

How Does Music Influence Revolution

Do you ever listen to a song and find yourself so deeply moved that you are almost in tears? Have you ever been to a live performance that turned your worst day into your best? Have you ever heard a song that inspired you? Music has the power to make us brave, energetic, happy or sad; it can be a instigator to bring people together and to instill courage and endurance. By inducing emotions, it creates a heightened sense of awareness and mental acuity. Words paired with music are far easier to retain. Have you ever found that you could remember words and meanings of songs that you hadn't heard in year?

Music is an effective, almost magical medium for learning and retaining information because it activates three different areas of the brain at the same time: language, hearing and rhythmic motor control.; it encourages people to move, induces positive moods, increases excitement and the desire to be active.

Music is an important part of popular culture around the world; it entertains us and so is a great platform for discussion on social issues. Concerts are particularly effective because artists have the opportunity to address large crowds. For social ideas to take root, they must be accepted by large numbers of people, and individuals are more likely to accept messages if their peers do. And it is the means by which people can convey important information and ideals to others in the hope that they will truly listen and, as a result, come together and bring about social, political and economic change.

In the word of the Boss, Bruce Springsteen, " The best music is essentially there to provide you something to face the world with."

So, here are a few brief examples of how music influenced revolution

The American Revolution

When the first American soldiers manual was issued to the Continental Army in 1778, it contained a list of beats and signals modeled on those used in European armies. They were utilized for wake up, lights out, roll calls and drills, helped organize the movement of the troops, and even conveyed combat orders to soldiers who were trained to recognize these commands. Soldiers in the 1700s were required to function almost as automans, to obey smoothly and in formation, whatever commands were given by their superiors. With clouds of gun smoke adding to the din of combat, oral commands were not always a reliable means of giving direction to an army. Musically transmitted signals, however, could be heard above the crash of gunfire. The voice of the trumpet and the cadence of the drums were clear and unambiguous, making them vital to command and control. Soldiers would sing songs in trenches or while marching to keep their spirits up. Not only was music used to boost morale, it was also used as a sneaky way of complaining about the war and the conditions they were currently in.

The most popular song that we would be familiar with is "Yankee Doodle Dandy". Originally, this song was sung by the British military officers as a way to mock the sad state of the colonists and their army. The colonists embraced this mockery and it provided them with a sense of camaraderie and patriotism. Washington's men turned the derogatory implications of this song around and used it as a song of defiance and pride. Thus, "Yankee Doodle Dandy" rose to be a song of not just colonial but national acclaim.

The "Liberty Song" was penned by John Dickinson in the hope that this song would inspire people to take real steps toward independence. He wrote, "Then join hand in hand, brave Americans all. By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall."

The French Revolution

During the French revolution of 1789 to 1799, protest songs could be heard not only in the streets, but also in the opera houses, theatres, and ballrooms of Paris. The reigning aristocrats of the time commissioned famous composers like Joseph Haydn to write music for their grandiose public ceremonies, while revolutionary leaders commissioned composers to write operas celebrating revolutionary causes.

Meanwhile, people took to the streets singing popular revolutionary songs like La Marseillaise. In total, almost 3,000 of these songs were written during the French Revolution. La Marseillaise was the most popular of these songs; it became the unofficial anthem of the revolution, and after the abolition of the monarchy, it became the official anthem of the new French republic.

Nueva Cancion

In the 1960s and 70s, Nueva Cancion Chilena (New Chilean Song) was a movement and genre of Chilean music incorporating strong political and social themes, taking influence from the traditional or folk music of Chile. The New Song sought to give a voice to Chile's rural peoples, its working class and their realities.

The Chilean New Song also developed amidst a background of social upheaval taking place throughout Latin America. The Cuban Revolution and the Vietnam War provided inspiration for a growing number of musicians who aligned themselves politically with the socialist struggle. This was the music that ushered Salvador Allende, Chile's first democratically elected socialist leader, into the presidency in 1970 as he greeted crowds under a banner that read, "You can't have a revolution without songs". Three years later, however, Augusto Pinochet seized power in a military coup, and the regime banned the use of many traditional folk instruments in an effort to further suppress the Nueva Cancion movement.

Despite this opposition, the New Song Movement has continued to flourish through the work of artists across South America who use their music to speak out against injustices of all kinds.

The Singing Revolution (Estonia)

Toward the end of the 1980s, while their country was still under the control of the Soviet Union, Estonians voiced their desire for independence in the best way they knew how: by singing.

Under Soviet rule, Estonian national songs and hymns were forbidden, but, as dissatisfaction with foreign rule mounted, people began to sing these songs publicly as an act of defiance. These protests culminated at the "Song of Estonia" festival in 1988, where 300,000 people - over a quarter of the country's entire population - gathered to sing national songs and hear speeches by independence leaders.

The bonds created by communal singing were strong: two years later, when Soviet tanks rolled into the country to destroy radio and TV towers, Estonian citizens formed human shields to drive the tanks away.

On August 20, 1991, thanks in part to this "singing revolution", Estonia gained its independence without any military action.

Songs and the Civil Rights Movement

There is no American social movement of the 20th or 21st century more closely connected to music than the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Music and singing played a critical role in inspiring, mobilizing and giving voice to the civil rights movement. "The freedom songs are playing a strong and vital role in our struggle" said Martin Luther King, Jr. "They give the people new courage and a sense of unity. I think they keep alive a faith, a radiant hope, in the future, particularly in our most trying hours".

"We Shall Overcome", became the unofficial anthem of the movement. Wyatt Tee Walker, executive director of King's Southern Leadership Conference, said, " One cannot describe the vitality and emotion this one song evokes across the Southland. I have heard it sung in great mass meetings with a thousand voices singing as one. I've heard half a dozen sing it softly behind the bars of the Hinds County prison in Mississippi; I've heard old women singing it on their way to work in Albany, Georgia; I've heard the students singing it as they were being dragged away to jail. It generates power that is indescribable." Joan Baez performed it at the 1963 March on Washington; President Lyndon Johnson quoted it in his speech to Congress proposing the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

There are many reasons why this song unified people during the Civil Rights Movement. One is that it's easily singable: the melody isn't difficult to remember and you don't have to be a trained singer to sing it. And the lyrics are so simple and relatable, " Deep in my heart, I do believe we shall over come some day" - there's no overt claim or acknowledgement of religion in these word, which means it can reach people across traditions, ideologies, races, and it can speak so powerfully to the act of seeking justice, any kind of justice.

Songs reflecting the themes of the Civil Rights Movement were not limited to the spiritual or folk genres commonly associated with American protest songs - but could be found in all types of popular music. The Jazz revolution of the 1960s was affected by the Civil Rights Movement. A number of Blues songs compared the oppression of southern blacks in the early 1960s to the racial injustices earlier in the century and before. Many prominent artists made recordings of the most iconic Civil Rights Movement music of the era including:

"A Change is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke

"The Times They Are A-Changin" and "Blowing In The Wind" by Bob Dylan

"People Get Ready" by Curtis Mayfield

"Freedom Highway" by The Staple Singers

"What's Goin' On" by Marvin Gaye"

"I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free" and Mississippi Goddam" by Nina Simone.

Songs that have gospel or spiritual origins were recorded and performed by multiple artists of the era, including: "We Shall Not Be Moved", "Lift Every Voice And Sing", "This Little Light Of Mine", and "Go Tell It On The Mountain".

One of the most famous protest songs of the Jim Crow era was "Strange Fruit" made famous by Billie Holiday. The song depicts the brutal realities of the torturous practice of lynching against African-American people. This topic was shocking for audiences of the time, but in spite of this shock, the song became a hit and Holiday continued to perform "Strange Fruit" for nightclub audiences across the country. Her performance of the song soon caught the attention of the FBI as it grew in popularity. "Strange Fruit" helped many people become aware of the horrors of lynching, and it served as a model for 20th century protest songs to follow.

Music is a powerful tool. It can incite hope. It can incite anger. It can incite a striving for peace. It also can incite a commitment to violence. One example of the Civil Rights Movement is the way activists leveraged music to bring people together rather than divide people or incite violence. They used music to soften the hearts and command the public's attention.

The Role of Classical Music

I would be remiss if I didn't at least attempt to bring the role of classical music into this paper. There is a trope often heard in discussions about culture that classical music is irrelevant - an elite and moribund art form disconnected from contemporary life.

If this trope were true, would Russian soldiers have assassinated a Ukrainian conductor in his home after he refused to conduct a concert celebrating Russia's "improvement of peaceful life"? And if classical music is irrelevant, why would the National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine, which resides in Kyiv, announce a three week tour to Britain - the most extensive in its more than 100 year history? And why would a performance of "Giselle" in London by the United Ukrainian Ballet be praised as a triumph of civilization against the barbarism of Putin's Russian Federation?

Those who believe the trope, then, that classical music has no currency are mistaken. At least the leaders of Russia and Ukraine believe it is very important indeed.

In 1917, the Metropolitan Opera banished the operas of Wagner and Beethoven in the run-up to America's entrance into World War I because the very spirit of the German Hun was thought to be embedded in this music. Unlike the case during World War I, Wagner's works were performed during World War II in America as well as in the Third Reich. Hitler marketed Wagner's operas as the artistic epitome of Nazi Germany. Beethoven was claimed by both the Allied and Axis powers. The opening of his Fifth Symphony became the musical motto of victory over the Germans who had claimed these very same four notes as another example of their superiority.

And when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it was Leonard Bernstein who led a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with choir and orchestra members gathered from East and West Germany as well as from the four allied powers - France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the U.S. In the symphony's final movement, he replaced the word "joy" (Freude) with "peace" (Freiheit), thus transforming it into an overt "Ode To Freedom". It is clear that something very powerful is at work here. It is what the 20th-century composer Charles Ives once described as "in-known" - something that we can sense profoundly even if we can't fully grasp or explain it.

Modern Music Is Continuing This Tradition

Political music peaked in the 1960s but it never went away. As pop music diversified, within each style grew a desire to sing about and listen to music of social change whether that was hip hop, rap, reggae, country or rock.

Luckily, in this despairing era, we are living through a renaissance in protest songs and their creators are more diverse than the Greenwich Village guitar strummers of yesteryear. In both public and private spheres, music can still be our hammer.

In Tahir Square in Cairo in 2011, a guitarist named Ramy Essam led protestors in a song called "Leave", helping to bring down President Hosni Mubarek. For the Women's March in 2017, singers organized a choir online to perform "I Can't Keep Quiet". In December, 2020, a Chilean song protesting rape culture called "A Rapist in Your Path" went viral, sung by protestors around the world.

The killing of George Floyd sparked an unprecedented wave of protest across a nation already on edge from the Covid-19 pandemic. Thousand and thousands of activists took to the streets in hundreds of cities across America. Hip hop is the heartbeat of this movement and as the protests gathered force, a wave of new songs pushing for social justice accompanied them.

Since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v Wade, many have turned to music to express the emotion that has overwhelmed them. One young singer songwriter rewrote some of the words to "My Country Tis Of Thee":

"My Country Tis Of Thee, Land of Inequity

Of Thee I Sing

Land where my mothers cried, fought, bled and sacrificed

For rights which we are now denied

Let Freedom Ring

As Bruce Springsteen sings in his song "Hungry Heart", *You can't start a fire without a spark*". Music often provides that spark and then continues to fan the flame.

Inn this social media age, songs can travel the planet in no time. We will not find people repeating speeches but we can guarantee that there might be millions of people at the same moment singing the same song. As the beloved troubadour, Pete Seeger, wrote in 1955, " We need thousands of new songs these days: songs of humor, to poke fun at some of the damn foolishness going on in the world, songs of love and faith in mankind, songs to needle our conscience and stir our indignation and anger". That spirit is universal and timeless.

I believe that music possesses great power. For the musicians and everyday people who used their voices to combat injustice, the path ahead wasn't always a sure or a safe one, but they kept on playing and singing to fight for what they believed in.

What are the lessons we can draw from this brief survey of history and music. Given the current state of the nation, can music play any role in smoothing out the sharp edge of our disagreements and the tensions of tribalism.

History suggests that it can. There's something about the transporting capacity of music, something about its odd but undeniable ability to create a collective experience that's more likely to open our minds to competing points of view.

Of course, it's neither a narcotic or a panacea, but music can recast the most charged and complicated of voices that may lead to actual conversation rather than reflective confrontation. And if we can hear and feel how others hear and feel, we're better equipped to press onward toward a more perfect union.

Now it is up to us to decide what to do with our voices. Only time will tell how our movement will be remembered and what our soundtrack will be. Even if we are not standing in front of tanks or storming the barricades, we can still be part of a revolution for equality, courage, honesty, compassion, kindness and peace.

So, to help us get started, Julie Donnell and Fred Haigh are going to join me - and all of you - in singing that iconic song, "We Shall Overcome".

We shall overcome

We shall overcome

We shall overcome, some day

Oh, deep in my heart

I do believe

We shall overcome some day.

We'll walk hand in hand

We'll walk hand in hand

We'll walk hand in hand, some day

Oh, deep in my heart

I do believe

We' shall overcome, some day.

We shall live in peace

We shall live in peace

We shall live in peace, some day. Oh, deep in my heart

I do believe

We shall overcome some day.

The whole wide world around

The whole wide world around

The whole wide world around, some day

Oh, deep in my heart

I do believe

We shall overcome, some day.

