

Protest songs

What is a protest song?

Protest music has been around for centuries and protest songs are usually written to be part of a movement for cultural or political change. Protest songs usually fall into two major categories: political songs which contest the government or culturally focused songs aimed at injustices to marginalised groups. Among social movements that have used such songs are the civil rights movements, the anti-war movement and 1960s **counter-culture**, the feminist movement, the animal rights movement, and environmentalism.

Protest songs in America

Most of the well-known protest songs came from **slaves**, largely with themes of **freedom** or escape. During the American Civil War (1861-1865), the protest song *John Brown's Body* became the **hymn** for slavery abolition. After the Civil War, protest adapted with the music of the early 20th century. Music recording became popular in the 1930s, and the radio helped it to become widespread. The advent of this new technology took protest music into its first stage of "pop", with genres like big band, jazz, and ragtime. The first example was Billie Holiday's 1939 song *Strange Fruit*, which, unlike the protest songs of the Civil War era, was not a chant or a call to arms but a **worrying** commentary on the state of the country, which denounced the **lynching** of Black Americans in the Southern United States at the turn of the 20th century, with lyrics that compared the victims to the fruit of trees. As long as protests have been a civic action in American life, music has been a key component.



Evolution of protest songs

Popular protest music **further** expanded in the post-World War II period and continued to dominate the music scene in the turbulent late 1960s and early '70s. Bob Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind* became the symbol of the civil rights movement of those years. Artists like Joan Baez used music to communicate their ideas to a nation moving towards the Vietnam war (1955-1975).

In the first two decades of the 21st century, punk rock was still a remarkable force and constituted the majority of the protest songs written today. They mainly focused on Black Lives Matter, a known social movement in support of which artists began creating songs against police brutality.

Environmentalism in music is also nothing new, but in the last ten years the climate crisis has become impossible to ignore and is getting more attention from musicians.

counter-culture: *contro-cultura*

freedom: *libertà*

further: *ulteriormente*

hymn: *inno*

lynching: *linciaggio*

slave: *schiaivo*

worrying: *preoccupante*

1  Read the passage and say if the statements are true or false.

1. Protest songs are a recent phenomenon.
2. Protest songs fall into two categories.
3. In America, protests songs had their roots in the fight against slavery.
4. The radio was a useful means to spread protest songs.
5. The song *Strange Fruit* was written during the Civil war.
6. Strange Fruit was about the lynching of American Indians.
7. Protest songs did not make a significant contribution to 1960s music.
8. In the 1960s the United States were involved in the Vietnam War.
9. Today, punk rock music is very often used for protest songs.
10. Environmentalism is not a topic covered in protest songs.

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2  Answer the questions.

1. What social movements have used protest songs?
2. Where do most American protest songs come from?
3. What was the role of the radio?
4. What genres of music were used for protest songs in the 1930s?
5. What are the victims of the lynching compared to in Billie Holiday's song?
6. Why is the song *Blowing in the Wind* famous?
7. Name two famous protest song singers of the 1960's and 1970's.
8. What social movement in America finds support in protest songs today?

3  Complete the sentences.

1. Political songs usually contest the government, while culturally-focused songs
2. During the American Civil War, the protest song *John Brown's Body* became the
3. After the Civil War, protest adapted with the music of
4. The first example of protest songs in the first decades of the 20th century was
5. is getting the attention of musicians in recent years.