

Rhythm, Rhyme and Rebellion

By RACHEL B. CRAWFORD



Courtesy: National Archives and Records Administration

The United States was born from protest and Americans have always used music to convey messages about civil, gender and labor rights, consumerism, war and patriotism.

American folk singer Joan Baez performs during the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C. in 1963.

Protest, demonstration and civil disobedience have been fundamental to America's journey through slavery, labor and voting rights movements and war. The arts have been an indispensable vehicle for protest, and music has been at the forefront since the colonists first fought against taxation

without representation.

The United States of America was, of course, born from protest. The Declaration of Independence is the embodiment of complaints directed at the British monarchy regarding the governance of the 13 American colonies. In response to taxation without representation, the situ-

ation in which the American subjects were taxed without a voice in the British Parliament, and were in other ways deprived of basic human rights, the colonies revolted. They declared independence and created a government that not only promised representation, but also the inalienable right to speak freely,

MUSIC



Bob Dylan sings Knockin' On Heaven's Door during a concert in 1997. He is one of the most prominent singer-songwriters to emerge from the civil rights movement, and also protested the Vietnam War.

protest, assemble and express their religious beliefs peacefully. One of the earliest American protest songs, *American Taxation* by Peter St. John, was written in this era.

In response to the conditions imposed on them, slaves often sang spirituals, both in the fields and in church. Several of these songs are still sung in Christian churches throughout the United States. Some of them, such as *I Shall Not Be Moved* and *We Shall Overcome*, were later invoked in the civil rights and labor rights movements. Many recording artists across genres have recorded their own versions, including Johnny Cash, Ella Fitzgerald and Joan Baez.

The labor movement changed the lyrics of well-known spirituals and anthems to suit its purposes. The movement reached

For more information:

Battle Hymn of the Republic

<http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200000003/default.html>

Eugene V. Debs

<http://www.eugenevdebs.com/>

Strange Fruit by Billie Holiday

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ZyuULy9zs>

We Shall Overcome by Joan Baez

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkNseH1GD7Q>

its pinnacle in the first half of the 20th century. The Socialist Party put Eugene V. Debs on the ballot for president five times between 1900 and 1920. Debs was involved in the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World, an organization meant to represent the interests of laborers in capitalist countries. On behalf of the organization, Ralph Chaplin wrote *Solidarity Forever* to the tune of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, a famous anthem of the Civil War. The final line of the chorus, “*For the Union makes us strong!*” was meant to motivate laborers and form a unified front to managers and corporations. Folk musicians such as Woody Guthrie sang *Solidarity Forever* and other songs urging workers to organize, join unions and assert their rights. The line between politics and art was blurred, and the link between the two continues today.

The civil rights movement was, of course, a key turning point in U.S. history. The leaders of the movement repeated the words of abolitionists and freed slaves such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. Likewise, the musicians of the era invoked the spirituals sung in the days of slavery, as well as popular genres such as jazz, blues and folk.

In 1939, jazz singer Billie Holiday

recorded a painfully disturbing song, *Strange Fruit*. Written originally as a poem by Lewis Allen, the pen name of a Jewish high school teacher in New York, this song describes an eerie pastoral scene after a lynching, “*Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*” In the 20th century, the American South passed from staunch segregationist laws through the challenging gauntlet of integration. After Holiday recorded the song, her label, Columbia Records, refused to release it, fearing the reaction from Southern listeners. Commodore Records offered to do what Columbia would not, and after securing a rare one-session release from her contract with Columbia, Holiday recorded the most famous version of this troubling song. Many artists in the 1950s and beyond would later reference Holiday’s version of *Strange Fruit* as a powerful influence in crafting their music and their message.

Baez and Bob Dylan are the two most prominent singer-songwriters to emerge from the civil rights movement. Like many of their contemporaries, they also protested against the Vietnam War. Baez’s father was Mexican; because of this she encountered significant discrimination in her youth. She often sang out to the Hispanic community, including a Spanish version of the spiritual *We Shall Not Be Moved, No Nos Moveran*. Dylan’s prolific oeuvre was performed by many artists of the civil rights era and beyond, including folk and rock and roll musicians.

The turbulence of the late 1960s marked

Jazz singer Billie Holiday’s soulful rendition of *Strange Fruit*, about the lynching of black Americans in the South, had a powerful influence on other musicians.



CARL VAN VECHTEN/Courtesy Library of Congress



Courtesy Wikipedia

Folk musician Woody Guthrie, who sang *Solidarity Forever*, urged workers to assert their rights.

a significant change in U.S. culture. Protest music turned from folk to more assertive styles such as funk, hip-hop and punk. Hip-hop evolved in New York City’s South Bronx borough in the 1970s and hit widespread radio play in the 1980s. Hip-hop was, contrary to popular belief, not inherently countercultural or angry in its origins. It was originally the product of disc jockeys and masters of ceremonies ad-libbing comments and rhyming commentary as they played music in clubs. It

was mixed with the aggressive style of breakdancing and the subversive art of graffiti. As hip-hop evolved, it gave voice to the traumatic experiences of its audience: police brutality, poor housing, gang violence, poor education and discrimination. Today, many hip-hop artists continue to address the concerns of the urban poor and their most political work receives significant airplay on popular radio stations.

As hip-hop was surfacing, so was punk. Punk is inherently a counterculture, a response to mainstream culture, or “The Establishment.” Unlike hip-hop, which evolved as its own culture in the South Bronx before spreading throughout New York City and beyond, punk was deliberately deconstructionist from its inception. The music is a strong example of the punk culture: rapid, chaotic and angry. Contemporary groups like Green Day are examples of punk bands that have long made albums full of political and social criticism.

Throughout U.S. history there has been a convergence of musical genre and social and political movements. Popular artists such as Bruce Springsteen, the Dixie Chicks, and Prince have all recorded music

Bruce Springsteen sings *Born in the U.S.A.* during a concert in Los Angeles, California in 1985. The song has become an anthem for political movements of the left, right and center.



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