

2020: Do You See the Same?

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

The year 2020 brought with it numerous trials of the human spirit. From frequent and senseless police brutality to a global pandemic to the mental health challenges which followed for many, 2020 was subjectively among the worst years, if not *the* worst year, in recent memory. In America, music has long been a reliable tool in exploring the thoughts and feelings of different generations, and there was no shortage of music released in 2020. However, there seemed to be a void of popular protest music which spoke for an entire generation's experiences during an intensely difficult year. This project contributes a five-song EP to the catalogue of protest music about 2020 as well as a review of protest music's history in America and a brief discussion of why the genre has a tougher time gaining traction in the modern day than it did in the 1960s.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXjJ-5eF5no>

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Process Analysis and Artist Statements

Process Analysis

I have been blessed time and again in my life. The year 2020 was, if nothing else, a span ripe for reflection on the many blessings I carry, whether bestowed at birth or inherited during my journey through life. In the midst of so much pain and struggle on a global scale, I was confronted with the sobering fact that I was not struggling. I may struggle with my mental health and trivial bumps in the road from time to time, but I have been nothing but safe and secure since my birth. I come from a loving family. Schooling came rather naturally to me. Whenever I was in need of financial assistance, I received it. I have never been threatened with violence. I have never feared for my life. I stared my blessings in the face while all around me, strangers and friends alike lost their jobs, their loved ones, their homes, their savings, and the list could go on. Naturally, I bore guilt for how wildly different my circumstances were from others, and along with that guilt came other emotions like shame, grief, fear, anger, and confusion. Even those emotions were blessings because they were focused outside of myself. I was ashamed of my country, grieving innocent lives lost, fearful for the wellbeing of many, angry at a healthy half of the country, and confused by all of it.

I have also been blessed with an outlet to explore these emotions and their complexities: music. I spent many nights quarantined in the Indianapolis suburbs with my guitar, desperately trying to pen a song that could aptly capture my feelings about the nightmare growing more vivid day by day. I was without my usual writing partners, the five scraggly hippies with whom I am proud to share a stage as Pushing Daisy's Band. I had no physical inspiration outside of the

contents of my childhood bedroom. It was maddening for a few months. Music, to me, was both vital and futile in those days. It was vital to my sanity, surely. There were only so many episodes of *Tiger King* to watch, and I was relieved to have a passion outside of Netflix to keep me occupied. Yet, plunking out a few chords on my acoustic could not alter the reality I sat in. I was separated from my best friends for the foreseeable future. A pandemic threatened to take not only my life but the ones of those I loved. The murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd weighed heavily on my mind and intensified the anger and distrust I felt toward my own country. No matter the lyrics and melodies I composed, none of them could comfort me entirely.

Futile though it was on some days, music inevitably helped me cope. In the process of beating the strings of my guitar to a pulp and screaming my frustrations into pillows, I saw progress in my playing. I came to appreciate the few days of clarity and inspiration that were gifted to me. Even in times when I grew sick of playing, I took advantage of the silence and confronted my emotions. I was able to sort out how I truly felt from the clichés that I had relied on in my scrapped lyrics. To some extent, this remains an ongoing process. I imagine the struggle to sort out my emotions regarding 2020 will take months, maybe years to resolve. Even so, the days ticked away and offered perspective on the universal traumas endured by the human race during the last year. As time passed, quarantine orders were lifted and bits of normalcy began to slowly emerge. My band was able to play select socially-distanced shows around the state. Ball State University continued classes in the fall, albeit without the privilege of in-person meetings for many. There was talk of a vaccine being developed which afforded a small bit of hope to what had seemed a dire situation. Step by step, the fog clouding my life began to dissipate. There was still plenty to be upset about, but the immediate end-of-the-world panic

faded away until it was a mere shadow of what it had been months earlier. With this new perspective, I picked up my guitar. It felt good to write again.

In December, nearing the end of the fall semester, I sat on the worn futon in my apartment's living room, merrily picking at my six-string when a wave of clarity slapped me in the face. I was reminded of how terrified I was months earlier. I recalled the sickening number of deaths that had taken place while my life returned to normal. I was confronted with the privilege I took for granted, that I was starting to feel happier while many in the country still feared for their wellbeing. It was a rush of confusion. Obviously, I had not yet addressed in full what I had experienced. Accompanying this realization was the feeling that I had not contributed what I could to both my own healing process as well as the healing of the country. Signing petitions and making small donations, while beneficial, were not acts that contained a part of me in their completion. In this moment, after more than a year of struggling to finalize a plan for my Honors thesis, I knew that I wanted to craft a collection of songs that could unpack my life in 2020 while also critiquing the injustices and the system that victimized millions.

I began by writing down the issues that I wanted to address in my songs. The first four came easily. I knew I wanted to write a song addressing George Floyd's murder and the imagery surrounding it. COVID-19, the Trump presidency, and my perception of the power structure of the United States were next on my list. For the last song, I sought to let myself be vulnerable and to write about the anxiety I experienced in the midst of that year. In pondering my purpose for writing these songs, I found myself riding a fence. After conducting preliminary research on the history of protest music and the components which have made protest songs effective in the past, it was clear that the focus of the tunes needed to be broad enough to be identifiable among a diverse audience. At the same time, quality writing comes from a place of truth and personal

experience. These songs needed to embody both qualities, personal but relatable. Ultimately, *2020: Do You See the Same?* is a passion project that helped me sort through my own experiences, but I am confident that the views I relay in my music are shared by many, and my hope is that others might listen to the tracks and reflect on what a terrible fever dream they just lived through. It is important to me that we, as a nation, do not let the last year slip away like it never happened. What I saw and heard on the news nearly every day was not, and should never be, “normal.” It should never be normal to hear on the news that another police department murdered a defenseless person of color. Hearing about hundreds of thousands of people who lost their lives to disease, many of those deaths preventable, should never be normal. Witnessing the blatant lies told by government officials on a daily basis should never be normal. Watching videos of armed military police harassing peaceful protestors should never be normal. I hope that listeners feel a little sting while enjoying the EP. I do not want to succumb to desensitization myself, and I wish the same for everybody else who can remember the events that unfolded in 2020. Otherwise, I worry that the pattern will continue and the deterioration of trust and democracy in America will speed up while each and every citizen suffers the consequences. That is my purpose for this project: to promote the fight for justice and to highlight the absurdity of what has taken place in the last year.

2020: Do You See the Same? was selected as this project’s title because it asks a multi-layered question. It is, in part, a reference to a lyric from the song “38th and Chicago” which argues that what happened to George Floyd in Minneapolis has happened, and will most likely continue to happen, all over the country and around the world. The title also asks if the listener perceives the world in the same way that they did before 2020 came along. Finally, it is a request for the listener to consider whether my lyrics resonate with them, asking if they feel the same

way that I do about what has just happened to us all. Contained in the following pages are the lyrics for each track of *2020: Do You See the Same?* accompanied by brief descriptions of the content and processes used to craft them. I am proud to say that, as cheesy as it may sound, I do not “see the same” as I did pre-2020. I am glad to have more perspective now than I had then, a new blessing to add to my collection, and I hope that others tap into the same reflective mindset listening to the tracks as I did writing them.

Lyrics and Artist Statements

STATIC

When I was younger, my life had a map.
Prideful no longer, I look at my path.
There are holes in the road where the signs should be.
When I'm ready to go, then my mind starts to speed...

CHORUS (x2)

Am I fit for the world? (Could I really do that?)
Is my mind unfurled? (Could I try and get it back?)
Is my head on tight? (Was it ever right?)
Static, playing in my head all night.

Am I in motion? You can't call it rest.
And nothing excites me that I could attest.
Just when I felt like breathing in fresh air.
I sheltered myself and I grew out my hair.

CHORUS (x2)

(instrumental break)

I'm not quite a victim, but the fault isn't mine.
And confidence lacking, I know I'll be fine.
'Cause a day's gonna come when the clouds are gone for good.
And my head's gonna love itself like it always should.
But 'til then I'm thinking...

CHORUS (x2)

Static playing in my head all night...

“Static” is an overview of my own experiences with anxiety, particularly how that anxiety affected me in 2020. The hook of the song reads, “Static, playing in my head all night.” I cannot recall where I heard the comparison between anxiety and the static that sometimes plays on a television screen, but I thought it was an apt comparison to my own experience. For me, anxiety gets in the way of feeling like my life is following a natural progression. I am constantly

doubting my choices, and the social component of my anxiety keeps me from taking advantage of opportunities that I know would help me progress the way I would like to. This is a recurring pattern in my life. The first two verses of the song speak to these experiences. In the first, I see my life as a road that I once had a map to navigate. Now, “There are holes in the road where the signs should be.” In the second verse, I acknowledge how difficult it was for me to feel excited about anything during 2020 and how, despite having moments of feeling normal, I was still stuck inside, keeping myself away from COVID-19. The chorus is comprised of various anxious thoughts being voiced by two different singers. This was my attempt at a manifestation of what bouts of anxiety feel like in my mind. There is rarely only one train of thought in my head, and when I am feeling anxious, those many trains of thought are hammering home my insecurities. As for the sound of the tune, one of the trains of thought in my head tends to be some sort of rhythm or melody, and the reggae-influenced backing melody is one example of what is constantly playing in my mind. While anxiety is not fun or bouncy like a reggae-influenced song should sound, I liked the idea of contrasting a chaotic mental state with a jovial melody and feel, in effect taking power away from the issue and hopefully channeling that energy through a pleasant listening experience. “Static” is not protesting anything directly so much as it is affirming that in the year 2020, anxiety was a perfectly normal and frequent response to the stimuli coming at us every day. The intent of the song is to hopefully give other anxious folks like myself a chance to identify with my experience and to know that they are not crazy for feeling crazy sometimes. The song ends on a positive note to let listeners know that there is always hope despite our minds’ persistent attempts to sabotage us.

SHERIFF BROWN

Sheriff Brown swore in on a Bible.
Slung around his shoulder was his rifle.
Fancy yourself pious, Sheriff Brown?
Well thoughts and prayers to you if you think you run this town.

But Sheriff Brown was good to all the children
Whose parents he had locked away like villains.
We know who you care for, Sheriff Brown,
And thoughts and prayers to you if you think you run this town.

(instrumental break)

Sheriff Brown, God bless him, kept his word
And blew away the bastards from the church.
St. John would have loved you, Sheriff Brown,
But thoughts and prayers to you if you think you run this town.

Sheriff Brown packed up, like we thought.
But even when his body starts to rot,
Monuments will stand to Sheriff Brown.
So, we'll just keep on fighting 'til the next one comes around.

“Sheriff Brown” is an allegory for the presidency of Donald Trump. The name Sheriff Brown comes from Bob Marley’s song “I Shot the Sheriff” in which Sheriff John Brown harassed and threatened Marley’s character until he left him no choice but to kill him. Most of the verses are references to general attitudes that were prevalent during the Trump presidency. For example, the first verse sees Sheriff Brown swearing in on a Christian Bible while simultaneously wearing a rifle around his shoulder. In my mind, this parallels the hypocrisy in Trump’s vehement refusal to entertain gun control policies while also supposedly championing Christian ideals. The second verse touches on Trump’s willingness to separate children from their families through his immigration policies, but it also speaks to his general disregard for the consequences of his actions. He wanted to show his supporters how tough he was on crime, but

he most likely was not thinking about what happens to the children of those that he locked away. The third verse is an allusion to Trump's infamous clearing-out of protestors from the steps of St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington D.C. The hypocrisy of violently removing protestors from the steps of a church for a photo op with a Bible is not lost on the song's speaker, and they sarcastically comment that "St. John would have loved" the Sheriff. The final verse sees the Sheriff packing up his bags to leave town, having been voted out of his position. The speaker knows that even though Sheriff Brown might not be around as much, his ideology permeated through the town and will live on longer than him. The song ends on a hopeful note, though, affirming that the residents of the town will continue to fight for their beliefs and values even when another Sheriff Brown comes through. The repetition of the line "Thoughts and prayers to you if you think you run this town" is a facetious use of the common phrase employed by gun rights proponents in the aftermath of gun violence tragedies. It is basically an empty wish, and in the context of the song, the speaker means to remind the Sheriff that his power is meaningless as long as so many abhor what he stands for.

The simplest tune on the EP, "Sheriff Brown" relies on the repetition of a singular musical phrase. It is soft and slow, which I meant to contrast how chaotic the actions of Donald Trump felt as the country watched them unfold. For those who felt a twinge of panic when they heard his name or saw him on the news, I hope the contrast brings them a bit of amusement if nothing else. The feel of the song could change depending on who is listening. Some may find it sounds pleasant and calm while others may find it sounds eerie and a little glum. This will allow the listener to form their own relationship with the content. I also find that the stripped-down feel of the song allows for a deeper connection to the lyrics, like listening to a story while someone plays a soft guitar in the background. In reality, two guitars are playing on the track, but they are

simplistic lines which blend together to convey one idea. The song picks up in tempo as it fades out, shedding a little light on the future and reaffirming the resilience and strength relayed by the line “We’ll just keep on fighting ‘til the next one comes around.”

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

You there in the water,
Would you like to come aboard?
You could hold out for another raft,
But I doubt that you'll see more.

There's room enough for me on here.
I'm sure there's room for you
If you give up both your arms and legs
And bend yourself in two

Are you not grateful that I'm here?
Weren't the expectations made clear?
I could surely save you if you learn to play the game,
But those who choose to stay adrift will surely know my name.

You there looking desperate,
Have you tried to save yourself?
If you can tread the water,
Tell me why you need my help.

Safety has a price, you know,
And someone's gotta pay.
If you haven't got the means, I guess
We'll find another way.

Who do you pray to in times like these?
Save your breath and worship me, if you please.
I don't have to save you if you won't afford me praise,
And those who choose to stay adrift will surely know my name.

(instrumental break)

You there in the water,
Has your power served you well?
I see there's been a mutiny
And they must've fought like Hell.

Your raft is full of bullet holes,
But weren't the guns your own?
I'm sure that someone loved you once,
But now you drift alone.

Where are your armies dressed in blue?
Didn't they pledge their souls to you?

The people you discarded, the lives you took in vain,
When the sharks start feeding, just be sure to speak their names.

“What’s in a Name?” is one long metaphor examining the power structure of the United States. Those on the rafts are those who are supported by the system and those in the water have either defected or they are dependent on the country but are receiving no help for one reason or another. Most of the song is written from the point of view of one man in the raft, and his choice of who to let on and who to keep off of his raft is arbitrary. He offers help to one person in the water only if that person gives up their arms and legs and contorts themselves, a feat that obviously cannot be done. He sees others able to tread the water by themselves, making him think they do not need his help that badly. His only desires revolve around his power. He wants to be wanted, appreciated, worshipped, but most importantly, feared and respected. He ends his choruses with the warning, “Those who choose to stay adrift will surely know my name,” as if he takes their unwillingness to comply with his ridiculous demands as a personal affront. In reality, those in the water would rather risk the perils of being adrift at sea than subscribe to a system built on maintaining an image of power and necessity. The end of the song sees the original speaker adrift at sea, himself. Whoever finds this man knows at least a little about him and can tell that his unfortunate demise was due to his own misconduct. The second speaker does not offer to save him and hopes that as the sharks start to feed on him, he will speak the names of all the people he neglected and killed as a result of his ego and greed. I think that the connections between this metaphor and the current structure of the United States are fairly evident, and I would like to let the listener discover those similarities for themselves.

The song borrows from the American folk tradition, a prominent vehicle for protest music in American history. This was a fitting style to attach to a song about the fundamental

issues with the predominant American ideology. I found that the bouncy rhythm and walking baseline lent a carefree, almost arrogant undertone to the lyrics in the first two verses. The last verse sounds to me like the person on the raft is mocking the man in the water, and the one shift in tempo and dynamics happens with the last line when the survivor in the raft asks the drifter to reflect on what he has done while dying a painful death. A bit of reverb was added to that last line to give it a more sinister, vengeful tone.

38TH AND CHICAGO

38th Street
And Chicago Avenue,
Covered in roses,
Stained in blue.

Chalk on the pavement,
Blood on the leaves,
Shed by those serving
A nation who grieves.

In your town, you'll see the same.
Walls and posters bearing their names.
No more water. Here's the flame.

38th Street
And Chicago Avenue,
Cries heard by many,
Justice for few.

This wasn't the first time,
But oh, does it sting.
Down with the soldiers.
Down with the king.

In your town, you'll see the same.
Marching through the streets, the crowds exclaim
Pull the picture into frame

38th Street
And Chicago Avenue,
Fists in the air
Along with the fumes.

These are the brave ones,
Crying for change
Crying for justice,
Crying his name.

When you look inside your heart,
Ask yourself where you can start.
Better days can't be too far.

“38th and Chicago” was a tough song to write. The title alludes to the location where George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, at the intersection of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue. I was struck by an image I saw after Mr. Floyd’s death which showed a makeshift memorial that mourners had made at this intersection. There were flowers laid around the statue of a raised black fist, and encircling those were chalk messages about George Floyd and police brutality. This was the scene in Minneapolis where the murder took place, and yet, similar memorials and tributes had sprung up in many cities around the country. Taking it a step further, protests and riots were not only taking place in Minneapolis in the aftermath of his death. There were protests all over the *world* in support of black lives and in defiance of the normalization of police brutality in recent years. I noticed that in many photos that circulated of BLM protests across the globe, oftentimes, it was difficult to pinpoint which city the picture came from. Most protestors were met with tear gas and force, regardless of the city or country they protested in. Most crowds were comprised of young people. They all looked brave and strong and tired of grieving. It dawned on me that this universal reaction is evident of how far-reaching and common racial injustice is, no matter a person’s geographical location. It is a fight that we are all in together, whether or not some of us realize we are a part of it. “In your town, you’ll see the same,” brings to light this conclusion. The problems that we face are all of our problems, not just the issues of a certain race or group or country or city. They aren’t problems confined to 38th St. and Chicago Ave. in Minneapolis.

In its earliest stages, this song was meant to be played by a solo acoustic guitar with no effects laid over the top of it. However, as I began to mix the track with the help of Pushing Daisy’s Band bass player and friend Mark Stinnett, we noticed that the track needed more to fill out the sound. I was set on a clean tone for the song from the beginning, but upon reflection of

the tune's intent, I decided to muddy parts of the verses. The chords are simple and beautiful, but the effects on top of them should make the listener a little uncomfortable. The subject matter of "38th and Chicago" is definitively uncomfortable, and I felt that making select sections uncomfortable to listen to would bring out the lyrics and spawn reflection in the listener. There are breaks in the madness, particularly during the choruses and the guitar solo where I felt that the listener might appreciate a moment of relief. The addition of strings contributes a layer of comfort to contrast the grittiness of the verses. The last line also gives a notion of hope, that the state of race relations might improve down the road. However, these moments of peace are cut short at the end by the sound of a tape winding down. It is a sharp and brutal ending, which I found to be fitting given the subject.

I DREAM OF COVID (MAMA SAID)

Mama said for me to come back home
Because she's worried 'bout my health.
I told mama please don't worry 'bout me
'Til you worry 'bout yourself.

I'm not tight with Jesus, but I think I'll say a prayer for you tonight.
They say we're okay, but to me, it don't feel right.
Well in the end, we'll all go down some day.

Mama said for me to put my favorite guitar,
Sally, up for sale.
I told mama I would rather wind up
On the streets or in the jail.

The times are getting harder and the money's running thin. This, I know.
But sometime really soon, I think the band'll play a show,
And in the end, we'll earn ourselves a little pay.

Mama said for me to get some flowers
For my sister. She's in town.
I told mama I don't think you should be having
Visitors around.

And I know how it stings you, but you've gotta play it safe and keep your cool.
If I let something happen to you, I would feel a fool.
But in the end, I guess you've got the final say.

Mama said her throat is dry.
Mama said I shouldn't cry.
Mama said the news is true.
Mama said she's got the flu.
Mama said she's feeling fine,
But papa said that mama's lyin'.
Mama said goodbye today.
I kind of feel she meant to say
For good.

“I Dream of COVID” is a reimagining of a dream that I had towards the beginning of quarantine in 2020. The song is meant to capture some of the fears, rational and irrational, that ran through my mind when the pandemic seemed to be solidified as a long-term issue. In my

original dream, my mother asked me to sell my guitars and other music equipment because she was worried that I wouldn't be able to sustain myself through the pandemic otherwise. I told her that I couldn't bring myself to sell any of it because I was still hoping to play some shows with the band once the pandemic was over. When I told her that, she grew very ill almost instantaneously, and I woke up from the dream feeling like my actions during the pandemic could have potentially dire consequences. It was a scary dream, and it crystalized a horror in my mind that many suffered in real life at the hands of COVID-19. In the song, my worry for my family comes through, but the first chorus echoes sentiments that I had felt when it was still unknown just how serious COVID-19 could be. I had reached a point in the early stages of quarantine where I had, in effect, made peace with the fact that this pandemic could kill everybody. Thankfully, that thought was short lived as more information about the disease and prevention strategies came out, but I did accept death as a possibility for a short time. I do not imagine I was the only one that made peace with that possibility, either. In reflecting on the year 2020, I find it troublesome that making peace with death was not even the part of the year I remember most. In any other year, it probably would have been among the most traumatic feelings I had experienced, but 2020 kept doling out new problems to pay attention to and new hurdles to jump through. This is what makes 2020 the worst year I have lived through, by far. My hope with the song is that others might hear it and remember how serious the threat of finality was at the time, and maybe if they keep thinking about it, they will wonder what could have been done to prevent the tremendous toll that the pandemic took on the United States.

My dreams are often absurd, and I found that in order to further convey that the song was taken from a dream, the relationship between the lyrics and the melody should be a little absurd. The lyrics are dark and foreboding while the melody is bouncy with psychedelic jam band

influences. The lead guitar is layered with ample delay and reverb in order to give the various melodic lines a dreamy feel. There is a fade-in with a solo acoustic guitar to start the track which I envisioned as myself entering a dream state. This track comes directly out of the abruptly-ended “38th and Chicago,” and I appreciated that the listener may feel as though they are coming out of a harsh reality and entering a dream world. Ultimately, this song was chosen as the final track of the EP because the musician in me hopes that it might inspire a listener to get up and dance, to finish off their engagement with these difficult reminders of the past in a lighter mood. However, the writer in me knows that the lyrical content of the song might not evoke pure bliss. The listener’s reaction is entirely up to them, and whatever they feel is how they should feel.

Protest Music in America: A Brief History

The year 2020 brought with it a number of reasons to protest, ranging from the senseless killings of unarmed black civilians like Breonna Taylor and George Floyd to the U.S. government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. In a frenzy of passion and purpose, many did take to the streets to protest, and not only from one side of the political spectrum. While some were outraged by the Trump administration's downplaying of COVID-19's threat to the country, others railed against attempts by state governments to keep people inside, away from large gatherings, and to mandate the wearing of masks in public spaces. Those who protested kept one of the proudest traditions in America alive, but as with any living entity, change was inevitable. When once an anthem could encapsulate the ideology of a generation, as did Bob Dylan's "Masters of War" in the early 1960s, there was no single song to embody protestors' thoughts and emotions in 2020. Protest music was written in 2020, but no one song achieved the popularity and influence that the protest songs of old could. The reasons for this shift in protest tactics are many, but despite a lack of commercially successful and widely-recognized protest music in the modern day, history has shown that protest music is an important and effective tool in the struggle for the oppressed to have their voices heard.

One of the primary reasons for protest music's popularity in the history of humanity is music's innate ability to control emotions (Heid). It has been well-documented that listening to music affords many benefits to the listener, but in the context of protesting, a good protest song has the ability to make many listeners feel the same way about a subject. The combination of melody, harmony, and a powerful lyric can be such that a song can strengthen a sense of identification among protestors. This is a fact that can be felt and known without the aid of a

neurochemistry textbook, and as long as there has been music, there have been protest songs. In America's infancy, protest music was used to inspire protestors to revolt against their British oppressors (Henwood). The children's song "Yankee Doodle" was actually an English tune meant to belittle American soldiers, but the Americans ended up singing the song themselves to spite the Brits. At this time, a tactic in writing an effective protest song was to adopt an already well-known melody and to add new lyrics to it, lyrics that could be learned easily, repeated, and taught to others. Without the aid of social media, streaming services, or even radio, a protest song had to be simple if it was to be circulated through the pubs and public squares of the country. Similarly, popular hymns and spirituals served as the base for songs that slaves would sing in the era of the Underground Railroad. The song "Go Down Moses" is one example of such a tune that used the story of Moses and the Israelites from the Old Testament as an allegory for slaves' own experiences and hopes for themselves in America. Of course, these early examples of protest songs had to make do without recording technology, meaning if they were to be shared, they had to be remembered and recited time after time via live performance.

In the dawn of the twentieth century, particularly closer to the 1930s, technological advancements had progressed to the point that music could be recorded, circulated on radio stations, pressed and printed onto records, and sold to a public who could afford record players for their homes. Not only that, but with the advent of jazz and the growing popularity of big band music, songs became more interesting to listen to, and artists had more of a chance to explore their medium. Out of this new era of musical innovation came a protest song that carries weight to this day: "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday. "Strange Fruit" sounded nothing like the jaunty, let's-get-drunk-and-belt-this protest tunes that had been the popular norm decades earlier. It was gritty, raw, honest, emotional, and a *good song*. Holiday sang about the horrifying, too-common

practice of lynching in the Southern United States, and she had the guts to release this song to a public which was still eating up Judy Garland's performance of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" (Henwood). Despite the grave and troubling content of its lyrics, the song was performed for audiences where folks could choose to simply listen and enjoy or to take a bigger step and engage in a discourse about the lyrics. It proved too visceral to earn radio airplay at a time when the lynching of black people was still brushed off, but Holiday's courage and honesty in her performances of "Strange Fruit" left a mark on the public and set the tone for what a good protest song could be: divisive, impactful, emotional, but still listenable. In 2013, Buffy Sainte-Marie, a Native American and popular protest musician, wrote an article for *American Indian Magazine* in which she explores the contents of a good protest song. Her analysis touches on the same qualities that "Strange Fruit" introduced to the world of protest music. She stresses that for her, "the power of a protest song is not about getting a hit or making a buck," but the power comes from using that song to better understand one's own emotions or the emotions and experiences of others. "Strange Fruit," by most accounts, seems to be one of the first songs to do this on a large scale in America.

Attempting to meet the bar set by Billie Holiday were the folk musicians who came to prominence in the late 1950s into the 1960s. In the time between the release of "Strange Fruit" and the beginning of the folk sensation of the sixties, popular music consisted of such hard-hitting, gut-wrenching classics as "(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window" by Patti Page. Those who were not satisfied with the rosy worldview of Patti Page, the abstract complexities of jazz, or the boisterous and insincere nature of the infant rock and roll genre turned to folk music (Rodnitzky 105). Folk music offered what nearly no other genre was offering at the time: an open invitation to discourse, an affirmation of common negative feelings, and metaphors to

unpack compiled with pleasing melodies and rhythms. The groundwork for this movement was laid in the 1930s when Woody Guthrie crafted “This Land is Your Land” as a response to Irving Berlin’s popular tune, “God Bless America,” and it was his influence that inspired future folk artists to carry the torch further (Henwood). Another contributing factor to folk music’s popularity at this time was its ability to be played on the radio and to achieve commercial success with younger audiences. Whereas families in the late 1940s and early 1950s typically all listened to the same music together, economic prosperity for white middle-class families allowed the children of these families to either work their own jobs or earn allowances which they could then spend on their own records. So, when folk songs protesting the Vietnam War sprung up from the scene, young men who had the potential to be drafted themselves flocked to these anthems for refuge (Rodnitzky 107).

Moreover, the advent of folk festivals allowed popular folk protest music to reach gigantic audiences all at once, manifesting an even deeper sense of identification between the artists, the listeners, and the music. In addition, the most popular protest musicians of the era were granted spots on popular television shows where their music could reach a nationwide audience instantaneously. The platform for popular folk musicians was such that Bob Dylan was still unknown by many before Peter, Paul, and Mary covered his now iconic song “Blowin’ In the Wind” (Rodnitzky 107). Peter, Paul, and Mary had enough influence over the masses to cover an unknown artist’s song and to make *that* artist a worldwide phenomenon. With this influence, artists like PPM, Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Pete Seeger, Judy Collins, Joan Baez, and The Chad Mitchell Trio helped to propel the antiwar and civil rights movements in America. Arguably, this was the golden era of protest music because of the social factors which facilitated its consumption. President John F. Kennedy seemed to push for change to the American status

quo which signified a “go ahead” to others pushing for the same (108). Leaders of the civil rights movement like Dr. King and Malcolm X similarly opened the doors for speaking out against injustice and engaging in protest. Television became more popular. Recording technology got better. Music festivals came to prominence. At nearly every turn, protest musicians had the ability to, and were encouraged to, make their voices heard and to write about the true American experience of their time.

Still, as has been the case at every point in American history, black musicians had to find their own way into creating popular protest music consumed by the masses. Whereas folk music was a predominantly white medium, soul music became a popular vehicle for black protest music in the 1960s and 1970s (Henwood). Soul music is generally a concoction of gospel, blues, and jazz, and rightly so, it hit its stride at the beginning of the civil rights movement. Tamara Roberts, an ethnomusicologist out of UC Berkley, has noted that an advantage of soul protest music was that it was born from already well-established traditions of black churches. Here, black Americans were well-acquainted with using soul music to sort out their experiences living in a white-dominated country. That deeply founded sense of identification within the black church translated to soul music in a secular environment. Songs like Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come” or Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On” provided opportunities for black audiences, and even white audiences, to further examine the strife being experienced during the civil rights movement. After the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Alabama, an attack that took the lives of four black girls, Nina Simone wrote the tune “Mississippi Goddam” which offers an enraged recitation of atrocities committed by the southern states against black people. One line stands out, an assertion from Simone where she claims, “I think every day’s gonna be my last.” The driving rhythm of the song is contrasted with creative phrasing by Simone, allowing her

lyrics to stand out against the underlying melodies. In this way, she does not give the reader any other option except to engage with her thoughts and feelings. She brings the message of her song to the forefront while also allowing a catchy, bouncy tune to capture the listener's interest off the bat. For this reason, "Mississippi Goddam" is a model of what protest music was at its best in the era of soul music.

Unfortunately, at the end of the 1960s and moving into the 1970s, a string of events occurred which created a sense of disillusionment among many of the once hopeful youth. Dr. King had been assassinated along with JFK, Malcolm X, and Robert Kennedy. The Kent State massacre and the shooting at Altamont Speedway are accepted as the finale of the hippie golden age of the late sixties. The election of President Nixon put to rest any hopes that the visionary plans of JFK could live on in the next decade. The Vietnam War would not come to a close until the mid-seventies. On top of this, hard drugs like cocaine and heroin began to invade the music scene in America, guiding musicians away from more contemplative themes and towards the party-centric attitude which spawned the disco craze. Record companies and radio stations took note of this trend and began promoting only what was selling, and what was selling was not rooted in protest in the same way that it was in the early 1960s.

However, the next couple of decades offered newer technological advancements that helped shift protest music towards what it is today. In the 1980s, the music video platforms MTV and VH1 created a boom in the consumption of popular music that shaped the trajectory of the music industry, seemingly permanently (Henwood). Young people could sit and watch MTV for hours, re-enjoying their favorites while also being exposed to new music and new genres. The days of limited genres in popular music were dead and gone. When only a decade before, popular music was mostly rock and roll (just the one kind), soul, pop, or country, now there were

subgenres like new wave, punk rock, hip-hop, hard rock, jazz rock, psychedelic rock, experimental jazz, rock operas, disco, and the list could go on. This meant that protest music could take many different forms if artists decided to craft it. Punk bands were the first to jump on this trend in the late seventies and early eighties. American punk band The Dead Kennedys lead the charge with tunes like “Holiday in Cambodia.” At the end of the eighties, hip-hop saw its first major renovation as a genre when N.W.A. dropped their protest anthem, “Fuck Tha Police,” a song that even to this day resonates in communities affected by police brutality and unjust treatment. Not long after came Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” further solidifying hip-hop as a viable and effective means of mobilizing black Americans to reject the white-centric systems in place. Rage Against the Machine gained popularity in the early nineties and used their platform to release songs heavy rock songs like “Killing in the Name” which also critiqued policing of nonwhite Americans. The “riot grrrl” movement of the early nineties saw groups like Bikini Kill and Sleater-Kinney releasing songs that addressed issues central to women such as equal treatment for lesbians and dealing with sexual harassment from men. It is clear from these examples that protest music did not die with the sixties, but the broadening of music tastes and the overall catalog of music in this era were prerequisites for the complex being of protest music today.

The early 2000s saw an uptick in the production of protest music as artists wrestled with topics such as George Bush’s presidency, the war in Iraq, and the events of 9/11 (Henwood). However, there was not enough momentum behind a clear, unified movement to place these protest songs among the ranks of “Strange Fruit” or “Masters of War.” Still, Green Day’s album *American Idiot* serves as a reassurance that there was protest music being made in the early 2000s. Later in the decade, the election of Barack Obama signified a shift in protest music away

from scathing commentary of the actions of political leaders and towards messages of hope and empowerment. At the same time, smartphones and social media came to the forefront of public fascination. That meant that new songs could be shared by artists with their followers at a moment's notice, and then that song could be shared by followers with their friends, allowing popular songs to go viral. Along with these social media and streaming sites came algorithms that could predict and suggest content which aligned with a user's values and listening habits. Hashtags created public arenas where social media users could view content under that hashtag and then share their thoughts and analyses. Beyoncé is an example of an artist who took advantage of this technology to share her own protest music, as was the case when she released the music video for her single "Formation." Under #Formation, Beyoncé fans were able to have discussions online about the artist's depictions of life in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina as the Black Lives Matter movement, both of which were alluded to in the video. Beyoncé's use of social media to spark an important dialogue with her music is an example of how protest music can function in the modern age, but it has not been the standard for protest music by any means.

Today, protest music is undoubtedly being made in response to the election of Donald Trump and a growing cultural awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement and the tragedies which keep it alive. The hook "We gonna be alright" from Kendrick Lamar's single "Alright" has been a popular chant at BLM protests (Manabe). A Tribe Called Quest used a performance at the Grammys in 2017 to criticize Trump, giving new meaning to the song they went on to sing, "We the People..." (Henwood). Groups like Greta van Fleet have taken classic protest anthems and revitalized them, as was the case when GVF covered "A Change is Gonna Come." Of course, Childish Gambino offered perhaps the most widely circulated and discussed protest song of the last thirty years with his music video for "This is America." It is not that protest music has

died. The issues that plague modern protest music are symptoms of a changing music industry (Manabe). Radio is a dying medium that has been replaced with streaming platforms like Spotify and YouTube, so listeners cannot all listen to the same selection of songs at the same time, as was the case in the sixties and seventies. The individualization of content on these platforms also means that more often than not, people will listen to what they usually listen to without being introduced to new genres that might have more protest-based messages. History has shown that in popular music, listeners ultimately control what music is being produced. The most popular songs dictate the current trends, and those trends are what get shared on social media and turned into memes and other viral content. Protest music is out there, and there is an audience for it, but the audience is not massive enough to make protest songs nearly as impactful and far-reaching as they once were.

This paints a grim picture for those hoping for a return of protest music to the golden era of Bob Dylan and Nina Simone. It is hard, today, to craft a protest song that can appeal to listeners from many different genres that can also unify them behind a single cause. There have been songs that came close, like Childish Gambino's "This is America," but the constant flow of new music from artists ensures that popularity shifts from one song to another quickly. Despite a growing catalogue of protest music, it is unlikely that any one song could universally be called the anthem of a movement anymore. This speaks to the dire need for protest music to be produced in droves now. If single protest songs can no longer get the job done, the answer is to inundate the music markets with protest music so that no matter what genre somebody prefers, no matter which artist they are listening to, and no matter what their social ideologies are, they are staying informed and passionate about the important issues of the day. The time may never come again when one song can unite a generation behind a cause, but if every artist could

embrace the power and importance of a protest song and could channel it through their own genre and style, the future for protest music may not be so grim after all.

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Accessing 2020: Do You See the Same? Online

Link to YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXjJ-5eF5no>

Timestamps:

Static – 0:00

Sheriff Brown – 4:25

What's In a Name? – 7:54

38th and Chicago – 11:53

I Dream of COVID (Mama Said) – 16:41