

THE REVOLUTION WILL BE **HARMONIZED:** SOCIAL PROTEST IN SONG

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Songs have been used as a form of social and political protest since the country's founding. From revolutionary soldiers singing rallying cries against the British government, to Civil War abolitionists repurposing hymns to decry the horrors of slavery, moments of great historical change are fertile ground for musical expression. American protest songs are most closely associated with the anti-war cause, reaching peak popularity during the folk revival of the Vietnam War era, but other social movements have also used music to great effect to spread awareness and bring people together for a purpose. Songs that address racial inequity and police brutality have a particularly rich tradition, one that HYPE MAN embraces and exemplifies when Verb and Peep One release their track, "Justice for Jerrod." Below, explore a few of our favorite songs with potent messages of social justice:

"STRANGE FRUIT"

BILLIE HOLIDAY (1939)

The 1939 song "Strange Fruit," performed most famously by Billie Holiday, was one of the first popular songs to address a social issue without using a call and response structure, or the traditional military cadence of a call to arms. The song's metaphor of a tree loaded with fruit to evoke the image of lynched black bodies is both deeply affecting and more artful than many of the socially conscious songs that came before it. Though it was banned from radio when first released, the song eventually became part of the protest song canon and was called "a declaration of war...the beginning of the civil rights movement." by record producer and co-founder of Atlantic Records, Ahmet Ertegun.

**Southern trees bear a
strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and
blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in
the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from
the poplar trees**

"MISSISSIPPI GODDAM"

NINA SIMONE (1964)

Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" is one of the most well-known anthems of the Civil Rights era, written in response to the murder of Medgar Evers in Mississippi, and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. The song expressed her frustration with the "go slow" ethos of the early desegregation movement, and demanded more action in the face of racial inequality. Once the recording was released as a single, it quickly grew in popularity and she went on to perform the song in front of 10,000 people at the end of the Selma to Montgomery marches.

**Don't tell me, I'll tell you
Me and my people just
about due
I've been there so I know
They keep on saying "Go
slow!"**



"THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED"

GIL SCOTT-HERON (1970)

Poet and singer Gil Scott-Heron's album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* was full of social critique, but "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" is the best known track of the bunch. The song combines spoken word poetry, pop-cultural references, jazz, and popular slogans from the 1960s Black Power movement, and feels like an early precursor to the socially motivated Hip-Hop music that would follow in later decades.

**Green Acres, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Hooterville
Junction will no longer be so Goddamn relevant, and
Women will not care if Dick finally gets down with
Jane on Search for Tomorrow because Black people
Will be in the street looking for a brighter day
The revolution will not be televised**

"THE MESSAGE"

**GRANDMASTER FLASH &
THE FURIOUS FIVE (1982)**

During the early days of Hip-Hop, "The Message" was one of the first commercially successful songs to forgo the block party culture that originated the genre, and instead provide social commentary by rapping about the poverty and discrimination faced by the urban black community.

**Don't push me, 'cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head
It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from going
under**



"FUCK THA POLICE"

N.W.A. (1988)

N.W.A.'s debut album *Straight Outta Compton* is widely recognized as one of the most influential Hip-Hop records of all time, and the track "Fuck Tha Police" is a fiery indictment of police brutality that launched the group into public consciousness. Seen by many mainstream outlets as controversial for seemingly encouraging violence toward police, the song even provoked an F.B.I. agent to write a letter to N.W.A.'s label Priority Records condemning the lyrics.

*Fuck the police! Comin' straight
from the underground
A young n*gga got it bad
'cause I'm brown
And not the other color,
so police think
They have the authority
to kill a minority
Fuck that shit, 'cause I ain't the one
For a punk motherfucker with a badge
and a gun
To be beating on, and thrown in jail
We can go toe-to-toe
in the middle of a cell*

"FIGHT THE POWER"

PUBLIC ENEMY (1989)

Originally conceived by Spike Lee, who was looking for a confrontational, unapologetic song to underscore his film *Do the Right Thing*, Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" has a hook that brings to mind the call and response structure of traditional protest chants, but is layered with samples and loops that create a distinctly modern anthem.

*Got to give us what we want
Gotta give us what we need
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death
We got to fight the powers that be
Lemme hear you say
Fight the power*

"KILLING IN THE NAME OF"

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE (1992)

Rap metal band Rage Against the Machine's music has been politically motivated since their debut, and "Killing in the Name Of" is widely considered to be their signature song. Written as a protest against institutional racism and police brutality, the song's lyrics are spare, but allege that some police officers are also affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan.

*Some of those that work forces,
are the same that burn crosses*

"I FIND IT HARD TO SAY (REBEL)"

LAURYN HILL (2002)

Written in response to the NYC police shooting of Amadou Diallo in 1999, Lauryn Hill first performed "I Find it Hard to Say (Rebel)" during a live taping of MTV Unplugged in 2002. Hill reworked the lyrics and re-released the song in 2016, along with a tweet, saying "Old tune, new Version, same context, even more relevant now: sick and tired of being sick and tired."

*Fret not thyself I say, against these laws of man
Cause like the Bible says: His blood is on their hands
And what I gotta say, and what I gotta say, is rebel
While today is still today, choose well*

"ALRIGHT"

KENDRICK LAMAR (2015)

An unofficial anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement, the chorus of "Alright" has frequently been used as a protest chant during marches and protests. Boosted by an impactful music video, the upbeat song has been a major commercial success, proving that socially aware music can appeal to a wide audience in this current political moment.

*Wouldn't you know
We been hurt, been down before
N*gga, when our pride was low
Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go?"
N*gga, and we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'
N*gga, I'm at the preacher's door
My knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow
But we gon' be alright*

SOURCES

Vox: "The history of American protest music, from 'Yankee Doodle' to Kendrick Lamar"
Billboard: "From Vietnam to Trump: Protest Songs Throughout the Decades"
Esquire: "Why You Shouldn't Trust Indie Rock With Your Protest Music"