

Songs of Protest: Seneca Falls to Vietnam

/prō'test/

publicly demonstrate strong objection to a policy or course of action adopted by those in authority.

Much of the power of our Freedom Movement in the United States has come from this music. It has strengthened us with its sweet rhythms when courage began to fail. It has calmed us with its rich harmonies when spirits were down.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Music has played an essential role in the history of the world. It is not unique to one society or culture or geographic region. It is an instrument of worship, of praise; it is a call to war; it glorifies triumphs; it laments loss. Music soothes, it entertains, it impacts; it provides emotional and intellectual stimulation.

Music is used to celebrate; it is used to mourn. For thousands of years, music has reflected a society's ideals and beliefs. And music has served as a call to action; a powerful agent of change. Women did not receive the vote until 134 years after the Constitution was signed. Songs such as "The Suffragist March" and "She's Good Enough to be Your Baby's Mother" helped to tell that story and rally women to the cause. Slavery was not abolished until 1865. "Follow the Drinking Gourd" and "Go Down Moses" were part of the Underground Railroad and abolition movement. Although African Americans legally had the right vote, they continued to face severe discrimination through the denial of the vote, jobs, and equal education. Songs such as "We Shall Overcome" and "A Change is Gonna Come" scored the Civil Rights Movement. The Vietnam War divided a nation and revolutionized music in the 1960s. "Blowing in the Wind" and "I Ain't No Fortunate Son" are just a couple of examples of the hundreds of protest songs written during this time. Each of these songs had emotional and intellectual impact at a time when people questioned essential issues such as freedom, universal suffrage, equality, and war. Music was a means to question and protest inequality for groups that had largely been marginalized in history. Music became a voice for activism. Music instilled a sense of community; of working with others to change and to improve. And, in the case of Vietnam, music was the soundtrack for a divided nation.

For thousands of years, music has reflected a society's ideals and beliefs and has often served as a call to action; a powerful agent of change. In the United States, the Suffrage Movement was one of the first to employ music as a persuasive tool; both for and against enfranchising women.

Short Description

In this lesson, students will explore how or if music reflects society and furthers the goals of activism and protest. By listening to and reading lyrics from songs that defined protest and activism for change in American history, students will discuss and categorize commonalities in the songs written for a cause.

Last, students will compare a 21st protest song to the goals and the protest songs of the Suffrage Movement, Abolition movement, the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War protests and address how music informs, educates, inspires, recruits or helps shape protest.

Query: *Does music have the power to influence societal attitudes and promote change?*

Time: Two – three periods; assigning review of songs as homework is optional.

Grades 8-12

Objectives

- Students will discuss evidence and construct arguments addressing the use of music to inform or support protest. Using research, they will identify commonalities and differences in the use and/or impact of music on protest.
- Students will analyze and define lyrics in relation to protest of different eras.
- Students will consider how or if protest music helped to break barriers or provide the momentum for change in society by addressing the question: **Does music have the power to influence societal attitudes and promote change?**

Prerequisites: Familiarity with key movements for voting and civil rights in US history and the use of music as an instrument of protest. Given the breadth of this topic, a sampling of music and articles focusing on the songs that helped to define protest movements and eras of history is provided.

Articles ([link](#)).

Materials

- Access to YouTube to listen to protest songs
- [Brief Overview of Protest Songs](#)
- [Analyzing Protest Music graphic organizer](#)
- [Unpacking the Box graphic organizer: Commonalities of Protest](#)
- [21st Century Protest: Student's Choice graphic organizer](#)

Procedures

Before beginning the activities, ask your students “**what defines protest?**” List all of the student’s ideas and comments. Next, ask them how those ideas can be invoked through music. How can music define the ideas and emotions of political and social unrest and protest? Ask students to consider the impact of 20th century technology on protest. The Suffrage and Abolition movements, unlike the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War protests did not have a soundtrack sold in record stores or heard on the radio—music that came to epitomize a decade or era.

Ask students to consider: How might 75 years of peaceful activism that characterized the Suffrage Movement influenced future protest movements?

It is recommended that you listen to the selected songs as a class if possible. Discuss with your students that these songs are only representative of the protest songs of each era. As they listen, ask the students to write down what they think is the key message or idea of each song. Compare ideas and impressions as a class.

Ask: Which songs had an emotional impact? Why? Are there common messages or ideas?

- Suffrage Movement: [“The March of Women”](#)
 - The March of Women was an English suffrage anthem written in 1910 and quickly embraced by American suffragists. *Note:* Unlike popular spirituals from the 19th century and songs of the Civil War, very few Suffrage songs were recorded or revived. This is 21st century video presents a well-known anthem.
- Civil War/Abolition: [“Follow the Drinking Gourd” sung by Richie Havens](#)
 - Follow the Drinking Gourd is reported to have been used as part of the Underground Railroad to help provide directions on escape. In the 19th century, anti-slavery songs were also published by a growing number of Anti-Slavery societies.
- Civil Rights: [“A Change is Gonna Come” by Sam Cooke](#)
 - Written by Sam Cooke in 1964, after he and his band were turned away from a “whites only” hotel, this song quickly became one of the anthems of the Civil Rights Movement.
- Vietnam: [“I Ain’t No Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival](#)
 - Written by John Fogarty, lead singer of Creedence Clearwater Revival, the song reflects Fogarty’s feeling after being drafted into the Army in the Vietnam era where exemptions for sons of wealthy or politically connected men were common.

Activity Two: Defining Protest Music

Divide Students into Groups of Four. Each group will assign one team member to research and provide feedback on:

- Music of the Suffrage Movement
- Music of the Abolition Movement
- Music of the Civil Rights Movement
- Music of the Vietnam War era

Allow several days for students to do the research before the class discussion. Students should use the [Brief Overview of Protest Music and the “Further Reading” section](#) to research their time period and are encouraged to expand their research. Each student must **provide a minimum of two examples** of protest music from the era assigned to them.

- Students researching the Suffrage and Abolition movements should include at least two examples of sheet music, from the suggested resources, which provide a visual link to 19th and early 20th century perspectives.

Two graphic organizers are provided to help students break down and analyze the songs they have selected:

[Analyzing Protest Music graphic organizer](#) can be used by students as they select and review the music from the era assigned to them.

[Unpacking the Box: Commonalities of Protest](#) should be used by each group as they compare and contrast the music from each period.

Encourage the groups to be creative in their read out. They might consider a short video, a power point show or a blog to provide their ideas and assessment and to engage their classmates in the protest music they have researched.

1. Are the songs successful mechanisms of protest? They should compare with the class definition of successful protest.
2. As a group, they should discuss which songs they believe demonstrate music as a successful and unsuccessful protest mechanism and explain why.
3. What are the commonalities of protest over two centuries that these songs reveal? How do songs impact individuals and society on an emotional and intellectual level?
4. Last, discuss differences in interpretation between each group. What are possible reasons? Discuss the fact that music, intellectual, and emotional connections are subjective. How can that impact protest?

Conclusion

Ask the students to create an Exit Ticket. They will answer the question **Does music have the power to influence societal attitudes and promote change?**

In answering the question, students will assess the societal impact and legacy of music as protest and use example(s) from the era they were assigned.

Assessment/Homework

Students will complete the [Student's Choice Activity using the graphic organizer](#) provided. Using information and ideas gained from the discussion and analysis of protest movements and songs in American history; they will select and analyze a 21st century protest song.

Future Research/Resources

Have students read "[Songs of War: The Evolution of Protest Music in the United States](#)" and compare it to the class discussion and projects. Would they add anything to their projects or assessment?

Standards

- D2.Soc.16.9-12. Interpret the effects of inequality on groups and individuals.
 - D2.Soc.17.9-12. Analyze why the distribution of power and inequalities can result in conflict.
- D4.3.6-8. Present adaptations of arguments and explanations on topics of interest to others to reach audiences and venues outside the classroom using print and oral technologies (e.g., posters, essays,

letters, debates, speeches, reports, and maps) and digital technologies (e.g., Internet, social media, and digital documentary).

D4.1.9-12. Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.2

Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.

CCSELA Literacy RL7.1: Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSELA Literacy RL7.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.

CCSELA.Literacy.WHST.6-8:1F: Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A

Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.B

Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C

Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.D

Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

CSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.2

Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.5

Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.