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Claremont Mckenna College

**The Decline of Contemporary Protest Music: A Textual Analysis of Political Protest Music
During the Bush, Obama, and Trump Presidencies**

**Submitted to
Professor Jon Shields**

**By
Anthony Madubonwu**

**For
Senior Thesis
Summer 2022
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To my friends, I am so grateful for the pleasure of meeting so many of you during my time here and creating music, clubs, and memories that I know will stay with me for the rest of my life. I am fortunate to have met so many great people, and I have grand visions for these next few years as we enter a new stage of our lives.

Abstract

Throughout the late 20th century, protest music was a pivotal tool for musicians in the United States to galvanize public support for different socio-political causes. Protest music has existed for years: when people are dissatisfied with the status quo, they compose songs about it. These songs are generally written to be part of a social or ideological change movement, and to rile up that movement by bringing people together, empowering them to act or reflect. This thesis argues that we have seen a decline in contemporary protest music that is political in nature. When reviewing the last three presidencies of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump and juxtaposing tracks of this era with newer ones, I believe it becomes apparent that contemporary political protest music is experiencing a decline both in the propensity of its production and in the commercial success such tracks garner. While this decline began with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, it accelerated at the turn of the century. This comes despite the increased adoption of several media technologies like social media that have assisted in the virality and diffusion of contemporary songs that evoke themes of prior protest music and the vast array of pertinent social issues for musicians to use as subject matter. Some of this subject matter has been harnessed by other groups in the entertainment sphere, like Hollywood directors and professional athletes, to display their views to broad nationwide audiences. Comparatively, musicians have not kept up with diffusing protest sentiment into the mainstream. This decline also coincided with the breakdown of unified and prolonged public protest movements in America as the Cold War concluded and the United State's status as the predominant global superpower became increasingly unquestioned. Contemporary protest movements like the Women's March often arise as fragmented offshoots responding to specific cultural triggers like the election of Donald Trump.

The Decline of Contemporary Protest Music

Throughout the late 20th century, protest music was a key tool for musicians in the United States to galvanize public support for different socio-political causes. Artists ranging the musical spectrum from Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, Simon, and Garfunkel utilized the power of music to represent the desires of unheard constituencies in the public sphere. The songs often relate different cohort effects experienced as a result of the social conditions faced by members of their respective generations. As a result, evolutions in protest music's nature and artistic components can be observed when analyzed throughout American history. These evolutions often reflect the changing social dynamics of the time between different cohort members, like the shifting interactions between race and class as the Civil War concluded.

Protest songs frequently lean liberal and fall into two broad categories: politically divisive, pertinent songs criticizing the government, and culturally centered songs addressing injustices faced by minority groups. This broad classification allows songwriters to be creative — songs can indeed be calm and disquieting, jubilant and tickling, or simple and appealing. Even when there is no significant social or ideological shift, musicians can make a contribution to the classics with daring songs about a wide variety of issues.

I believe that we have seen a decline in contemporary protest music that is political. There could be several reasons for this, from monetary incentives for non-political themes to a decreased desire to listen to such songs from the mainstream public. While I believe we see the reverberations of a decline in contemporary protest music throughout society in a larger age of decadence, there still are some songs that break through to mainstream success while still responding to different cohort effects. However, these songs are in the minority of those that succeed on the charts in modern times. Prominent artists across various genres, from Drake to

Taylor Swift, often shy away from contentious political topics, leaving protest music to be covered less by major publications and relegated to more niche playlist categories.

Age, Chort, and Period Effects

Sociological researchers investigating human development and social trends often challenge disentangling the web of effects that lead to larger societal changes. In these analyses, scientists often note that the causes for change may fall into three major categories. The first type of change is due to age effects that tend to reflect physiological changes in individuals. There are also secular changes that involve social and environmental forces related to the passage of time. Lastly, there is a change relating to greater cohort effects, the macro conditions that birth cohorts experience over a lifespan. While the effects frequently interact, they can contribute independently to change. In some analyses, researchers may ignore one effect while focusing on the other two.

Defining Protest Music

While this paper focuses on protest music from the 1950s to the modern day, music speaking against the political status quo has been around for centuries. Because music genres, human emotions, and the gamut of pertinent political issues are so wide-ranging, we also see diversity in the subject matter of protest songs. Protest songs tend to be written as a part of a movement for cultural or political change to bolster the cause by bringing people together and inspiring them to take action given the circumstances. These songs typically represent liberal positions. I would also argue that they tend to fall into three major categories:

Political tracks- topical songs that draw attention to problems with government or public policy

Cultural tracks- songs that draw attention to injustices faced by marginalized groups

Secular tracks- songs that draw attention to larger social and environmental issues of the era that encompass a range of issues having universal/overarching impacts on multiple demographic groups

Even when we aren't in the midst of a particularly major political movement or cultural shift, musicians can contribute to the gamut of protest songs spanning various musical genres, including but not limited to rap, folk, rock, and pop music. In the 19th century, prevalent themes included anti-slavery messages around the Civil War. The 20th century saw increased popularity for songs promoting feminism, calling out economic injustices, and speaking out against military conflicts. Many 21st-century protest songs address police brutality, racism, and other issues surrounding systemic injustices. I argue that most contemporary protest songs are typically secular tracks that shy away from the controversial topics of political tracks.

Early American Protest Music

Musicians have been singing about the status quo for as long as they have grown tired of it, which dates back hundreds of years. Protest songs are diverse; covering a wide range of musical genres, emotional responses, and societal problems. These songs are typically composed as a part of a social or political change movement to unite people and spur them on to action or reflection. Liberal in partisan leaning, protest songs typically fall into one of two broad categories: politically charged, timely songs critical of the government, or songs with a cultural focus on the injustices marginalized communities experienced. The first American protest songs were straightforward; rooted in simple verses and choruses, they were typically sampled from pre-existing hymns and songs people already knew. They share far more components in common with traditional poems than some contemporary tracks. These remixes were accompanied by lyrics that were frequently written in a manner that would be easy to learn and replicate. While

“Free America” and “Yankee Doodle” was a prominent Revolutionary War protest song; many of the first notable protest songs in the United States descended from enslaved people with themes of escape and liberation. Many of these songs were also biblical, as many enslaved peoples who learned how to read while it was not permitted were limited to gaining literacy exclusively with the Bible. “Go Down Moses” is an example of one of these songs rooted in biblical texts; based on the Old Testament story of Moses freeing the enslaved Israelites in Egypt and used by Harriet Tubman as a code song while conducting the underground railroad.

“Go Down Moses

Way down in Egypt land

Tell ole Pharaoh

To let my people go

When Israel was in Egypt land

Let my people go

Oppressed so hard they could not stand

Let my people go”

Some of these first protest songs were spirituals performed aloud in a group setting. These gatherings provided an opportunity to gather and express emotions, whether despondent or joyful. Black artists frequently tried to demonstrate humanity that extends beyond that which was conventionally expected from them in the South during slavery. In this case, the pioneering black artist-intellectuals, such as the Hutchinson Family Singers and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, serve as translators who speak in ways that are legible for white audiences while still laying out many of the complications of black reality.

Later songs like “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” “Oh Freedom,” and “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” were also important for expressing pro-union and abolitionist sentiment in the antebellum period leading up to the Civil War as well as the years of the war itself. For example, during the Civil War, Union soldiers and sympathizers took up the protest song “John Brown’s Body.” The song encompasses many of the same elements that were previously mentioned, like religious language and allusions to a famous story of the time that many audiences would be familiar with. The poem’s subject was the white abolitionist whose Harpers Ferry raid was in a long line of events that sparked tensions leading to the Civil War. If the political stance made in the song was not already clear, a later verse calls for the hanging of Jefferson Davis, the leader of the Confederacy, from an apple tree.

As America emerged from the Civil War, the relationships between class and race evolved, and protest music likewise morphed and adapted to changing social structures. A large reason for this is that the identities of many lyricists changed in a transformational way. A generation of artists emerged from the United States amidst Reconstruction. Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in the 1870s. This means that he did not experience the conditions of being a slave firsthand. However, he was the child of two former slaves and thus was raised with knowledge of the effects slavery can have on an individual and their families.

Twentieth Century Protest Music

Advancing music technologies played a pivotal role in music's distribution and commercial nature at the turn of the century. Electronic music recording began to take shape in the 1930s, as radios and record players surged into the mainstream and became household appliances. This new technology opened new pathways for songs to emerge outside previous oral traditions. It coincided with the emergence of the pop genre, with subgenres like big band, jazz,

and ragtime stemming from it. Protest music also began to evolve lyrically by shifting from the simple tunes and lyrics of easy-to-earn Civil War songs to more complex artistic expressions of discontent with the status quo.

Jazz Protest Music

This is extremely apparent in the 1939 recording of "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday. One of the first protest songs with jazz elements, the lyrics offer a uniquely candid commentary of lynchings in the United States. Lynching, the gruesome practice not federally labeled as a hate crime until 2022, is explained in detail as the song progresses, bringing the listener through the body's hanging, burning, and the ultimate fate of the body left "for the crows to pluck.". The track drew in listeners with a silk and darky melody while retaining attention with explicit lyrics about South lynchings. Lyrics serve as a harrowing reflection of the state of civil unrest in the South and use the metaphor of fruit to create an analog to the image of a hanged black body. The practice of lynching was one of the lasting pernicious habits of the Jim Crow South. It was designed not only to dehumanize Black Americans but to have the societal impact of signaling to them that their race came with lesser social standing because, at the end of the day, there would be no consequence for the heinous actions.

“Southern trees bear a strange fruit

Blood on the leaves and blood on the root

Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze

Strange fruit hanging from the popular trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south

The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth

Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh

*Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
Here is fruit for the crows to pluck...*

The song was one of the first to bring protest songs into popular music. In his book *33 Revolutions Per minute: A History of Protest Songs, From Billie Holiday to Green Day*, music journalist Dorian Lynskey wrote that "Up Until this point, protest songs functioned as propaganda, but 'Strange Fruit' proved they could be art," Unlike Civil War era protest songs, there wasn't a chant or a call to arms being repeated in the song. Instead, the song is designed to grab one's attention, given the extreme nature of the events being sung about. While responses from audiences generally ranged from enthusiastic approval to sickening disgust, they were equally visceral. Lynskey mentions that the song was almost completely banned on the radio, meaning that most Americans that heard about the song found out about it via word of mouth or through a publicized description of Holiday's performance. After Holiday died, her song entered the canon as a song that went beyond a repetitive chant for those in the trenches. It was a piece of popular culture that could be enjoyed in clubs and bars and stir up a conversation afterwards.

Folk Protest Music

Popular protest music further disseminated public sentiment for and against the status quo into the mainstream as contemporary folk songs began to hit radios in the post-World War 1940s. Folk artists could use songs primarily in the acoustic form to broadcast their political views to a nation struggling through the civil rights era, fighting the Korean War, and barreling towards the Vietnam War amidst Cold War tensions. The music was filled with both heavy use of metaphors and more straightforward political commentary, all designed to draw different political movements together. Because songs were now broadcast through television and performed live

to massive crowds at concerts, fans and protestors could interact with songs and their artists directly. This interaction allowed fans to feel an increased level of personal ownership with songs that only amplified the songs' resonance within the individual's consciousness.

Woody Guthrie, an Oklahoma songwriter, was one of the most renowned folk protest genre names who helped jumpstart the movement to the mainstream. Guthrie was born to a white working-class family before the beginning of the Dust Bowl in 1934. As a result of the unique experiences his upbringing gave him, Guthrie was a member of a cohort that experienced a level of social marginalization and economic deprivation that was historically experienced more by other racial demographic groups at such high numbers. Guthrie grew up listening to protest songs by labor activist Joe Hill and discussing socialism around the campfire. In his adulthood, he penned songs like “This is Your Land” as anthems for the working class he came from. The track also urges unification and the forging of a shared American identity for a nation less than one hundred years from the Civil War. The first lines make clear to listeners that America does not belong to any one group and instead is a political experiment in which democracy must be upheld by “you and me” to be successful. Guthrie’s songs were seen as honest and stemming from lived experience, propelled along by a reputation as an authentic voice from the new “trenches” that weren’t necessarily dug around the battlefield of war but now dug in the battlefield of working class struggles.

“This land is your land and this land is my land

From Claifornia to the New York island

From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters

This land was made for you and me”

Bob Dylan, synonymous with 1960s folk activist music, is an example of an artist whose music was internalized and adopted by the masses in ways that extended far beyond what was intended by the artist. While Dylan is regarded as a key figure in the development of protest music, much of his protest songs were written in a brief period of 20 months, from January 1962 to November 1963. As fans had their own increasingly personal experiences with songs, some tracks were made marquee songs of protest movements. While Dylan lists Guthrie as the main influence on his songs, he denies being a writer of protest songs. Instead, he insists that his tracks like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Times They Are a Changin'" were co-opted by civil rights and Vietnam protesters and infused with meaning to make them songs of the movement. As Lynskey says in his book, "Dylan lost ownership of his songs and their nuances" as the movements that were far bigger than any one individual adopted his tracks to speak to major societal issues. Many of the more progressive protest songs mentioned can be contrasted with popular patriotic music that defends the status quo and resonates in some conservative circles. For example, some of the most popular music in the 1960s defended the Vietnam War. "The Ballad of the Green Beret" is an example of one of these songs, with lyrics that praise U.S. military actions and, more specifically, venerate the Green Beret. The song was written by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler, a Green Beret medic who served in the early years of the Vietnam War. While he could not score anything close to major success with his other songs, "Ballad of the Green Beret" was the number one song for five weeks on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1966.

"Fighting soldiers from the sky

Fearless men who jump and die

*Men who mean just what they say
The brave men of the Green Beret*

*Silver wings upon their chest
These are men, America's best
One hundred men will test today
But only three win the Green Beret*

*Trained to live off nature's land
Trained in combat, hand to hand
Men who fight by night and day
Courage Peak from the Green Berets...*

While many prominent contemporary artists, such as Olivia Rodrigo and Justin Bieber, shy away from songs broaching topics like active war, several popular artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s made songs protesting against the Vietnam War. At a 1970 performance in Berkeley, California, Jimi Hendrix, as another example, introduced a new song, "Machine Gun," with the following declamation "I'd like to dedicate this song to soldiers fighting in Berkeley—you know what soldiers I'm talking about—and oh yeah, the soldiers fighting in Vietnam too ... and dedicate to other people that might be fighting wars too, but within themselves, not facing up to the realities." (Hendrix Live Performance) The song is lengthy, clocking in at over twelve minutes long, loosely decries the Vietnam War, and provides a gruesome picture of conflict of any kind. His long guitar solos and percussive riffs, combined

with the feedback of the sound system utilized for the performance, created a unique sonic experience for those present to perceive. The sounds simulate those of helicopters, machine guns, explosions, and the screams of the wounded on the battlefield. Lyrics paint a picture of the gruesome realities of war:

Machine gun, tearin' my body all apart

Evil man make me kill you, evil man make you kill me

Evil man make me kill you, even though we're only families apart

Well, I pick up my axe and fight like a farmer

But your bullets still knock me down to the ground

Lyrics are sparse throughout the song, but these provide a picture directly from the point of view of a soldier fighting in the war.

While folk and jazz music were on the rise, soul music also experienced rapid growth. In the 1950s, black artists began to make music with roots in blues, gospel, and jazz that blended into the soul movement. Many songs of this era and from artists of this cohort responded directly to the injustices of the civil rights era. Protest songs were given the title "freedom songs". They were especially powerful due to their roots in the black church tradition that already had a strong history centered around a communal shared body of song. Artists making these songs helped to galvanize the black side of the civil rights movement by infusing it with historical elements of black protest music within the newer genre. Singer-songwriter Nina Simone's first protest song, "Mississippi Goddam," is exemplary of the era. Its lyrics decry the popular ideology of some in the Civil Rights movement to "go slow" on movements like desegregation while also speaking out against everyday injustices faced by black people. The song's title itself calls out the inhumane actions in states during the Jim Crow South. In 1963 civil rights activist Medgar Evers

was murdered in Mississippi, and four young black girls were murdered when Alabama's 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed. Sam Cooke's 1964 song "A Change Is Gonna Come" struck a different chord by expressing less anger than Simone's track and instead expressing a melancholy hopefulness for better days in the near future.

"I was born by the river, in a little tent

Oh, and just like the river

I've been running ever since"

"What's Going On," an early 1970s protest song by Marvin Gaye, encapsulates the sentiment and grievances of several different parties on both moderate and extreme ends of the political spectrum. In the song, Gaye keeps returning to the question alluded to in the song's title; a question that can be directed toward multiple people and institutions.

Shortly afterward, poet Gil Scott-Heron released "The Revolution Will Not be Televised." a spoken word production that combined poetry and jazz to make art specifically meant to support the black power movement. Heron wrote the track amidst a tense political climate in the United States surrounding the Vietnam War and the Kent State shootings that sparked nationwide demonstrations. "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" sent the critical message that political protest movements belonged to the activists "in the trenches," not the media entities covering the activists or the government bodies who are typically the subjects of protest.

Contemporary Protest Music: 1980-2020

One of the central contentions I am making in this paper is that cohort effects are experienced by all groups in the population regardless of age. Generational divides are no longer as crucial as factors like globalization and technology have made them, so the population

experiences major societal events as a collective. While the response of different population segments may vary, the events themselves are experienced as what I would dub a “universal cohort” that is segmented by the lines between the elite class and minority/working class individuals.

As the Vietnam War ended and the plethora of popular protest songs inspired by the conflict came and went, the 1980s and 90s ushered in a new era with a relatively calmer political climate. However, several pertinent social issues still affected the working class and minority racial groups. As a result, we saw a further evolution of protest songs into tracks providing more general social commentary. Similarly to how protest music was boosted by the advent of electronic recording in the 1930s, the music video was a critical piece of sound technology that helped shape this era and amplify the music created in it by introducing a new artistic element. Channels like MTV and VH1 made visuals and music a package deal while providing artists with an alternate dimension to display their views and express themselves. A new optical element of art was now manipulated by creatives and blended with the sonic elements artists were accustomed to.

The success of an art form like hip hop is also interesting to analyze from the context of protest music as it stems from the innate human search for rhyme, reason, and recognizable patterns. While rhyming poems are frowned upon in conventional literary poetry, hip hop offers a pattern of poetry that contains the satisfying element of rhyme blended with music. The move away from rhyme in conventional poetry likely has much to do with a desire among academics to distinguish themselves from “common art” and a desire to create their elite art. The art form began as a form of protest music. Hip hop also has a unique key component where individuals themselves are recognized in their moment. Rarely are two voices heard performing

simultaneously, but each individual receives their spotlight on the track to express what they choose. While there is an element of oppositionality in hip hop, there is also a great deal of solidarity forming from the common position of expressing disappointment with a shared social marginalization.

In the late 1980s, rap music began to hit the mainstream. N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police" offered a scathing indictment of police brutality in the era around the beating of Rodney King and subsequent L.A. Riots. Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" utilized lyrics with a clear call to action: "We've got to fight the powers that be" Over the ensuing decade, the California band aptly named Rage Against the Machine churned out a multitude of protest songs fusing elements of punk rock and rap. This included songs like "Sleep now in the Fire" that discussed the colonization of America and the atomic bombs of World War Two. The band also incorporated visual art elements on songs like "Testify," which came with an accompanying music video admonishing George W. Bush, Al Gore, and American politics.

The riot girl movement is a poignant example of protest music failing to resonate with contemporary audiences to the degree that past protest music did with prior cohorts. While the 80s and 90s didn't produce droves of new and iconic protest music, it was a critical period that laid the foundation for what political tracks could look like, devoid of any overarching era-defining political movement to serve as an inspiration. The 90s also ushered in the first concentrated feminist rock movement of its kind, as women began the iconic, albeit short-lived, "riot girl" movement. Riot girl artists came together to collaborate on tracks focused on advancing progressive agendas like potential Bush sanctions on abortion rights, protesting apartheid, and deconstructing the patriarchal hegemony in America. While the gritty attitude expressed by songs of the movement helped to display the frustration of the moment, the riot girl

movement fell apart by the mid-90s without any breakthrough hits that emerged into the mainstream with commercial success. Nevertheless, the common themes of feminism, privilege, and police brutality that came up in socially conscious songs of the riot girl movement and the period at large were not going anywhere and, in many ways, have only come closer to the forefront as the years have progressed.

Protest Music During the Bush Presidency

As evidenced through the historical analysis of protest songs to this point, protest music is a form that usually tends to flourish at critical inflection points with major political upheaval and marginalized groups yearning for change. There was a relative lack of civic or social turmoil in the 90s. With a new geopolitical world order emerging from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold war, protest music was evolving into new territory. It would have seemed like the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq would have provided musicians with the ammunition and subject matter necessary to give political protest music a major revival. However, this resurgence failed to materialize in reality. While the era following 9/11 was layered with heavy emotion, frustration, and confusion that helped singers produce some unique songs, the lack of a unifying political movement being advocated for, like abolition, desegregation, or withdrawal from Vietnam, caused a millennial protest song resurgence to never truly emerge.

George W. Bush was the President that sparked some of the most outrage in the musical world, transcending genres and geographic scope, in past decades. Anti-Bush music was a subgenre that flourished between 2003 and 2005, and some of the greatest examples of it may be seen on records such as Green Day's *American Idiot* and the now-outdated *Rock Against Bush* compilations. The Beastie Boys' sense of fun started to dwindle 20 years into their career when

they chose to become politically active. "In a World Gone Mad," a well-intended protest song, was made available for free the same month the United States attacked Iraq.

Previously there had been protest songs reprimanding sitting presidents. For instance, Stevie Wonder produced an album, *Fulfillingness' First Finale*, two weeks before Richard Nixon retired from the White House that featured the caustic farewell *You Haven't Done Nothing*. "We're sick and tired of hearing your song," Wonder reprimanded the departing President. However, Bush was a gift to composers since he afforded room for so many different points of attack. To Public Enemy in *Son of a Bush* (2002), it was a supposed cocaine habit associated with Bush and a record of executions while governor of Texas. In *Bu\$hleaguer* (2002), Pearl Jam described him as a "confident man" who "got lucky."

Just before the 2004 election, hip hop artist Eminem labeled Bush a "weapon of mass destruction" in his stirringly surly anti-war song *Mosh*, and Green Day released *American Idiot*, which didn't bend over itself to discourage that interpretation if it wasn't expressly about the President. The songs became increasingly caustic with Bush's re-election and Iraq's ongoing plunge into anarchy. Conor Oberst of Bright Eyes depicted President Bush as a delusional religious madman in *When the President Talks to God* as the second term began (2005). However, no creative endeavors appear to have mobilized enough younger people to place John Kerry in the White House.

It was an understandable reaction. More politically vocal singers have backed down since the early 1960s, largely due to fear of leftwing expectations than rightwing persecution. It takes guts to go further than producing a one-off protest song and stick with it even if it means upsetting or alienating your supporters. Pearl Jam's *Riot Act* tour, Nash, and Young's *Déjà Vu* shows were among the few that took the anti-Bush cause seriously.

Conservative popular patriotic songs like “God Bless the USA” also garnered popular success in the aftermath of 9/11, used by political candidates in several ads and campaign rallies. However, some unique tracks did emerge that tried to follow in the footsteps of predecessors and use Music to take a political stance against the status quo. For example, the band Green Day channeled the sonic elements used by past punk bands to create songs like “American Idiot” that called out the 24-hour news cycle and the negative impacts of constant media coverage on the populace. Lyrics blatantly called out the media for “propaganda” that worked against the interests of a population molded into believing whatever narrative was told to them by elites on television. Rappers Sage Francis also released “Makeshift Patriot” in October 2001, critiquing the media’s coverage of the incidents surrounding the September 11th terrorist attacks.

While these artists, and others, kept the heart of the protest tradition beating, we failed to see the reverberations of the Music in actual political change. In 2004 President George Bush was re-elected with a higher share of electoral votes than he received in 2000. American troops remained in Iraq throughout Bush’s term and remained there to this day. Most importantly, a centralized political movement never evolved. In Dorian Lynskey’s book, he quotes the Flaming Lips’ lead singer Wayne Coyne who encapsulated my sentiment of the period: “ It’s not like Vietnam. The youth aren’t dying in the same way. There’s no protest. Music Consumers weren’t powerless; they just didn’t give a shit. While people were caught off guard by 9/11 and the ensuing wars in the Middle East, there was no sustained protest movement for songs to act as background music. Many powerful protest songs that emerged were unique because they acted as standalone items. They were not anthems for a broader social movement; rather, they were isolated bursts of anger bubbling through that also did not achieve major Billboard success.

Reflecting closely on each of the songs written in opposition to the Bush presidency, it appears that what had been lacking was not passion but cohesiveness. Until Obama offered a symbol to gather around, musical opposition was so dispersed that it was imperceptible to the casual listener. In contrast, the neat narratives of the 1960s or punk overestimate the importance of preceding protest songs. Cultural influence usually appears to be overly romanticized and overblown in retrospect. Just maybe the Bush years will profit from this influence one day, and the numerous musical rebels will be recognized for their contributions.

Protest Music During the Obama Presidency

The resonance of these songs dissipated fairly quickly into the political past after the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Tracks written during his term with political elements tended to be designed to promote the empowerment of different identities and marginalized communities. This led to another era of calmness within protest music as artists did not dive into some of the culture war issues that began to segment society upon President Obama's election. In reality, Obama's election exposed the soft white underbelly of American racial tension. I contend that it is not entirely coincidental that a lull in protest music coincided with these early years of the Obama presidency. The lack of a galvanizing protest movement not only contributed to this lull but also manifested in a lack of pressure placed on the Obama administration to fulfill some of the aspirational agenda items proposed on the campaign trail. The Obama era is a great example of the reverberations of a lack of compelling contemporary political protest music reverberating through society and applying pressure on the ruling political class.

The presidency of Barack Obama came at a pivotal inflection point in United States history. Amidst the 2008 financial crisis, subprime mortgage crisis, and automobile crises, these events' trickle-down windfall led to the country's most extreme calamity since the Great Depression.

Predatory lending that targeted low-income homebuyers, the excessive risk is taken on by global financial institutions, and the bursting of the housing bubble created a perfect storm of compounding factors that culminated in the Great Recession. The summer of 2010 became known as the "summer of the Tea Party," with websites and local chapters fanning the outrage of a national government that was not responsive enough to their needs and too focused on enriching institutions and their capital backing than individuals. It was a true grassroots backlash to a wasted opportunity to address the very needs of those constituents with policies that directly put more dollars into their pockets. In 2010, Democrats lost 69 seats—63 in the House and six in the Senate—while Democratic President Barack Obama was in the White House. Obama, who signed an overhaul of the nation's health care system that was deeply unpopular among Tea Party Republicans, later described the midterm results as a "shellacking."

By the time President Obama was elected to his first term, the internet had already played a key role in music distribution. The Obama presidency has been a historical anomaly in many ways: President Obama has been extremely amicable with the liberal music industry. Be that as it may, the advent of new technologies only assisted in the proliferation of political messages to the American public. The 2008 Obama election team's social media usage pioneered the digital strategies utilized by several subsequent political campaigns. Similarly, in seconds, musicians could now use platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to reach their entire fan base. In this new era of virality, there were several channels for songs to spread like wildfire. Lull in protest music and the calmness.

Protest Music During the Trump Presidency

The metro in the 4th Street was covered in post-it notes the day after Donald Trump was elected president. The notes included messages of encouragement, misery, and relief. The following was scribbled by an unidentified person:

It's a typical left-wing refrain. Fans of protest rock want to believe Trump will bring in a golden age of righteous rage.

For nihilists, this is pretty upsetting: there is currently enough injustice and brutality in Obama's America for protest-minded music to thrive, and significant art isn't made when the security and resources accessible to oppressed artists are gradually eroded. Trump would not deviate from past standards in this regard. For as long as rock and punk bands have flourished, they have sneered at US presidents. During the Nixon administration, Elton John and Neil Young responded with "Postcard From Richard Nixon" and "Ohio," correspondingly. Hardcore and hip-hop rose to prominence in the 1980s on a tide of anti-Reagan fervor. The 1990s were quieter, although they targeted George H.W. Bush as a "war pig fuck" and Monica Lewinsky in rap songs.

Especially compared to the Obama presidency, music played a much greater role as a simmering form of protest during Donald Trump's presidential campaign and term in office. Artists from older and younger cohorts, including Adele and Neil Young, refused to grant the Trump team permission to play their songs at campaign rallies. Several artists took to online platforms on social media and physical forums at concerts to criticize some of Trump's more inflammatory comments. Nevertheless, Trump won the election as an ardent protest movement against him never materialized with accompanying music for activists to rally around. Instead, the focal point for many musicians, particularly of a liberal worldview, was on abstention and

preventing one's brand from being associated with someone who was as politically polarizing as President Trump.

President Trump also differentiated himself from the two presidents to precede him by providing musicians with more ammunition to attack him personally instead of creating the usual issue-based protest songs of the past. With an uncanny ability to say whatever he was honestly feeling Trump has been regarded as an “outsider” breaking the conventional norms for the actions, speech, and attitude expected of a president:

What exactly did Neil Young and people like that not like Trump due to bombastic behavior instead of policy

Are the lyrics indicative of all people's viewpoints of America compared to the other songs mentioned that have Donald Trump saying he has done more for black people

Currently, the two most well-known protest songs of Trump's presidency are "Love It If We Made It" by the British band the 1975 and "This Is America" by Childish Gambino. "Love It If We Made It" recites the most heinous global events of the previous years while smiling helplessly. "This Is America" holds up a mirror to our violent, racist, viciously racist system before ultimately shrugging in its face.

In the civil rights struggle, the country's finest illustrious example of social transformation, protesters chanted "We Shall Overcome," a greater gospel anthem that proclaimed triumph was just around the corner. "Resist" is the slogan of Trump-era protest, and it only aspires to a stalemate. It's a defensive stance, a proclamation of immobility, so it feels appropriate in these times. It's impossible to imagine the future in a culture so deeply engrossed in its historical nostalgia.

However, the upheavals of the twenty-first century have spawned at least two great protest anthems. One was "FDT," a 2016 song by two Los Angeles rappers, YG and Nipsey Hussle, denouncing then-candidate Trump. After years of various rappers rapping about Trump's self-made millionaire image, "FDT" functioned as a corrective measure, blending aggressive insults with a clear warning. YG raps, "He can't make decisions for our country." "He's going to crash us." Unfortunately, "FDT" only addressed the near future of politics. Following Trump's election, it became yet another source of smog in the air..

The voice of women in Protest Music

With the emergence of political competition into the mainstream, negative campaigning has gained precedence over the years. Political protest song has played a role in facilitating this. The first spin doctor was Quintus Tullius Cicero way back in 64BC, who advised his brother on using negative campaigning to gain a competitive advantage over his rivals. Fast forward to the 21st century, and negative campaigning has defined US campaigns. A well-known example is the 1800 presidential race marked with personal attacks by both camps where the candidates brought numerous allegations against their opponents, including but not limited to rape, adultery, and robbery. In 2016, the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, used footage of the Democrat presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, which showed her collapsing, to smear her public image. Rhiannon Giddens sings in a powerful soprano, "My heart it is a-shakin' with an old, old song/I hear the voices sayin', it's time for going on," in the song "We Could Fly" off of her 2017 album Freedom Highway. With the help of a banjo, Giddens stages an old-timey picture of group action and a better future while singing, "Together, hand in hand/Searching, always searching for the promised land." The way Freedom Highway simultaneously gestures backward and forwards

sets it apart from other modern protest music. Giddens contemplates freedom as an unfinished journey over space and time with a musical palette that evokes recollections of "old, old songs" with its straightforward string instrumentation and heartfelt vocals—tackling subjects as broad as slavery in "Julie" to modern police profiling in "Better Get It Right the First Time." As the lead singer of the string band Carolina Chocolate Drops and a black folk musician, Giddens skillfully navigates aural codes and audience expectations by fusing gospel choirs with traditional Appalachian instrumentation. Giddens was inspired by Mavis Staples' 1965 song "Freedom Highway," which she released on her protest album, *If All I Was Was Black*, later that year. After Obama was elected president, Staples lamented in an interview, "I never thought I'd have to produce another album like this again," highlighting how the Civil Rights Movement had fallen short of being a protracted march to victory.

Is Contemporary Protest Music in Decline?

Arguments for a Decline

While the hip-hop art form was created to uplift the marginalized collective and create change, it was flipped on its head to propagate the very same system responsible for the marginalization. The art form of hip hop began to demonstrate that it is also part of the capitalist environment of sports and entertainment where greater talent can be sold for greater profits. I would also argue that we have seen a decline in improvisation with contemporary protest music. The influence of capital has disincentivized artistic risk-taking, which is essential for creating compelling protest music that meets the moment by addressing pertinent issues. Instead, formulaic tracks that follow the established blueprint for pop success are the ones provided record deals by major labels, and the artists that create tracks that fit into this existing structure are the ones given capital and opportunities by music industry giants.

Analogs In Sport

I believe it helps to look at sport as an analog for the role I believe many more contemporary artists could play with contemporary protest songs. Amid widespread cultural turmoil due to racial disparities, modern America often seeks reprieve by going to the area that seemingly is free of the burden of racial tensions, segregation, and discrimination. For decades white America has seen that venue as the field of sport. However, black athletes like Colin Kaepernick and members of the Milwaukee Bucks who went on strike to protest police brutality during the 2020 NBA bubble have recently questioned that perception. Nevertheless, athletes who dare to challenge the status quo often pay a heavy price. The cost of this may be another major reason why contemporary artists avoid contentious political tracks. To this day, Colin Kaepernick has not played for a football team since his season of protest. There are also major media institutions that now can provide their commentaries on the “revolution.” For example, on Fox News, Laura Ingraham used the phrase shut up and dribble to insult LeBron James for his statements on police brutality during the same season. However, in a show of how black athletes increasingly use their platform to control their narratives, LeBron James has taken that phrase and turned it into a rallying cry. He has sold merchandise, made commercials, and started television shows off of that single phrase. This is one of the major ways black athletes can remediate the negative ways they are depicted in popular media.

In sports and music, an inherent fallacy has also spilled into other facets of contemporary society. That fallacy is the idea that we have somehow transcended race as a major social issue in the country. Like musicians, black athletes also play a large role in how their image is dispersed across popular media. While progress has been made since the events of the summer of 2020, the lack of female and non-white representation in managerial and coaching staffs in the music

industry and sports leagues alike is a microcosm of the pervasive issue. There is one black owner in the NBA, and in the NFL, there is none. The efforts to change diversity issues such as these have led a generation of what Thabiti Lewis referred to in his book *Ballers of the New School: Race and Sports in America* as “New School Ballers.” This set of athletes are members of the generations born post- Civil Rights Movement and with hip hop as a part of their realities. Through action, they have been unique in their refusal to be reconstructed, patronized, or exempted from social, political, and economic spheres of influence. They are the collective members of a specific generation that has yet to reap the benefits of the changes that the movement for Civil Rights supposedly promised them. Many hip-hop artists could function as “New School Ballers” in their respect, given the prominence of the art form in today’s society. However, we do not see a generation of artists taking the same risk as their counterparts in athletics, risking their own careers to speak on these issues affecting the greater “universal cohort”

Analogs in Film

By analyzing the contemporary state of music with the state of sport and film, I believe it becomes clear that music has begun lagging despite its activist roots in putting political protest content into the mainstream. I also believe that popular black film provides another media form we can compare music with to see the role contemporary film plays in the proliferation of ideas circulating in the culture. Movies like *Do The Right Thing* were pioneers in getting black-centered narratives displayed on the big screen. Depictions of black characters that displayed their full range of humanity were not yet known to have the potential to be profitable in Hollywood. Hence, directors seem to have been more willing to create films that embraced the blackness tropes that had been displayed in Hollywood for years. More recently, films like

Moonlight and Get Out have challenged the old way of thinking. They proved right in the belief that such films could simultaneously have box-office success and critical acclaim.

Moonlight goes even deeper into the complexity of the black makeup by portraying an LGBTQ+ black individual as the film's main character. The film is a coming-of-age story, with the protagonist, Chiron, struggling to truly understand his identity as a gay man as he grows older. The film navigates the trials faced by a gay black individual in a hypermasculine setting, with a mother who has to resort to prostitution to feed her crack addiction, a nonexistent father, and an excessively hostile environment to LGBTQ individuals. This environment serves as a microcosm of the conservative black community, which is still, in many cases, more apprehensive and opposed to the equality of gay people than any other group. The film also takes the stereotype of the menacing black thug and turns it on its head. Instead of fearing this figure, the movie causes viewers to root for and even admire this individual. In the movie's first act, Mahershala Ali's character, Juan, serves as a father figure for Chiron, who feeds him, protects him from a neglectful mother, and encourages him that there is nothing wrong with his identity. In the third act, we see an adult Chiron who followed in Juan's footsteps and began selling drugs. Despite his "hard" persona with a grill, pimped-out car, and chain, the movie again goes against expectations, showing Chiron as speechless and shy when reunited with his love interest, Kevin. The movie concludes with Chiron being coddled and consoled, wrapped around Kevin. This display of "softness" goes completely contrary to the thug stereotype and further shows the complexity of black characters that again would not be afforded to them in the deracinated films. The movie was released to massive critical acclaim and even reached the highest peak a movie can by winning the Academy Award and the Golden Globe for the picture of the year. Furthermore, the film had a 1.5 million dollar budget and made 65 million dollars at the box

office. *Get Out* and *Moonlight* all indicate that tackling the complexity of blackness is not only a viable blueprint in Hollywood, but it is also an extremely successful one that allows for more legitimate and nuanced representations of blackness to be permeated into the mainstream.

While history provides several examples where it is evident that music can achieve Billboard success and critical acclaim, Recent history lacks a healthy catalog of protest songs that prove the same can be true. Part of this may be because of differences between the art forms. Longform movies are long enough for directors to make their points clear without time constraints, while songs provide artists only a few minutes to do the same. In addition, movies are typically enjoyed with the understanding that they will be fodder for discussion upon their conclusion. At the same time, today's songs are often played in enjoyed public spaces in quick succession without much time given to discuss and parse through any song's contents.

Film and sports are two examples of entertainment that can be contrasted with music to see the extent to which trends of contemporary protest movements can be infused into the art forms of athletes, Hollywood directors, and musicians. By juxtaposing the different media forms, it becomes evident that while political protest has been permeated into the public discourse by sports and film, it becomes apparent music has not kept up when it comes to diffusing protest sentiment into the mainstream.

Arguments Against a Decline

There is a great deal of evidence pointing to a decline in the quality and success of contemporary protest music; however, in order to develop a nuanced sense of the current state of the genre, it is crucial to analyze the evidence against a decline as well. It can be argued that the internet has become the new public square where political songs are discussed. Some songs like Beyonce's "Formation" were able to capitalize on the virality the internet affords modern songs.

Within hours of the track's surprise upload on Youtube, the hashtag #Formation was trending, creating an online forum for people to discuss the song and the accompanying video. Individual users were able to give their own takes on the police in riot gear, and subtle references to the Black Lives Matter movement. Her Black panther-inspired Super Bowl halftime performance of the song also evoked many of the elements prior artists like Jimi Hendrix utilized to amplify the reach of protest songs with advanced live show displays. Nevertheless, it becomes apparent that while Beyonce may be sympathetic to the Black Lives Matter movement and its aims, the lyrics of the song itself don't go so far as to address the issues straightforwardly. Instead, the accompanying video and performance are where the messaging is imbued. This allows the track to retain a sense of innocence and pop appeal that allowed the song to achieve the success that it did.

Furthermore, sometimes the virality songs can garner on the internet is strong enough to escape these online forums and showcase themselves in the real world. For example, before the 2017 Women's March on Washington, Los Angeles musician MILCK collected an assembly of singers nationwide and taught them her feminist protest song "Quiet." On January 21st, 2017, the day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump, the group met in person and performed the song together in the streets surrounding the nation's capital. After the fashion of call and response tracks from the 19th century, the track employed a simple chorus that was easy enough for the rag-tag bunch of online activists to learn with the assistance of modern technology. It can also be argued that the interactions users have with songs and videos are a form of protest. Although it can lack the physical element of the collective gathering or spontaneously singing, shares and posts on one's social media feed have become a signal of endorsement for a cause. As a result, there is a measurable metric online for the success songs have. However, there still

remains a need for protest songs that work better outside the digital sphere in order to create sustained protests that last for long periods of time. The nature of a social media feed is that it is constantly being updated and filled with new content and information to displace whatever came before. This rapid-fire creation of new content for users to interact with can thus actually work against protest movements and protest music, as there is always a shiny new object being uploaded that can distract from the importance of sustained, applied pressure over the course of years. This consistent external pressure, including in the form of political protest music, was crucial for the success of political protest movements during Vietnam, slavery, desegregation, and other major American sociopolitical issues of the last few centuries.

Many publications have remarked on the "return" of the protest song at this specific epoch in American cultural politics, characterized by the election of an anti-black and anti-woman administration and also supercharged by new movements for social justice such as #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName. In recent years, protest music has surfaced in the work of legends as well as newcomers, perhaps most compellingly in the performance of female performers. In 2017, protest icons like Vince Staples and Joan Baez released new songs, whereas chart toppers like Beyoncé, Alicia Keys, and Janelle Monáe preferred politically charged material over traditional pop hits. Nevertheless, the notion of protest music's rapid "return" discloses a cultural obliviousness to the deeply entrenched role of female musicians in shaping political cultures and social movements—even in less divisive times. Indeed, women's voices have endured most poetically in this form of artistic expression.

Conclusion

History provides us with a vast archive of protest music that, upon inspection, reveals itself to have gone through a multitude of evolutions and metamorphoses over time. The very

first American protest songs were written with a goal in mind: to coalesce people together around common cause. The tunes were frequently picked up from hymns or recreated from songs people knew, with lyrical content commonly written as simple call and response. These songs were more concerned with versatility and intent than with beauty and finesse. In my thesis, I have attempted to demonstrate how contemporary protest music has declined over time and that the reverberation effects of this decline manifest themselves in a lack of pressure placed on leading politicians to address the public's social grievances. After comparing and contrasting older protest songs with newer ones, I believe it becomes apparent that contemporary protest music that is political is experiencing a decline both in the propensity of its production and in the commercial success such tracks garner. This comes in spite of the increased adoption of a number of media technologies like social media that have assisted in the virality and diffusion of contemporary songs that evoke themes of prior protest music. It also comes in spite of the bevy of hot-button social issues for musicians to write striking lyrics about over the last three presidential administrations. I believe that the reverberations of this lack of a protest music movement permeate through society, causing the political establishment to feel a lack of external pressure, or affirmation, from this critical form of media. I outline a number of potential causes. I also contend the lack of prominent protest music may also be a symptom of a society that is devoid of a larger unified protest movement.

Protest music of the 19th century served as a forceful rallying cry for abolitionists looking to defeat the peculiar institution of slavery. Protest music from the early 20th century was less of a rallying cry but more so an artistic expression of internal emotion that could later be teed up as the fodder for discourse. Many of the jazz, soul, and folk songs to enter the canon from this era expressed the views of the cohort and amplified the protest movements that they

often acted as a soundtrack to, whether it was truly the artist's intention for the songs to be utilized for that purpose or not. While I would contend that contemporary protest music has been in decline since the Bush era, I do not believe that it is destined to be relegated to this fate. Establishing the next generation of forward-thinking, inclusive protest music may require combining a conventional protest song with a millennial liberation anthem. And, while it can be difficult to find that one song that inspires people to take action, one way for famous protest music to actually succeed is to look back in time.

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