

markets, producing profitable music that was reliant more on the mood of youths, than messages (Rodnitzky 22). Psychedelic music followed this trend, as a kind of protest of the very foundations of society, calling for existential authenticity. The flowering new styles of music, reliant on instrumentation over overt lyrical messages, spoke to youths growing increasingly disillusioned with race riots and the seemingly endless Vietnam War. Confronted with alienation and absurdity, youths were attracted to music which depicted the absurdity around them.

Whereas protest music in the folk tradition had worked to build solidarity and pinpoint specific social issues, new forms of protest music called for diversity among audience members, protesting societal norms and the notion of ideology, itself (Rodnitzky 31). While the older protest songs made radicals feel better, perhaps the popular music of the later 1960's made radical converts in subtler, more effective ways. However, whatever its effects, the diverse catalogue of protest music made popular in the 1960's undeniably became an integral part of the social movements and culture of a turbulent decade.

Obviously, with the rise of popular protest music came the rise of popular musicians, who served as cultural heroes for a generation of youth. Artists such as Neil Young, Country Joe MacDonald, Phil Ochs, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan all became famous for their individual brands of protest music. Phil Ochs is an interesting example of a popular protest musician who often represented the feelings of his generation, as they came of age during the 1960's. A middle-class kid who became radical in college and subsequently dropped out, Ochs picked up a guitar and became involved in activism. He moved to New York City in 1962, writing topical songs in the shadow of Bob Dylan

(Rodnitzky 70). Addressing many and diverse issues of injustice throughout his songs, Ochs moved to the far left by 1965, marching with various groups and closely associating himself with Students for a Democratic Society.

Originally optimistic about the power of music, Ochs became disillusioned like so many of his peers at the end of the decade. He emulated the lengthy, prose of Dylan's new songs without much success, as he rejected liberalism, dogging the feet of new leftists like Jerry Rubin (Rodnitzky 78). Ultimately, he rejected American political society, before it eventually rejected him culturally. Though his career ended in unpopularity and relative obscurity, Ochs was a key figure of the 1960's protest scene, exhibiting the connection between social protest and people's music.

Another example of a musical hero spawned by the renaissance of protest music in the 1960's is Joan Baez. Baez, another college dropout, was perhaps the premier American folksinger by 1960. Singing ancient ballads, her own protest songs, and covers of artists such as Dylan, Baez also became an articulate activist. She escorted children to schools during de-segregation, often charged no more than \$2 to attend her concerts, and set up an institute for the study of nonviolence (Rodnitzky 89). Baez had celebrity status and used it for specific purposes, singing protest songs and advocating the causes of peace. Perhaps in no other decade could a female pacifist have become a popular icon, such as she.

However, the most important case study of a protest singer during the 1960's is Bob Dylan, although he would surely cringe at such a label. It is critical to study Dylan and his body of work because he probably wrote the best topical, protest ballads of the era, he redefined what protest music said and sounded like, taking it to new plateaus, and

his influence on his contemporaries, as well as future generations of musicians is unparalleled. Robert Zimmerman dropped out of college, ran away from his Minnesotan home to Greenwich Village in New York City, and adopted the name Bob Dylan. By 1962, at the age of 21, Dylan was at the forefront of the folk-protest scene (Rodnitzky 107).

His first three albums were largely comprised of acoustic folk music, with his second and third albums, *The Freewheelin Bob Dylan* and *The Times They Are Achanging*, offering mostly protest ballads. Dylan's well-written songs, such as "Blowin in the Wind," became hugely popular, unifying anthems. Because of his superb protest music, growing popularity, and early identification with social issues, such as the Civil Rights Movement, the left quickly looked to Dylan to lead their movement for social change. He was hailed as "the voice of his generation," among other, heavy-weighted titles.

However, rather than accept the role as a sort of spokesman for the protest movement, Dylan, always rapidly changing, decided to strike a different path. He amplified his guitar and employed a back-up band, diversifying his sound. Some, such as Dylan scholar Michael Jones, have suggested that Dylan had always sought accompaniment, that Dylan chose folk as a vehicle to stardom because it spoke to him, but that it was never an end for him (Boucher 72). Lyrically, Dylan changed as well, abandoning the topical, protest ballad form. In the song "Back Pages" from *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, Dylan ridicules his own simplicity and claim to moral authority in his earlier work, claiming that he's "much younger now." Abandoning spokesman-like, finger-pointing

tendencies in his music, Dylan's lyricism went extremely inward, painting impressionistic pictures of both society and idealism as absurd.

Perhaps most telling is a quote from Dylan's rambling acceptance speech at an awards dinner held by leaders of the left, in which he stated that, for him, there was no longer left or right, but only up and down, and that he was "trying to go up, without thinking of anything trivial, such as politics" (No Direction Home). By 1965, Dylan had made his final break with what many would refer to as protest music, as his electric set at the Newport Folk Festival during that year was met with frenetic boos. Understandably, those involved with the social movements of the day were disappointed and even angered by Dylan's changing music. Many accused him of abandoning the movement and disregarding his social responsibility as a popular icon. The left accused his music of fostering alienation, rather than togetherness, while the folk community asserted that Dylan was a sell out (Rodnitzky 118).

However, several Dylan scholars would disagree with this negative assessment. Andrew Gamble argues that despite Dylan's denial that he was a leader, had useful advice, or was even a protest singer, his songs did show how to live and survive in modern America, without preaching. In a political world gone awry, Dylan advised that one evade authority, watch out for societal trappings, and ultimately stay true to oneself. As he sang on "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "You don't need a weatherman to tell which way the wind blows;" the wind, which he first cited on "Blowin in the Wind" was still blowing, but it was no longer offering the hope of a better world (Boucher 28). Even if the world was unreformable, it was survivable through the protest of those willing to go against the societal grain and live authentically.

Michael Jones also defends Dylan's later works as important pieces of political music. After elevating folk music to global awareness, Dylan took it to popular heights, using pop music as a medium for questioning social and political norms. His music was no longer the people's music Seeger spoke of, but it wasn't synonymous with mass culture. Rather than abandon traditional music, Dylan found a power in it greater than communal singing (Boucher 74). Perhaps Dylan went deeper into tradition than anyone had before. Though he turned his back on the protest ballad form, Dylan never turned his back on protest itself. In fact, poetic anger at injustice, when freed from addressing specific social issues, might be raised to such a lacerating intensity that the listener has a more profound reconsideration of values (Boucher 81).

Dylan's influence on protest music is particularly relevant because it was felt throughout the music of the second half of the 1960's. In addition, today's artists work within Dylan's tradition, often echoing his artistic sentiments concerning protest. Although it can be debated whether or not anthems are a necessary part of protest music, contemporary artists seem to agree that there are other ways to protest through music. As the Village Voice blogger Tom Breihan boldly stated, "It's a clichéd Rolling Stone boomer-idea, that pop culture managed to stop a war" (Powers).

Rather than construct message driven songs, contemporary popular artists are more apt to wrestle with issues of injustice in their lyrics, providing something for fans to think about. This is especially true in the hip hop community, where rappers such as Mos Def, Immortal Technique, Lupe Fiasco, and Boots Riley of the Coup, integrate their views on power, poverty, and city life into multi-faceted songs and tales of inner-city life. Los Angeles Times staff writer Ann Powers sums up the modern conception that,

“Today's most effective dissenting artists are making such connections, finding in pop's multilayered expressions a potent way to capture complexities that require more than sing-alongs” (Powers).

Others are more pessimistic about the circumstances surrounding contemporary protest music. Singer-songwriter Fiona Apple has said, "I don't know if anybody wants to mix their politics with their entertainment... Look at what happens when people get up on podiums and talk about politics" {In reference to the initial outrage over political statements made by the Dixie Chicks} (Moody). Fellow artist Alicia Keys stated "The climate of today is not really focused as much as it was then on being able to speak about different cultural issues or different situations that were going on politically” (Moody).

However, this does not insinuate that protest music is not happening today. In fact, artists continue to compose and perform protest songs both in the traditional vein and through a diversity of genres. Artists such as Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young continue to perform protest songs today, while new artists, such as Pink, Green Day, Citizen Cope, Bright Eyes, Talib Kweli, Michael Stipe, and David Rovics, have contributed contemporary protest songs, some with commercial success.

However, despite the presence of protest music today, it hardly amounts to a flowering revival of popular protest music. Rather, today's popular protest music scene consists of already established artists releasing albums, which contain some protest material. In 2006, the Dixie Chicks' album *Taking The Long Way* debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard charts, Pearl Jam's self titled release, led by the single “World Wide Suicide,” reached No. 1 on Billboard's modern rock charts, and Pink's record, with the anti-Bush song “Dear Mr. President” peaked at No. 6 on the Billboard charts (Hicks).

Records released in the early days of the Iraq invasion by Green Day and Eminem also fared well with their protest material. However, the commercial success for contemporary protest music is limited and seems restricted to established artists whose dissent mirrors the disparaging public opinion polls of President Bush and the Iraq War. The prevalence and success of today's handful of popular protest singers pales in comparison to that of the 1960's, when record sales tripled, as over 100 songs concerning the Vietnam War became popular, cracking the top 100 charts (Anderson).

Three main factors, a differing social response to social injustice, the changed nature of today's music industry, and the changed nature of today's pop culture, have contributed to the lack of popular protest music in contemporary America. Firstly, the lack of popular protest music today has mirrored the lack of strong, unified social movements in America. Protest music has never been responsible for starting such movements; rather, it has served to unify, popularize, and sustain movements already in place.

Todd Gitlin, professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University elaborates,

Forty years ago, there was a social movement, or a collection of social movements, and people gravitated to the music because they thought the music spoke for them... So the music ... was an anthem for armies that were already on the march. Today, the armies are not so much on the march, if there are armies. So necessarily, the place of the music is going to be different. It's more often out ahead of what people are doing in their political lives. (Danton)

Fellow scholar Robert Thompson, a Syracuse University expert on the subject of pop culture, notes that the large population of baby boomers attending college during the 1960's had just hit the most idealistic time of their lives, enabled to vote and be drafted. As they filled campuses with protests and supported movements at the grass roots level, protest songs offered a rousing soundtrack for movements already up and running. By contrast, today's musicians perform in a context of growing disapproval for the war, but little activism (Marino).

Social movements have often been supported by throngs of young people; the Civil Rights Movement and the movement to end the war in Vietnam owed a great deal to the efforts of young people, many who felt connected to a generational revolution. However, current issues of social justice, such as subverted racism, the Iraq War, and global warming, fail to penetrate youth consciousness with any viable force. This is largely due to the fact that such issues often exist outside the realm of youths' direct experience. Subsequently, considering such issues requires a refined level of selflessness that is "anathema to the culture of current-day pop, which is absorbed with gratification," as David Hajdu, writer for *The New Republic*, puts it (Hajdu).

Because of the absence of a draft, the war in Iraq is not felt as viscerally by today's student population, as it was during the 1960's. The military draft, which was not only a defining issue for a generation, but an impetus for social action during the 1960's, does not offer today's youths a powerful reason to protest. Although protest music undoubtedly can exist without social movements, it is such movements that often popularize protest music, using it as a galvanizing force. Unlike a unified collection of songs fueling unified movements, today's protest music is more akin to a collection of

isolated songs, accompanied by low approval ratings. As Hajdu comments, “In the absence of a significant anti-war movement through which the music could be employed, contemporary protest songs have purpose but not function” (Hajdu).

A second major reason for the lack of popular protest music today is the changed nature of the music industry. Since the 1960’s, there has been a widespread consolidation of record companies, record stores, and music broadcasters, such as radio and television. The concentration of global ownership in the record industry is such that, as of 2003, five international companies, Sony (based in Japan), Universal-Vivendi (based in France), AOL Time Warner (based in the U.S.), EMI (based in the UK), and BMG (based in Germany), controlled seventy to eighty percent of all global music sales (Brown 290). Thus, the ease of pressing and promoting a single has greatly diminished for contemporary, independent labels. In addition to this horizontal integration of the record industry, there has also been a vertical integration, as companies, which used to function separately as record companies, publishers, radio stations, and the like, have also merged.

These changes have made the relationships between artists and record industry executives much more impersonal than they were in the 1960’s. Furthermore, as musicians David Rovics, David Crosby of Crosby, Stills, and Nash, and others have asserted, record companies, which were once run by musicians or people who actually loved records, are now run by businesspeople who are ultimately concerned with making maximum profits (Frontline, Rovics). Big record companies with mandated quarterly earnings “didn’t care that you had written a song; they cared how much you sold,” explains Crosby (Frontline). In an industry that releases nearly 30,000 albums a year, a hundred of which might be hits, instant success is needed for an artist to receive proper

support from a record company (Frontline). Unfortunately, protest hasn't proved to be a shortcut for instant success among today's artists, the way it often was among musicians in the 1960's.

However, if the record industry truly runs on the wheels of capitalism, they would be pragmatically obliged to supply popular protest music if the populous demanded it. Although protest music has intensified and become slightly more accepted as approval ratings for the current war and presidency have plummeted, record companies are not offering an array of protest music to be heard on commercial radio or television. In a personal interview, traveling protest singer David Rovics clarified what seems to be a counter-intuitive situation:

Modern record companies operate with an enlightened self interest; if they are making billions of dollars promoting {music of poor quality}, then why bother with other music? They're going for the lowest common denominator, looking for the biggest sales across as many demographics as possible. They don't want to risk losing the thirty percent of the population who are for the war {by promoting protest music}. They're happy with the status quo and aware that music can be used as a form of mind control – not only to build solidarity, but to numb the senses and sell products. (Rovics)

This comfort with the status quo and commitment to safely earned profits means that record company assets are focused on a few, global superstars, often leaving politically controversial musicians without a popular venue for expression.

Finally, the third key reason for the relative nonexistence of popular protest music today concerns the changed nature of today's pop culture, specifically pop music. During the 1960's, pop culture was something of a monolith. Today, pop culture is very much a niche marketplace, a diverse and often disunited collection of seemingly infinite options for one's own entertainment. While three or four television channels vied for the viewer's attention during the 1960's, today there are hundreds of channels competing for the viewer's time (Marino). This situation is analogous to the current state of popular music. There is a seemingly endless supply of musical genres, either independent or sanctioned by record companies, available in a multitude of ways, through radio, music television, retail stores, and the internet. As Gitlin explains, "Everything in the culture is fragmented, and therefore it's very hard for anything in the culture to be the big voice in the way that, say, songs that came out during the civil rights movement could be in the early '60s" (Danton).

The transformation of pop culture into a niche culture has translated into the marginalization of protest music. As Rovics points out, the term "protest music" is merely a label, as the record industry has co-opted protest music and defined it as marginal. He asserts that real popular music, both of and for the people, has always been protest or political music (Rovics). Record companies today have created the illusion that protest music isn't happening in a significant way. By consequence, the marginalization of today's political music has made it difficult for protest singers to produce popular music that can be successful across multiple genres and demographics.

Thus, instead of protest music existing on commercial radio and on music television, it largely exists in such marginal settings as the "Bring 'Em Home Now"

concert at the Hammerstein Ballroom in March of 2006 (Sanneh). The event, held by multiple, protesting musicians, was headlined by Conor Oberst of Bright Eyes, arguably one of the best songwriters of Generation X, who has written several excellent protest songs, such as “When The President Talks to God.” However, he serves as only further proof of the marginalized status of today’s protest music, as he remains on the independent label he founded and his songs receive little commercial play.

It is not only the nature of the pop music marketplace that has changed; music and musicians have also changed since the 1960’s. Today’s protest music is often “more aggressive, angry and unapologetic” (Proskocil). Given the current, divisive nature of American politics, even among young people, protest songs struggle to unify youths on social issues, especially when they are incendiary. Furthermore, the role of musicians in society has changed. Michael Budds, a music history teacher at the University of Missouri School of Music, comments "At the time during the Vietnam war, people looked to musicians and actors as social leaders and wanted their point of view.... They had a leadership role that I don't think they have in our culture right now" (Draper).

In many ways, today’s artists are Dylan’s children; his shift from overt protest songs to electric, more existential songs is echoed in much of modern music. Memorable protest songs of the early 1960’s often relied on folk-inspired melodies, which made them easy to learn and suitable for both individual performance and group singing. This is not always the case with today’s protest music, as it is disseminated through many, diverse styles. Often driven by punk and hip hop, contemporary protest music is often inappropriate for group singing, best considered as an artistic statement of protest, rather than a rallying call.

Furthermore, the bounds of what constitutes protest music today are somewhat more vague than they were in the 1960's. Popular protest music, or references to protest in popular music, are "part of the same stream that brings us hot new booty calls, 'American Idol' ballads, and neo-punk declarations of puppy love" (Powers). Rather than construct albums of protest songs or even individual protest songs, many modern artists, such as Juelz Santana, Chamillionaire, and the Flaming Lips, slip in political statements into their regularly non-political work. Although it is encouraging to see mainstream artists speaking out, this serves to keep such artists safe within their own genres, while other protest musicians remain marginalized. As Rovics observes, one of the biggest differences between today's generation and that of the 1960's is that the older generation "knew there was this thing called protest music... today's generation doesn't" (Rovics). Thus, references to issues of social justice may slip by the increasingly young population targeted by MTV and record labels.

This leads into an interesting discussion of the role of music in the lives of young people. Music has always played multiple social roles, used to sway emotions for entertainment and distraction, to condition or persuade people to buy things or take certain action, and to create solidarity, among a variety of uses. The notion of pop music as an affirmation of mass culture values was challenged in the 1960's by the plethora of popular protest music. However, record companies have probably taken notice of the fact that even among the biggest selling protest songs of the 1960's, the vast majority of teenage listeners were relatively unsure of what the lyrics were exactly about (Brown 62).

This suggests that in the relationship between pop music and youths, the lyrics and music may not be what's important. Rather, what's important is that certain music

helps define the listener to themselves and to others as a certain kind of person. This phenomenon is more true today than ever, as the function of music has been inevitably influenced by the features of modernity, “individualism, pluralism, secularism, consumerism, media proliferation, and reliance on technology” (Brown 51).

Today’s youths are more apt to receive pop music through music television than other methods, as a 2000 marketing survey of 27,600 teens in forty countries revealed that eighty-five percent of teens watch MTV everyday (Brown 203). Music videos tap into global youth authenticity paradigms that are often molded by large corporations. Whereas youths in the 1960’s may have been connected by issues of social justice or even songs of social justice, international focus groups have revealed that today’s youths are not joined by a common ideology, but by a sophisticated knowledge of consumer products (Brown 202). This knowledge is seen as a status symbol among young people who are listening to pop music, but are not necessarily united by it. These multifaceted changes in the composition, style, and function of the pop music marketplace have worked together to contribute to the absence of popular protest music today.

Although popular protest music does not exist today, in the way that it did during the 1960’s, musicians continue to write and perform songs of social justice, as they have throughout time. As Rovics notes, “There is a constant stream of political music, throughout different genres, that has existed for thousands of years. Although it ebbs and flows, the stream hasn’t changed” (Rovics). In order for a resurgence of popular protest music to occur again, a reconstitution of the music industry would be necessary. In many countries, government pressure forces media companies to conform to the will of the people, playing locally produced music and popularly demanded songs. However, a

strong audience would also be required for such a resurgence, whether it be a unified social movement or politically conscious youths willing to trade ideas, rather than commercial capital. As protest music continues to evolve and address current issues of injustice, one cannot help but look back on the renaissance of protest music during the 1960's and wonder if such an era could ever occur again.

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