

Songs and Singers of Social Protest

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This issue of *MUSICultures* is devoted to Songs and Singers of Social Protest and is inspired by the theme of the “*Songs of Social Protest*” conference held at the University of Limerick, Ireland in 2015. This three-day international conference took as its starting point that popular culture, and music in particular, may reproduce or challenge the cultural/political status quo in contemporary societies across the globe.

Recent years have seen a significant increase in the literature on music and protest. Our approach in this volume is informed by an understanding that sees music as “a discursive practice” that “is situated in particular social relationships and locations that are a product of complex intersections of culture, class, gender etc., in lived experience” (Ballinger 1995: 13, cited in Peddie 2006: xvi). We are concerned with what Turino (2008) has termed “music as social life,” and in particular in understanding music as “a cultural resource in the social construction of emotions” (Juslin and Sloboda 2003: 17; also see Finnegan 2003). Moreover, because of music’s polysemic nature, it has the capacity to mean different things to different people in a variety of contexts, arousing their passions in particular ways. As such it is important to acknowledge (and study) the centrality of music in social movements precisely because “modern social solidarities” are “simultaneously emotional and reasoned” and produce “complex kinds of collective agencies” (Stokes 2012: 35).

Music as social protest is too diffuse to be pigeonholed into a particular genre, location, or time period (Peddie 2006: xvii), though it is clearly “associated with opposition, contestation, revolt and resistance” (Piotrowska 2013: 280). Some scholars consider protest songs as rhetoric to convince the masses (Kizer 1983) or as musical cannons with which to defend the oppressed (Lieberman 1989). We take our lead from Ruth Sanz Sabido, who argues that “when analysing definitions and scholarly debates about protest songs,

it is necessary to contextualize their occurrence in relation to the conditions within which they emerged” (2016: 59). We hold that protest songs and those who sing them identify and contextualize social problems, raise concerns, and provide resolutions to the issues, while also playing a role in ensuring groups develop, perform, and maintain a collective identity and social consciousness (see Danaher forthcoming; Taylor and Whittier 1995; Bernstein 2005; Frith 1996; Rosenthal and Flacks 2016).

Our call for papers for this special issue asked scholars to submit papers that deal with protest songs, singers/songwriters, and live and recorded performances (contemporary and/or historical) that draw inspiration from both vernacular and popular music traditions. Our initial focus was simple: What makes a great protest singer and what might we learn from iconic performers or performances? We asked authors to consider the ways in which we might explore the relationship between songs or singers of social protest and the music traditions of a given place; whether we could map typologies of protest song across space and time, and how we might productively talk about, theorize, and assess the relationship between songs of social protest and social movements. We were interested in how songs of social protest address inequalities of various types, and what “structures of feeling” make a protest song efficacious in a given historical/socio-economic/political moment. Other considerations were whether local protest songs translate or mutate in transnational contexts (and how that intersects with discourses of “authenticity”). Ultimately we wished to determine if a protest song has ever directly effected tangible change? The five articles presented here respond in various ways to these questions.

The first paper in this special edition is by Illa Carrillo Rodríguez. She examines the social construction of singer Mercedes Sosa’s artistic persona following her return from exile to Argentina. Through a close analysis of her February 1982 concerts in Buenos Aires, Carrillo Rodríguez argues that Sosa’s persona was socially effective because it embodied a vaguely attractive type of cultural heritage, a form that facilitated an ahistorical acclamation of communal traditions, in addition to a historically grounded, politicized practice of remembrance.

Martin Power, Aileen Dillane, and Eoin Devereux examine, through a musical, lyrical, and contextual analysis of the Irish recording artist Damien Dempsey’s song “Colony,” contemporary discourses concerning colonialism and postcolonialism. In presenting Dempsey’s work in this way, they interrogate how he uses protest song as a form of social critique. Their reading reveals different levels of meaning, which is in part dependent on a contextual understanding of Ireland and its indigenous singing tradition. Ultimately the

paper argues that the song engages clearly with the complexity of the issues involved in any discussion of postcoloniality.

Geoffroy Colson's article investigates expressions of *Mā'ohi*-ness in the emergence of popular protest music in Tahiti, which he understands as voiced feelings of opposition against social or political injustice, but also as more implicit and "pacific" forms of artistic resistance and opposition to such issues. More broadly, Colson's article utilizes a global framework to guide his analysis of the development of Tahitian protest songs vis-à-vis expressions of *Mā'ohi*-ness.

Jada Watson's article examines singer-songwriter Sarah Harmer's activist campaign to protect the Niagara Escarpment region, and how she uses her musical platform as a vehicle for environmental advocacy. Watson interrogates how Harmer's music and musical practice strongly connected regional identity and local environmental issues, which in turn helped to mobilize the community and bring about significant social change.

Finally, Julie Rickwood's paper considers the context for community choirs in Australia, where environmental concerns essentially inspire philosophical and political interventions to create an inventive form of protest music. Her paper contemporaneously situates two community choirs within the nexus of music and environmental activism.

In conclusion, we hope that this special edition expands upon the existing knowledge and offers new materials for, and new approaches to, contemplating protest songs, in their social, cultural, and political contexts as counter-hegemonic acts and performative deviances. 🌿

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