

## Stand Up, Sing Out: The Contemporary Relevance of Protest Song

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Sound is an integral part of protest, and singing is a way for ordinary people, as well as amateur or professional musicians, to sonorously raise their voices in an appeal for justice. The intimate and sensuous activity of singing, in solo form or as part of a collective, has a power and persuasiveness beyond mere rhetoric. Because of music's ubiquity, its presence in all cultures, and its fundamental ownership by all human beings, it is a medium and a performance act that is essentially recognisable, familiar, and translatable; therefore, it has the potential to reach across social and political divides, or, at the very least, reveal our shared humanity. Music, of course, is not intrinsically good or inherently utopian, even if, in making music – in *musiking* - people celebrate not only who they are, but also often who they hope to become (Small 1998: xi). Like any medium, music can be used for malign propaganda purposes. It can disinform, it can proselytise, it can incite, and it can exclude; singers, song texts and performance activities may, in fact, be part of the very systems that reproduce oppressive structures and behaviours (Turino 2008). But when singing is mobilized in order to counter injustice, to challenge inequality, to rise above hate and fear, to appeal against the normalisation of bigotry, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and a myriad of other anti-democratic, anti-human practices, then the power of song is revealed as affective, persuasive, ethical and hopeful.

This collection of essays on the songs (and singers) of social protest presents rich, diverse, nuanced and multidisciplinary protest scholarship from experienced and established voices alongside dynamic, emerging scholars from across the globe, at a

time when protest singing seems more important than ever. Engaging in social protest through song has a long and rich tradition that has currency in everyday life, and it is gaining traction within the academy, where the intersection of music and social justice research continues to expand. This book aims to contribute to that growing field (see Fowkes and Glazer 2012; Friedman 2016; Illiano 2015; Lebrun 2009; Kutschke and Norton 2014; Peddie 2006, 2012; Roy 2010; Rosenthal and Flacks 2011; Spener 2016), offering scholarship that directly and unflinchingly engages with the world around us. The *study* of music may be understood as a moving of musical sound into discourse, but it should also be understood as a political act in itself because of its agentive capacities and its refusal to see music in purely aesthetic terms (Bohlman 1993: 418).

A key aim of this collection is to critically remember the origins and meaning of protest songs of the past - especially those that continue to have resonance in the present - and to explore less familiar and newer protest sounds, forms (and aesthetics) in their respective contexts. In the essays that follow, canonical songs revisited through historical approaches are placed alongside emergent refrains documented in cutting-edge ethnographies. Protest songs are analysed through philosophical excursions, socio-political and economic perspectives, and cultural and contextual interrogations and detailed musicological, textual, and performance analyses open up new and dynamic ways of engaging in protest song research.

By deliberately broadening the geographical and historical remit to include sites and epochs outside of Anglo and American popular contexts, we have endeavoured to curate research on a wide variety of song genres and performance traditions, many of which are ethnographically explored and contextualized. By inviting readers to understand and appreciate the power of song as a vehicle for social protest across

cultural, social and political divides, our aim has been to make this collection truly international in scope.

The book's roots lie in the "Songs of Social Protest" conference held at the University of Limerick, Ireland in 2015, where over eighty academics from thirty countries came together to interrogate the ways in which popular and vernacular cultures, and song in particular, can reproduce or challenge the cultural / political status quo in contemporary societies worldwide. The cases interrogated in this book therefore emerge, as do their authors, from a broad range of national, political and cultural contexts, as well as ideological positionings. The cross-cultural and multidisciplinary character of their collective contributions underscores that songs of social protest have been, and continue to be, a truly global affair.

It is rarely in one's economic interest, as a professional musician, to be exclusively dubbed a protest singer, and in places where freedom of expression is curtailed, it is often a highly risky practice. And yet most protest singers find a way, sometimes concealing the very subversive nature of their message in beautifully crafted melodies and harmonies in opaque metaphors, or in unexpected and therefore unthreatening performance contexts. Other times, the singing is loud, defiant and in unison, buoyed by the power of numbers and by the sheer, effervescent force of the resonating human bodies, singing civil disobedience with pure, noisy exuberance. Such singing, when combined with 'exemplary action' transforms people into 'moral witnesses' (Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 162) and making music helps activists to "honour a commitment they've already made" Rosenthal and Flacks (2011: 123). Countless social and cultural contexts populate the wide performance spectrum delineated above, but in the end *all* songs of social protest seek to do one thing – bring

our attention to an issue that needs redress, which ultimately challenge the status quo:  
And we live in a time where there is much to protest.

### **The State of Things: Putting Protest in Context Today**

Any assumptions of unidirectional development towards democratic and rights-based systems of governance have been challenged by contemporary shifts to the political right, on-going human rights abuses and intensifying environmental conflict, regressive developments in which state actors are frequently implicated.

In 2017, in an unprecedented development, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination issued an early warning with respect to racial conflict in the United States of America (Malik 2017; Sidique 2017). Public confrontations between white supremacists and anti-racists (as in Charlottesville in 2017 where an anti-racist protestor was killed (Tani 2017)), can be understood as contemporary manifestations of a lengthy and deep-rooted history of racism. This period is marked out within recent history however, by the equivocal response of the State to such clashes. White supremacist groups appear to have been emboldened by the election of President Trump (Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights 2017), and indeed, by his prevarication in condemning their principles and mobilisation (Kentish 2017).

Populism, and the right wing movements which promote and benefit from it, also gained ground in Europe during the same period. In 2016, the conservative vote in the UK successfully mobilised to terminate that country's membership of the European Union (European Parliament 2017), arguably one of the most progressive political projects in recent history, one which is credited with a hiatus in armed inter-country conflicts in Western Europe since its inception (Federation of American Scientists

2017). The UK referendum was informed by racist rhetoric, which both heightened and sought to capitalise on divisions within the populous based on racialized identity and citizenship (Chakraborty 2017).

Far right parties have been making significant gains across Europe since 2014/5. The outcome of the 2017 German federal election prompted public demonstrations as it emerged that the right wing anti-immigration party 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD) had won 13% of the vote (Sharkov 2017). The European Parliament, has however, included a coalition of far right parties since the middle of this decade, incorporating representatives from France, Hungary, Austria, Belgium, Italy, the UK and Germany (Rublin 2015). In Oct 2017, the suppression of the Catalonian independence vote in Spain illustrated the fragility of democracy, as hundreds of protesters, many of them singing, were beaten by Spanish riot police.

East of Europe, and on its southern borders, a humanitarian crisis resulting from the displacement of people on an unprecedented magnitude is on-going. Fleeing political persecution, war and poverty, refugees continue to make their way north and west, undergoing perilous journeys which often culminate in their deaths. In 2015, the 28 EU member states agreed to accept 160,000 refugees. By July 2017, 21,000 people had been relocated (Tisdall 2017). The European Parliament (2017) describes this crisis as having "... exposed shortcomings in the Union's asylum system". In contrast, Amnesty International (de Bellis 2017) describes Europe's response to this crisis as having focused on "increasing border controls and stepping up returns".

Mobilisation for the purposes of demonstration is as necessary today as it has ever been. Moreover, this moment in time is characterised not just by single-issue protests marking shifting and temporary nodes of communal grievance. Rather, this is an era of renewal for the mass movement as a popular means of responding to structural

inequalities requiring fundamental changes in the manner in which we organise our societies. This renewal speaks, we argue, not only to the gravity of the challenges now facing us, but of the failure of institutional politics to adequately address those challenges. Mass protest represents the migration of democracy outside the formal structures of the political system, and as such it is essential to a just society. Globally, recourse to protest continues to entail risk. That this mode of political participation continues to be criminalised and repressed in so many parts of the world is additional evidence of its necessity (and many of the contributors to this collection speak to these risks). The question then remains as to whether those of us, whose personal circumstances or geopolitical location provides us with greater protection from repressive responses to protest, will agitate for and on behalf of those who cannot.

### **Protest, Activism and Agency**

It is essential, then, that from the outset, we as editors of this collection pin our colours to the mast. For us, protest is a legitimate, even essential, aspect of modern democratic societies, “a discursive intervention, designed to dramaturgically disrupt dominant discourses, to promote alternative frameworks of understanding and to demand their actualisation” (Power et al. 2016, 266). Social protest is a form of “political expression” that seeks to bring about meaningful social change on causes which range from “identity politics, to cultural, social, economic or political issues” (Cable 2016, 2), by applying pressure to (and in the process influencing) the existing “knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the public or the policies of an organization or institution” (McLeod 2011). It therefore follows that the manner in which protestors communicate is a key component in determining whether or not a protest is successful. Research going back several decades has shown how media coverage has (attempted to

/ undermined the legitimacy of protest movements and events by presenting the actions of protestors as violent and insurrectionary (Power et al. 2017; Gitlin 1980; see also Philo 1990; Power et al. 2016). More recently, Cottle (2008) has argued that there has been an ideological fragmentation and dilution of protest, in conjunction with a significant (positive) shift in public attitudes towards protest. It is also the case however that the very technologies and networks created by powerful transnational capital (such as the I-Phone or Twitter) allow for protestors to circulate counter-hegemonic discourses. Devereux (2014) notes that this was in evidence in the Arab Spring (2010) and in cultural practices utilized by the 'Occupy Movement' originating within Wall Street, the very belly of global capitalism in 2011. Costanza-Chock evidences how protestors engaged in 'transmedia mobilization' in getting their message ('We Are The 99%') into circulation, and to help spread the Occupy Movement to at least 100 other cities around the world. Without wishing to understate the continued power of transnational capital and the global elites, Devereux (2014) argues, that one of the unintended consequences of media globalization is that technological changes and developments (which create negative consequences for many of the world's citizens) also permit 'ordinary people' to be more agentic and to circulate powerful counter-hegemonic discourses. Thus the power of citizen journalism, the capacity of audience members generally and musicians/songwriters/performers in particular, has been transformed in terms of its capacity to potentially disrupt and challenge the status quo. In that context the capacity to articulate contradictory narratives has in the past and, as is clearly demonstrated in this volume, continues to be aided by the 'reach' of popular music (Botta 2006, 123) and therefore it is imperative that we pay close attention to this area. But we also understand the need to focus on songs and their performances as multi-modal 'texts' (Lyndon and McKerrell 2017) generated in performance contexts.

This volume, therefore, firmly establishes the efficacy of song as a means of communicating dissent: when song combines with social protest, something very powerful is unleashed, especially when people really listen to what is being said.

### **Songs of Social Protest**

Songs of social protest are “associated with opposition, contestation, revolt and resistance” (Piotrowska 2013, 280), yet even a cursory glance at the table of contents in this volume make it starkly evident that music as social protest is too far reaching to be neatly packed into a particular genre, geographic location or time period (see Peddie 2006, p. xvii for a discussion). The polysemic nature of music means that it can take on different meaning for different people in a wide range of contexts.

Denisoff (1968) was one of the first social scientists to publish on the phenomena of protest songs in 1968. He understood such songs as a form of "magnetic" or "rhetorical" propaganda. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) were concurrently interested in how protest songs function as performance events, where a “process of exchange – between artists and audiences, between the past and the present” enabled new and alternative “societal formations” to materialise (Friedman 2013, xv). The editors of this volume appreciate song as “a discursive practice... situated in particular social relationships and locations that are a product of complex intersections of culture, class, gender etc., in lived experience” (Ballinger 1995, p.13 cited in Peddie 2006, p.xvi; see also Sanz Sabido 2016). As critical consumers of protest songs we participate in “a lived social experience with music”, where the songs become a productive “discursive element in our worlds” (Peddie 2006, xxiv). Songs are acts of performed solidarity and particularly effective (and affective) in terms of moving the spirit (Small 1998; Turino



2008). Songs themselves may not change the world, but they certainly have the capacity to change the minds of people who can change the world

### **Structure, Content, and Themes**

This volume is parsed into nine main thematic sections. There were multiple ways in which the material could have been organised, including along historical, geographical or genre lines. However, we chose a thematic approach, honouring the African-American experience first, and moving from there to Anglo-American protest traditions, and then to thematic concerns that focus less on specific groups and more on ideas as a means of showing what songs of protest from different parts of the world, historical eras, and genre share in common; how fieldwork can play an important role in researching protest song; and some of the ideas and ideologies against which protesters sing.

In **The African-American Experience**, the songs featured are familiar to many. Stephens and Junda (ch. 1) remind us that singing in the form of spiritual or slave songs has been a central part of African American protest experience from the outset and that this tradition remains unbroken, while Lieberman (ch. 2) insists that is incumbent upon us to be aware of the historical meaning of songs such as ‘Kumbaya’ whose original message has subsequently been co-opted and eroded. Bakan (ch. 3) configures Billie Holiday as an organic intellectual, nuancing the particular challenges she faced and the leadership she showed as an African-American performer inhabiting the commercial world. All of these chapters underscore how much African American experiences have changed, yet also remain the same, and they are thus particularly pertinent for grounding and contextualizing African-American (including intersectional) experiences today.

**Protest Genealogies** deals predominantly with songs from some of the key figures of the Anglo-American protest ballad tradition. It begins with Danaher (ch. 4) who offers an overview of the sociological literature as it pertains in particular to twentieth century protest in the US and UK, though with resonances in many other parts of the world. Key singer-song writer protagonists from Pete Seeger - who, according to Rosenthal (ch. 5) was masterful in the manner in which he invited participation in his performances - to the 'radical' Phil Ochs (Ashbolt, ch. 6) - who was particularly active in the 1960s - offer a fascinating insight into the politics of mid-twentieth century USA and how left-wing positionalities went hand in glove with protest singing. Ord's (ch. 7) analysis of Ewan McColl focuses as much on the medium as on the message in his discussion of the British singer's radio ballads, while O'Connor (ch. 8) ends the section with a reflection on Bob Dylan, offering an insight into the impact of protest singers on a novelist pivoting between local and trans-Atlantic, Anglo-American cultural influences. These chapters also pave the way for understanding other protest songs and genres from Anglo-American and Irish contexts, as explored later in the book.

**Transforming Tradition** casts its generic net widely, examining the ways in which structures, styles and meanings of songs from a variety of different music traditions and epochs can be transformed and made anew depending on the context. In this section, maverick composers, performers, and cultural interventionists are revealed. Colson (ch. 9) unpacks the historical influences and aesthetic conventions in contemporary expressions of identity in Tahitian pop music, outlining a very Pacific-centred protest form. Virani (ch. 10) examines how Dalit singers in India have reclaimed and performed the sacred poetry of the 'rebel saint' Kabir as a voice for the subaltern, while Ní Shíocháin (ch. 11) illustrates song's inherent power to counter

hegemonic discourse, in terms of liminality and pure creativity, in a discussion of a nineteenth century, anti-colonial, Irish-language poet and singer.

This naturally leads into the next section on struggle for independence, for greater autonomy, and for resistance against fascist regimes, entitled **Freedom and Autonomy**. Unsurprisingly, Gramsci's 'organic intellectual' comes to the fore in this section, where both David (ch. 12) and Orlandi (ch. 13) underscore the roles of singers and songwriters as intellectual leaders in the twentieth century, who helped to bring about regime change in Portugal and counter fascism in Italy, respectively. Borrull's case study of Catalonia's 'New Song' movement from the 1960s, whose music continues to have resonance in the region today, is particularly pertinent, in light of the independence referendum held in Oct 2017. Finally, Sambaraju's assessment (ch. 15) of the role of protest song, and particular singers, in the formation of a separate Telangana State in India reminds us that songs may act as powerful, mobilizing forces for change, particularly where we have uneven experiences of capitalism (foreshadowing a later section in the book that focuses on critiquing that economic system).

**Politics, Participation and Activism in the Field** pays attention to authors featured in this volume whose fieldwork experiences have often called for their own political views to become explicit, or who have become involved in the musical lives of the protest performers whom they study and observe (and with whom they often times end up making music). Jolaosho (ch. 16) opens the section by assessing the role of music in periods of depoliticisation in South Africa, tracing how songs move across time from one cause to another (in this case from anti-apartheid to anti-privatisation movements), and how, as a fieldworker, she confronts and assesses these political and methodological challenges. Ögüt (ch. 17) engages first-hand with feminism in Turkey, examining the production and dissemination of two protest songs from Istanbul, coming to an understanding of how art

(and, by extension, fieldwork) is intrinsically political. Singh-Grewal (ch. 18) closes the section with a nuancing of the relationship between activism and escapism in the genre of Ugandan hip-hop which, she argues, creates a place for civil society (in the face of authoritarianism); and it does so not by direct confrontation but rather by circumvention.

If the previous section focuses on *how* to protest, the next section focuses on the manner in which, as audiences and witnesses to particular protest genres, we are craftily guided, and even sometimes manipulated in our responses to a ‘cause’, through a variety of multi-modal means, as well as through codes that we are taught or tacitly absorb. **Semiotics, Mediation, and Manipulation** begins with Neil-King’s detailed analysis (ch. 19) of a heavy metal music video by the band System of a Down and director Michael Moore originally protesting the Iraq war (and which was subsequently used in a variety of other protest contexts, including the denial of Armenian genocide by the US government), focussing on how all of these elements come together and perform and encourage protest. Such encoding is a very careful, deliberate and noisy strategy for the feminist Russian punk band, *Pussy Riot*, according to Graper (ch. 20), whose close reading of the band in multiple contexts suggests a subversion of hegemony not through direct political action, but rather through aesthetics and virtual virtuosity. Naiman crucially points out (ch. 21) that without the requisite cultural capital and critical apparatus, there are some codes that are in danger of being misunderstood in her case study of camp fascism in North America which, in the current political climate, is finding new resonances with the alt-right. The section concludes with a reminder by Moufarrej (ch. 22) in her nuanced case study of what she terms propaganda videos from the Free Syrian Army, which use singing children to create empathy for their cause, that regardless of the cause, not all protest ‘singers’ have the level of agency we might assume.

In **Protesting Bodies and Embodiment** both Moore and Smith reminds us that it is one thing to study a protest song abstractly but quite another to perform it and appreciate the manner in which it moves the body, through pulsating rhythms and acts of emplacement. Moore (ch. 23) in particular asserts that songs performed outside of their gender contexts lose something vital in her study of 'Bread and Roses', while Smith (ch. 24) returns us to an efficacious African-American song, 'We Shall Overcome' arguing that it is the act of communal participation and the process of entrainment that make any protest song truly efficacious.

The section entitled **Borderlands and Contested Spaces** explores, in particular, the 'brown bodies' of the borderlands, so often displaced and marginalised literally and figuratively. Hidalgo (ch. 25) illustrates the mechanisms by which Mancunian popular music singer Morrissey is evoked and referenced as a meme for solidarity in the face of exclusion and alienation amongst Chicano fans in LA, and why this should matter. Toomey (ch. 26) follows the protest songs of successful recording artist Ry Cooder, whose own career trajectory shifted in the face of encounters with Hispanic people affected by gentrification in LA, something which is becoming more and more common across the world, as poor bodies are pushed away to make room for the more monied ones. Gimenez (ch. 27) ends the section on dislocation and exclusion with a discussion of Western Saharawi music in refugee camps in Algeria and in communities in Spain, through a detailed account of the protest music of Mariem Hassan and her associated record label, something in which Gimenez is embedded as an accompanying musician and composer.

**Critiquing Capitalism and the Neoliberal Tide** features two chapters that directly deal with the financial collapse of this decade as it played out in two countries in particular (Ireland and Greece). Dillane, Power, Devereux and Haynes (ch. 28) examine the repertoire of a Dublin-based protest singer, Damien Dempsey, whose songs evidence the important role

singer-songwriters have to play in predicting societal challenges, in critiquing government responses to crises, and in offering alternative solutions. Hajimichael (ch. 29) performs a similar analysis, this time focussing on two specific songs which, through their use of reggae, connect Greece to Jamaica, with a focus on imagining a better and alternative culture, history and society in this era of uneven global capitalism. Boland (ch. 30) ends this section by looking at the very nature of critique as part of the neo-liberal agenda, and through his examination of the UK band *New Model Army* considers the limits and challenges of this kind of protest that is invariably challenged by commercial and related concerns.

The final section, **Ideology and the Performer**, returns to the theme of maverick performer, examining their respective careers as commercially viable protest singers. Power (ch. 31) pays attention to one particular song by Billy Bragg, 'Ideology', and concludes that it is potentially more efficacious now than it was at the time of its original release, in the process reminding us that songs can be reignited and gain traction depending on historical circumstances. Coulter (ch. 32) examines English punk band *The Clash*, showing how those in the music business struggle with their desire to protest effectively and outlining the challenge of not allowing 'leftish melancholia' to deter singers from active protesting. Finally Cashell (ch. 33) gives a forensic overview of the performance career of Irish singer-songwriter Christy Moore whose insistence that 'the truth must be told' has been central to his life's work, and whose influence illustrates the important social role that a truly committed protest singer can play, if they choose to do so.

This collection of essays on singers and songs of social protest is far from exhaustive. We are keenly aware that the thirty-three chapters presented here offer particular takes on very specific protest song activities, past and present, and are as varied as the authors who have penned them. Even as we brought this volume from conception to conclusion, we could easily have included dozens more contemporary examples of protest songs responding to

current political moments, not to mention delve into the historical records in other places and times not covered here. If we did, the volume would probably have been endless, and still incomplete. Therefore, it is our hope that more volumes of this nature will be generated by like-minded scholars in the day, months, and years to come. It is also our hope that reading the work of these scholars, many of whom are also committed activists and protest musicians, will inspire others to follow in the footsteps of the many organic intellectuals, fearless performers and unsung heroes who populate these pages.