

# The Music of Protest

NOAH MASS / MAY 18, 2003

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## Introduction

In this unit students analyze popular music as statements of social, cultural, political, and economic protest. They begin with an exploration of the meaning of protest, both in their lives and in the larger society, and how individual protest becomes a protest movement encompassing a group consciousness. By researching a protest issue, picking apart the elements of protest from selected works of art, and crafting their own artistic protest, students initiate a personal dialogue with their social world, manipulating and critiquing that world so they can more fully understand their place in it. This, in turn, gives them the knowledge and agency to effect change. The unit also scaffolds the analysis of text for meaning and purpose, the consideration of artist and audience perspective, and the translation of abstract knowledge into unique, personal art.

## Minnesota Graduation Standards

Arts and Literature: Creation and Performance: Dance/Music/Visual Arts/Creative Writing/Theater/Media Arts (students must choose one item from this list) A. demonstrates elements and skills of selected art form. B. demonstrates artistic decisions to communicate intent. C. demonstrates a sense of an artistic whole. D. demonstrates a consideration of audience.

Arts and Literature: Analysis and Interpretation: Music and Literature A. describing the elements and structure of music and literature; the artistic intent; and the historical, cultural, and social background. B. applying specific critical criteria to interpret and analyze music and literature. C. describing how particular effects are produced by the artist's use of the elements of music and literature. D. communicating an informed interpretation using the vocabulary of music and literature.

## Unit Objectives

Students will consider the meaning and function of protest. Students will make thematic and formal connections between diverse works of art. Students will analyze music and lyrics for meaning. Students will research a protest issue. Students will create and present their own protest art. Students will consider the history of American protest through music. Students will relate the issue of protest to their own lives.

## Final Project

The final project consists of two parts. First, students will write a two-page essay about their protest issue that explores the problem, its historical antecedents and modern/future consequences, and proposed solutions. Second, students will create an original work of art—visual, aural, written etc.—that could be used to rally support for their issue.

## Materials

### Music

Cooke, Sam, "A Change is Gonna Come"  
Dylan, Bob, "Dear Landlord"  
Hendrix, Jimi, "The Star-Spangled Banner"  
Holliday, Billie, "Strange Fruit"  
Love, "Signed D.C."

Public Enemy, "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos"  
U2, "Sunday Bloody Sunday"

### **Books & Articles**

King Jr., Martin Luther, Letter from a Birmingham Jail  
Margolick, David, Strange Fruit  
Staples, Brent, "Corporate Radio Kills the Protest Music"

### **Movies**

Gimme Shelter  
Woodstock: The Movie

### **Websites**

[www.emplive.com](http://www.emplive.com)  
[www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2](http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2)  
[www.geocities.com/~music-festival](http://www.geocities.com/~music-festival)  
[www.progress.org](http://www.progress.org) [www.protest.net](http://www.protest.net)  
[www.rockhall.com](http://www.rockhall.com)

## **Chronology of Activities**

### ***Day One: What is Protest?***

To introduce the notion of protest, I will ask the students to free-write for five minutes about one rule (family, school, society/culture) or law that they believe is unjust and/or illegitimate, why they consider it so, and how they would amend it. Students will then share their responses with each other in small groups. When the class reconvenes, we will discuss how individual protest becomes a larger protest movement. How is it that individuals acquire a group consciousness? What do they rally around? At this point I will hand out selections from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from a Birmingham Jail. Students will once again break up into groups and each group will receive a short selection from the text. For example:

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling, for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.

Students will be expected to summarize their excerpt for the entire class, discussing how it positions the reader (protester, witness, bystander, perpetrator?) and what its particular purpose might be. What does it advocate? Why did King address it as an open letter to the community? To finish this phase of the lesson, I will ask each group to write a letter to their own community addressing one issue that they wrote about in their free-writes.

Before class ends, we will listen to two protest songs loosely framed as letters: "Dear Landlord" by Bob Dylan and "Signed D.C." by Love. The lyrics will be projected onto the board, so the students can follow along. The students will be asked to consider how each song thematically and formally relates to Dr. King's letter. What connections can be made between the three texts? How might one map their similarities?

For homework students should read all of Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail.

### ***Day Two: The Music of Protest***

To start class we will listen to Jimi Hendrix's version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" from Woodstock. How can music, aside from lyrical content, be a form of protest? Is Hendrix making a protest statement? If so, how? What aspects of the song suggest a countercultural attitude? What associations might people in 1967 have made between this piece of music and their world? If someone made the same sort of gesture today, what associations might we make in response? After a full-class discussion of these issues, we will watch footage of Hendrix performing the song (from *Woodstock: The Movie*). How have our perceptions of the song changed now that we've seen actual pictures of the event? In small groups I will ask the students to brainstorm adjectives they could use to describe Hendrix, his song, and the atmosphere on stage and in the crowd at Woodstock that day. Students will then individually read a short article about Woodstock and first-hand reminiscences of the concert from The Music Festival Home Page at [www.geocities.com/~music-festival](http://www.geocities.com/~music-festival).

To demonstrate that the music of protest, although certainly associated with the 1960s, transcends time and place, I will play two song selections from different U.S. historical periods. First we will listen to "Strange Fruit" as recorded by Billie Holliday. This song vividly recalls the lynching of a black man in the American South: Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood on the root / Black body swinging in the Southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees. Playing the song again, I will ask students to write down the most resonant images and draw any pictures (abstract or concrete) that come to mind as they listen. They will then free-write responses to the song and discuss them in pairs. For the second song I will play "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos" by the rap group Public Enemy: I got a letter from the government / the other day / I opened and read it / It said they were suckers / They wanted me for their army or whatever / Picture me given' a damn—I said never / Here is a land that never gave a damn about a brother like me . . ." The speaker of this song fantasizes from his jail cell about a prison riot, a depiction of violent liberation. Students will be asked to consider this song as a protest document. How does the song make you feel? How might it make someone of a different ethnic group (African-American, for instance, or Asian-American) feel? Is it dangerous? If so, to whom? How might it relate to Dr. King's letter, and very specifically, to his notion of creating and maintaining "tension" as a nonviolent protest technique?

For homework, students will read a short excerpt from *Strange Fruit*: Billie Holliday, *Cafe Society*, and an *Early Cry for Civil Rights* by David Margolick. They will also be responsible for presenting a personal protest issue at the end of the next class.

### ***Day Three: Protest Research***

Students will have most of this period to conduct online research related to a specific protest issue that he or she finds personally relevant. We will meet in the media center for this purpose. Students will be prompted to begin their research at [www.protest.net](http://www.protest.net), an internet clearinghouse for protest issues; however, I will also advise my students that they may choose any issue and need not focus on a political concern. Sample issues on the website include Animal Rights, Civil Rights, Death Penalty, Environment, Fascism, Immigration, Globalization, Poverty, Sexuality, and the Third World.

At this point I will introduce the final project for the unit. The project consists of two parts. First, students will write a two-page essay about their protest issue that explores the problem, its historical antecedents and modern/future consequences, and proposed solutions. Second, students will create a unique and personal work of art—visual, aural, written etc.—that could be used to rally support for their issue. On Day Four of the unit, students will be expected to submit their issue choice. Overnight I will confirm or deny choices based solely on their relevance to what we are studying. On Day Five students will be

expected to submit their choice of medium for the work of art. This too will be subject to my approval. The project will be due on the last day, Day Ten, of the unit.

Near the end of class, we will go around the room and each student will present a short synopsis of their protest issue and what they learned about it so far. If anyone shares a topic, they have the option of combining their talents and writing a four-page paper and creating a more substantial work of art. Groups, however, may be no larger than a pair.

### ***Day Four: Make Your Own Protest Song***

To begin class we will listen to “Sunday Bloody Sunday” by U2. Then students will get into groups and read the poem aloud to each other. How should it be read? What is the tone? How does the music set the tone? If we disregard the music, how do the lyrics by themselves set the tone? Each group will present a dramatic reading to the class. Going back to the text, students will annotate the text, noting the associations conjured by each image. How do they relate to a protest theme? How do we know this is a protest song? Finally, students will be asked to consider how and if the song might be improved, and also, how it might be changed to reflect different circumstances. Imagine the song was still a rough draft—how might you edit it? Written about Northern Ireland, how might you rewrite the song to reflect the particular history of the United States? What events could we relate to it?

As a companion activity, each group will receive one piece from “A Change is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke. The entire song, a civil rights anthem with religious overtones, reads as follows:

I was born by the river in a little tent  
And just like the river, I've been running ever since  
It's been a long time coming  
But I know a change is gonna come  
It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die  
I don't know what's up there beyond the sky  
It's been a long time coming  
But I know a change is gonna come  
I go to the movie, and I go downtown  
Somebody keep telling me “Don't hang around”  
It's been a long time coming  
But I know a change is gonna come  
Then I go to my brother and I say, “Brother, help me please”  
But he winds up knocking me back down on my knees  
There've been times that I've thought I couldn't last for long  
But now I think I'm able to carry on  
It's been a long time coming  
But I know a change is gonna come

Based on their excerpt, each group will write the full lyrics for a protest song. It can be either related to a particular issue or general in tone. It should incorporate the excerpt and remain true to its spirit, however the group decides to interpret that spirit. Groups will read their lyrics to the class. I will then pass out the true lyrics to the song. Each student will free-write about his or her expectations based on their excerpt and how the song did or did not fulfill those expectations. Finally, we will listen to the Sam Cooke recording.

For homework students will prepare their proposals for a work of protest art.

### ***Day Five: Gimme Shelter***

For this class period we will watch excerpts from “Gimme Shelter” by the Maysles brothers. “Gimme Shelter” is a documentary about the Rolling Stones’ 1969 concert tour, focusing primarily on the disastrous free concert at Altamont Speedway, during which the Hells Angels, hired as cheap security, drunk and stoned and out of control, murdered one concertgoer and injured many others. In addition, the lead singer of Jefferson Airplane, Marty Balin, was assaulted by a biker. Altamont is commonly viewed as the anti-Woodstock—a music event associated not with peace and love, but rather with debauchery and license—and therefore provides an appropriate antidote to the idealism of Jimi Hendrix’s performance viewed on Day Two. “Gimme Shelter” shows how the nature and meaning of protest music (for example, Jefferson Airplane’s “Volunteers,” or more complexly, the Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy for the Devil”), is negotiated between artist and audience. It provides a graphic demonstration of what happens when an audience chooses not to accept or does not understand the artist’s intended meaning. At Altamont, protest music became just another reason to party.

After viewing selected scenes from the movie, students will break up into groups and brainstorm reasons why the concert went awry. How much control does anyone have over the meaning of their art?

For Day Six students will prepare a short presentation on one protest song that means something to them. They will play a portion of the song and talk about its relevance to their life. The one requirement for the assignment is that each student must talk about how the song qualifies as a protest.

### ***Day Six: Protest Song Presentations***

Students will share their favorite protest songs with the class, so that, at the end of the unit, each student will have a musical bibliography related to the topic. I will compile a master list and hand it out on Day Ten.

### ***Day Seven: History in Song***

Today class will meet in the computer lab, so that students can conduct research on the internet. Using three websites, History in Song at [www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2](http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2), The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at [www.rockhall.com](http://www.rockhall.com), and the Experience Music Project at [www.emplive.com](http://www.emplive.com), students will explore the history of American popular music and the way that American popular music has embodied aspects of history. Students will answer questions such as the following: Find a song that addresses the life of a prisoner. How is it described? Does the song have a political message? If so, what is that message, and how is it communicated? What emotions does the song convey about prison life? Read the biography of one early blues musician. How was he or she shaped and/or affected by the historical period in which he or she lived? Was he or she treated fairly by his or her time and by history? How did his or her music reflect historical circumstances? Pick one social/cultural event in American history and annotate the songs that grew out of that moment. Were they similar in tone and perspective or did they vary? How did they interpret the event? How accurately did they paint the event for the listener? Protest is alive and well in America! Find one post-1990 example of protest music. Was it popular? To what genre does it belong? What modern-day protest issues are most prevalent in music? Listen to a RealAudio interview with a musician. What does he or she say about politics and the political/social/cultural content of his or her work? Do you think the musician places political considerations before artistic ones—and is this an effective way to be an artist? Does it make for good art? Why or why not?

### ***Day Eight: Project Workday***

At the beginning of class, students will meet in small groups to present their research from the previous day. Afterwards they will have the remainder of the period to build their projects. Students may meet with

each other to discuss a shared issue or provide feedback on their essay or work of art. I will circulate around the room and meet with whoever needs assistance. Those students who want to use a computer, either to word-process or conduct web research, will be allowed to access the resource room or media lab. I will remind students that their works of art must be ready for presentation in two days—on Day Ten, the final day of the unit.

### *Day Nine: Protest and Free Speech*

Students will first read a short essay about “message music” and social protest, written by Andrew Rosenthal and posted to his website at [people.cornell.edu/pages/ajr32](http://people.cornell.edu/pages/ajr32), that begins as follows:

For many years, popular music has been a forum for free speech. Ideas that might normally be censored by other media can be expressed through the subtle art of pop-rock music. Although the process of using songs as social protest took some time to gain popularity, the songs that were produced contain a great deal of emotion and important meaning, which can be delivered to the listener through a variety of components. Among them are the beat, the instruments, and, of course the lyrics. The song is then used to enlighten its audience as to what the writer feels is a problem in society.

This essay will be juxtaposed with an article by Brent Staples called “Corporate Radio Kills the Protest Music,” available online at [www.progress.org](http://www.progress.org). Staples argues that corporate control and consolidation of the airwaves has also consolidated the message that “radio-friendly” songs may communicate to listeners, limiting the range of topics deemed acceptable by the hitmakers. For example:

Pop music played a crucial role in America’s debate over the Vietnam War. By the late 1960s, radio stations across the country were crackling with blatantly political songs that became mainstream hits. After the National Guard killed four anti-war demonstrators at Kent State University in Ohio in the spring of 1970, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young recorded “Ohio,” a song about the horror of the event, criticizing President Richard Nixon by name. The song was rushed onto the air while sentiment was still high, and became both an anti-war anthem and a huge moneymaker.

A comparable song about President George W. Bush’s rush to war in Iraq would have no chance today. There are plenty of angry people, many with prime music-buying demographics. But independent radio stations that once would have played edgy, political music have been gobbled up by corporations that control hundreds of stations and have no wish to rock the boat.

After the students have read both articles, they will free-write about their favorite radio stations. What type(s) of music do they play? What period music do they play? What general percentage of the broadcast is music vs. talk/advertisements? How does their particular station rise above all the other competition? What makes it the best? How often do they repeat songs? Is this considered good or bad? Do they think the music is programmed locally or nationally—why? Can they pick out a perspective or viewpoint based on the selection of music?

Next I will turn on the radio, so we can observe and compare different stations. I will toggle between students’ favorite stations—including my own: independent Radio K—soliciting opinions and observations about quality and quantity. Does the music have a political component? If not, is this a political statement as well, and for what? Should radio stations be accountable for their choices? Do they have any responsibility to the society? Should they? Is this a free speech issue at all?

Finally students will meet in groups to design their own “ideal” radio stations, ones that reflect what they want from the medium. They will choose genres, sample playlists, and format. (Is the morning show, for example, talk-based, humorous, or music-only?) In addition they will consider their mission and write an appropriate statement. What are their goals? This activity will prompt them to think about how music is controlled and disseminated through our culture, and how music is a product of consumer and power relationships. Music is not unmediated—it is manufactured and produced, filtered through a series of social, political, and economic decisions.

***Day Ten: Performance and Presentation***

Students will present their works of protest art—songs, poems, paintings, or sculptures, etc.—to the class.