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“There is a Power in a Union”: Protest Music as Part of Late 20th Century British Pop Culture

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Abstract:

Great Britain's first female Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has been considered to be one of the most influential women of the past two hundred years. During Thatcher's 1979 to 1990 reign issues such as high unemployment, the Falklands conflict, racial and class tensions, inflation, budget deficits, industrial unrest, and the miners' strike provided inspiration for a collective of angry musicians. The popularity of ideologically-driven protest music increased, encouraging citizens and artists to raise their voices against (the) power. Protest music gave voice to a change in political beliefs and intertwined itself with politics in order to influence society. Protest music gave a voice to the voiceless, and awakened the masses to political matters. In this paper, the endeavour is to become intimate with this “progressive popular entertainment industry” in order to understand post-war Britain's social and political changes.

Keywords: Protest, music, British, politics, popular culture.

Introduction

Music is the fastest means of communication in and among all of the branches of the arts that is inseparable from societal problems and interprets civil unrest. When we consider the overall political role protest music holds, it either encourages people to serve the state or those in power—as is the case with national marches for example, or it invites the masses to display their opposition towards a clearly defined social problem.

Cloonan documents that during the later end of the twentieth century, protest music as part of 1970s/80s British pop culture had become intertwined with the politics of the day and had been the most significant medium in terms of portraying reactive attitudes towards that politics. Following the Vietnam War, protest music had (too) become an important part of North American pop culture as the music itself gained ground, and had focused more on war, racism, human rights, and shifts in life styles. Moreover, many a song from that era are still in vogue today. When music grabbed the attention of as well as sensitized the public to the social and political events of the day, it took on a momentous role. Protest music had called the masses into action—weaving itself into politics in order to influence society (Cloonan: 2007).

Where other forms of music had failed, protest music had succeeded in catching the attention of a public, and had encouraged men to take a stand against them. Upon examining protest music in the past, it is inescapable becoming enlightened about the socio-cultural shifts that had occurred during that era.

Protest music is the outcry of a portion of a population who believes that they are deprived, and can be a means of awakening others to these problems as they become more apparent. In this paper, an attempt is made to become intimate with this “progressive popular entertainment industry” in order to understand post-war Britain’s social and political changes.

Protest Music and Power Relations in British History

Dobson has argued that the tradition of protest songs and verses in British culture has been an ongoing one for centuries. Every movement has had its own marches, starting with The Peasant’s Revolt of the fourteenth century and its famous revolt-directing line “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?”, continuing into the seventeenth century with marches that were against the English Civil War such as “Levellers and Diggers”, and through to the end of the 1954-1975 Vietnam War (Dobson: 1970).

In his book “Levellers and the English Revolution”, Brailsford mentions “Levellers and Diggers” as the clearest political movement to arise from the English Civil War— which had spawned as a consequence of the biased disagreements in political viewpoints as well as physical conflicts between Parliamentarians and Roundheads between 1642 and 1651—and the radical ideas there within. The “Levellers” movement was one of the radical groups that was influential during the first part of the English Civil War. They wanted their reforms by means of revolt and they had the support of public. It’s member-penned “Agreement of the People” manifesto called for social justice, a limit on the king’s authority, reforms, individual rights and freedoms, popular sovereignty, an increase in voting rights, equality before the law, religious tolerance, free trade, and a manner of rule that stood up for the people in place of royalty or parliament. A political party was unable to form and what did form only affected those living in and around the south of London. “Diggers” were radical persons who were more connected with the Protestant faith and who managed to advance as well as stay alive due to how they viewed humanity’s unrestricted relationship the earth and nature. This group, who were the pioneers of modern anarchy and the socialization of agriculture, were the ones who defended the free use of their own land plots, defended the need to remove fences from between properties and allow everyone to freely use the land(Brailsford: 1976).

The musicians of this era produced songs about the social events of the day such as military life, war, and people losing their lives. As can be observed in the Digger’s most important “Diggers’ Song” march, music was created that went against the grain of the era’s political troubles. These groups, following the 1648 English Revolution and the execution of King Charles I, were annihilated together with other enemies of the period:

You noble diggers all stand up now, stand up now

The wasteland to maintain sin, cavaliers by name

Your digging does maintain and persons all defame

Stand up now, stand up now

Your houses they pull down stand up now, stand up now

Your houses they pull down to fright your men in town

But the gentry must come down and the poor shall wear the crown

Stand up now diggers all

Another political song from this period was a “World Turned Upside Down.” This song was re-interpreted into a leading hit by one of the leading British singer-songwriters of the 1970s Leon Rosselson, who had attempted to shed light on the social problems of the 17th century. This song is one about inequality differences between the rich and the poor and that is played at protests to stir crowds:

In 1649, to St. George’s Hill

A ragged band they called the Diggers came to show the people’s will

They defied the landlords, they defied the laws

They were the dispossessed reclaiming what was theirs.

We come in peace, they said, to dig and sow.

We come to work the lands in common and to make the waste ground grow

This earth divided, we will make whole

So it will be a common treasury for all

While the technological advancements of the Industrial revolution at the beginning of the 19th century naturally provided people with a chance at a better life with the reduction in production time, it instead took the labour force into a turn for the worse and threw the living conditions of the working class into the deep end. Ned Ludd who was likened to Robin Hood and remembered as a “General”, is understood to have become a legend during the beginning of the Luddite Rebellions in 1811 in England. This character made an appearance in 1985 through Robert Clavert’s song as well as in the February 15th, 2003 anti-war protest:

They said Ned Ludd was an idiot boy

That all he could do was wreck and destroy, and

He turned to his workmates and said: Death to Machines

They tread on our future and they stamp on our dreams

This character is best portrayed in Chumbawamba’s 1988 protest song of the period “General Ludd’s Triumph”. At the end of the 1970s, the group Sham 69—in trying shed light on the problems faced by a young population—caught people’s attention with the song “If the Kids are United”:

For once in my life I’ve got something to say

I wanna say it now for now is today

A love has been given so why not enjoy
So let's all grab and let's all enjoy
If the kids are united then we'll never be divided
If the kids are united then we'll never be divided

The Relationship between Protest Music and Power towards the Late 20th Century

Throughout the 1960s, rock music was one of the most important forms of music to symbolize the rebellion of protest groups, and in a sense assumed the role of spokesman. In the midst of this period, student demonstrations that had begun in England and stood against all forms of tradition and authority had appeared. Weinstein mentions that protest music, seen as what lead on protest crowds, revamped the public's most important marches and became a medium of expression for the people that were against its authority. Protest music had—at the same time—started to be on a more aggressive frequency (Weinstein, 2006).

During the 1970s, punk music—which was born as a means of expressing angst against a re-adjusted law and order—surfaced at protest gatherings in England. Among these was “God Save the Queen” by the group the Sex Pistols, and was resealed in 1977 during the Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee. The song's lyrics and single cover were the result of the debates of that period. The song had deliberately taken the name of England's national anthem in order to draw attention to youth unemployment, working class problems, and the conditions of poverty-stricken life.

The right wing in power is compared to a fascist regime, and emphasises the state starting to become a force that's above the public in the lyric “God Save the Queen, the fascist regime”. Fascist regimes had put forward that the people should follow one single power for the sake of their country's future. This song was banned throughout England upon its release during Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee. Here, the word “fascist” was an attempt to awaken the English working class, and especially those with limited education, by reminding them about the reality of restricted work opportunities and being limited to working in factories.

The frustration, hate, and spite in and among the public is likened to a bomb because their skills and abilities have been used without permission by the ruling power, and they have been made to act like “morons” who obey the rules as seen in the lyric “They made you a moron, Potential H-bomb”.

According to the lyric “God Save the Queen, She ain't no human being; There is no future, In England's dreaming”, the queen's non-human, stone-like heart emphasized due to her being deaf to the social problems of time, because celebrating the Silver Jubilee during such a time of social unrest had become unacceptable. It reacted to the country being unable to imagine its own future due to the energy problems, revolts, terror, and economic recessions experienced during that period.

A gloomy portrait of reality is painted in the lyric “Don't be told what you want, Don't be told what you need” due to the working class being unable to speak for themselves in light

of the desperation born out of economic problems as well as their utter dependence on the middle and upper classes.

The 1977 song “Career Opportunities” by the group Clash was aimed at criticizing the political and economic environment of the time, the worsening living conditions of youth, and the everyday, run-off-the-mill, low-paying job offers that existed mutually alongside ever increasing unemployment among youth:

They offered me the office, offered me the shop
They said I'd better take anything they'd got
Do you wanna make tea at the BBC?
Do you wanna be, do you really wanna be a cop?
Career opportunities are the ones that never knock
Every job they offer you is to keep you out the dock

Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth mentioned that Great Britain’s first female Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has been considered to be one of the most influential women of the past two hundred years. Issues such as high unemployment, the Falklands conflict, racial and class tensions, inflation, budget deficits, industrial unrest, and the miners' strike provided inspiration for a collective of angry musicians. During Thatcher’s 1979 to 1990 reign, the popularity of *ideologically-driven protest music* increased, encouraging citizens and artists to raise their voices against (the) power (Klimke, Scharloth: 1968).

The song “Ghost Town” by The Specials, was significant in terms of its release the day after the 1981 Handsworth Riots as well as two weeks before the wedding of Princess Diana and Prince Charles. It had succeeded in catching people’s attention about societal dissatisfaction and sharply regressing social-living standards. Even when this song is revisited years later, it depicts a cityscape captured within history, the context within which society lived, increasing unemployment, the state-of-mind of youth, eroding relationships, and social division:

This town (town) is coming like a ghost town
All the clubs have been closed down
This place (town) is coming like a ghost town
Bands won't play no more
Too much fighting on the dance floor
Do you remember the good old days before the ghost town?
We danced and sang, and the music played in a de boomtown
This town (town) is coming like a ghost town
Why must the youth fight against themselves?
Government leaving the youth on the shelf

This place (town) is coming like a ghost town

No job to be found in this country

Can't go on no more

The people getting angry

The song “Ghost Town” by The Specials, as part of protest music, summarized what had existed and what was being lived within a city in terms of culture, society, and politics, and that was able to open the eyes of youth and heighten their sensitivity.

Sometimes, in producing a song about a political figure rather than ongoing troubles is much more effective. Morrissey’s song “Margaret on the Guillotine” most clearly expressed the hate and frustration in sharply criticising the systematic problems and governance of Margaret Thatcher’s reign:

The kind people

Have a wonderful dream

Margaret On The Guillotine

Cause people like you

Make me feel so tired

When will you die?

Costello’s song “Tramp the Dirt Down” was a cumulative response towards governance and governors, and had ended with a wish. What is apparent in these songs was Margaret Thatcher’s ten year reign in power and that no other was able to last this long:

There's one thing I know I'd like to live long enough to savor

That's when they finally put you in the ground

I'll stand on your grave and tramp the dirt down

During the 1980s, singer-songwriter Billy Bragg—who was a voice of socialist thought and who touched on political and social issues through music, didn’t sway away from being completely against and criticising the Thatcher period, was situated within persistent change, and called upon youth to take a stance against that change—brought significant songs to the microphone that were aimed at the problems of the working class.

Protest lyrics are not just a collection of emotionally stirring lines, but rather they are the works of literature. During the Thatcher era, Red Wedge—which was another group fronted by Billy Bragg—had also formed. Bragg’s 1986 album “Talking to the taxman about poetry” became one of that decades most eye-catching works just by its name alone and, one of its songs “There is power in a union” stood as the title of both a track and of a struggle:

There is power in a factory, power in the land

Power in the hands of a worker

But it all amounts to nothing if together we don't stand

There is power in a union

Bragg, who alongside portraying the year-long Miner's Strike in his song "Between the Wars", had at the same time become one of that era's most critical artists against authority. Regardless of whether Bragg is or isn't known or listened to today, his songs are literary pieces from which we can be enlightened about the history, politics, and pop culture of 1980s Britain:

I was a miner, I was a docker
I was a railway man Between the wars
I raised a family In times of austerity
With sweat at the foundry Between the wars
I paid the union and as times got harder
I looked to the government to help the working man
And they brought prosperity down at the armory
We're arming for peace, me boys Between the wars

Protest music is nerve-racking both for musicians and the music industry alike because it can do what other forms of music cannot in terms its influence being twice that of songs selected onto the top of the charts. Where a number of musicians in recent years have been wearing their attitudes against their country's politicians on their shirts, those same artists either don't produce or fail to produce music about those very same people they oppose. On the contrary, similar to Bob Dylan's *Master of War*, protest music with more general-themed content is being written, as is seen in Pete Seeger's "We Shall Overcome":

We shall overcome, some day.
Oh, deep in my heart,
I do believe
We'll walk hand in hand, some day.
We shall live in peace, some day.
We are not afraid, today
The whole wide world around someday

Bob Dylan in his "Masters of War" uses sharp and plain language while attempting to meld together the ethical and humanistic values as well as moral dilemmas of his listeners:

Come you masters of war
You that build all the guns
You that build the death planes
You that build the big bombs

You that hide behind walls

You that hide behind desks

According to Özbek, the word “popular” in contemporary usage has two basic meanings. Where the most prevalent of these two meanings is “[to be] widely liked, consumed”. The word’s second meaning refers to “being of the/belong to the people”, and lends itself more to discussing popular and high culture(Özbek, 2002).

Özbek mentions that the persistence of all “high culture, art” as produced in the name of others without changing anything and without sharing what is available neither goes beyond imprisoning groups for the second time who are thought not to take claim of this, nor beyond spreading butter on the bread of the dominant cultural power. This is because that what we know of as the popular culture of the people is at the same time means for the rich to fool around, campaign and get what they want in order to strengthen their rule. This thus becomes widespread by means of the dominant class weaving their values and thought into “popular” emotions and thoughts as well as neutralizing resistance there within. In turn, this medium which both raises eyebrows as well as contradicts resistance, is a medium with a distorted struggle needing to be won by articulating the socialist agenda” (Özbek, 2002).

The hand-in-hand union of power and music and in ability for one to exist without the other goes unquestioned. Protest music that is radical in nature and written around a specific issue becomes forgotten later on and thus has a shorter life-span. Either that, due to that issue alone, the meaning extracted from that music shouldn’t be one about everybody coming together and spewing the same politics. In this sense, ruling powers that make use of political music can end up falling from grace.

Music has an influence over society and equally stirs mobilization within society as well as within itself. Its strength is a beneficial effort for groups and ruling powers alike. Due to the consumption of music within society, as soon as the music comes under the control of (the) power, the music begins to be as (the) power wishes. Thus, music will continue to remain unable to pose any danger. However, if protest music protects its own essence and doesn’t fall off course, it will be clamped down upon or banned by those in power so it then will cease to exist in the market. Because the individuals are at the core of the variety of music that exists on the market, we find ourselves seeing that music resembles one another. The individual, in believing that music is expressing him/herself in fact, is gravitating towards the music imposed by those in authority. What results from this is that both music and the individual end up going down the path steered by the system. It is also intriguing that the ruling power stands closer to that popular culture just to influence the groups if needed. Protest music, more often than not, is mistaken with being associated with youth, left-wing politics, and their sympathizers. At the end of the 1960s, John Lennon was found at the forefront of radical political demonstrations with stance against war, and used his music to address a number of social issues.

For example, his 1971-penned song “Imagine” has been influential across all anti-war demonstrations and left-wing politics from the time it was released up until the present day. This song is considered to be the single most important anti-war stance of its day to attract international attention. Around the time of its initial release, it had moved other artists who too were against war and violence:

Imagine there’s no Heaven
It’s easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people, Living for today

The same song had been used in 1987 by right-wing politician Margaret Thatcher, and had been converted into a symbol of struggle and had been adapted for a new political context within the milieu of historicity of that era. This example reminds of that the political music and discourse of an era is not limited to that era and its geography alone:

Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace

In 1970, Jimmy Cliff, who had started off his career as a Reggae musician and who believed in protest music’s ability to spark change, was one of the most important of protest musicians—together with this song “You Can Get It If You Really Want”. One again, the song was used by British Prime Minister and Conservative Party leader David Cameron during his election campaigns:

You can get it if you really want
But you must try, try and try
Try and try, you’ll succeed at last
Persecution you must bear
Win or lose you’ve got to get your share
Got your mind set on a dream
You can get it, though harder them seem now

Conclusion

Protest music is an attempt by musicians who are dissatisfied with the socio-economic and socio-cultural problems that exist within society towards addressing those problems. Despite differences in culture, history, and socio-economic structure among people, it is identifiably the most important of the arts in terms of its voicing the thoughts and experiences of especially the lower versus upper class struggle.

Protest music, in addition to being a response to a local problem, can also help us head towards a universal solution. It pushes more intellectual types of music to the wayside and represents the real state of and the problems faced by the public in the street language of the public.

Protest music is not just a type of music or just notes on a page. Thinking about protest music in this manner shows what is implied within it and the reality that we need to see into the background. What makes protest music influential and what is intended to reach listeners is hidden within song lyrics. What is important is the artist interpreting her/his thoughts.

Protest music of the past and present can act as a guide in responding to an era's problems when they are worked on and examined together with youth within the appropriate social context, and when the power of its lyrics and verse are analysed within the sense of social change.

The musician possesses an attitude whereby she/he feels a sense of responsibility towards an issue, responding to that issue, and attempting to lead the path towards change. The writing of lyrics is the musician's demonstration of the mountain of social problems being living through. This means that in attempting to have listeners understand this, she/he is reaching her/his intended goal. The platform for the public to organize into groups also forms around protest music.

One of the key qualities found within British society is its spirit of protest. Not only is this spirit demonstrated in groups forming and taking to the streets, it at the same time shows itself within the messages woven into various kinds of music.

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