The Revolution Shall Not Be Televised, but Heard and Streamed

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American protest music has been around for as long as music has been a vessel to express human emotion. Over time, advancements in communications technology were largely responsible for the spread of protest music. But within the last fifteen years, it is the creation of social media platforms and video/audio sharing and streaming services like YouTube that have not only empowered entire movements more quickly and efficiently but have also brought the concept of protest music to other shores around the world. This was most effectively achieved through the genre of hip hop and rap, which is known for its anti-establishment and rebellious theme. The protest music of this past decade is remarkably unique because of how much it has changed regarding spread and geopolitical range, but it lacks the ability to unify people, a quality that has made songs in the past iconic and everlasting. Instead, it draws upon the characteristics of music of decades past, begging the question of what the future of popular music in protest culture will be like.

Protest songs, also known as resistance songs, are songs that are strongly associated with a social movement. It is a form of music that strives to fight against the status quo. It does not conform to a certain style or emotion or issue – there are many ways for humans to express their discontent, which means that there is great variety in protest songs, from music genre to the emotions attached to it. The primary reason why protest songs are so critical for sociopolitical movements is because of its association with "collective singing". According to Yale sociology professor Ron Eyerman, "collective singing helps transform a loose collection of individuals into a more cohesive group, one that is better prepared to act collectively." Collective action is more effective against conflict with authorities or opponents.

While the subgenre primarily identifies with liberal causes that lean politically and/or culturally, far-right groups have created their own form of protest music as well, as exemplified by the genre of white nationalist rock

music and authoritarian rulers attempting to co-opt rap for themselves. Liberal protest songs are typically aligned with more significant social movements of history, from the enslavement of black people to the Vietnam War. For the sake of simplicity, this paper will concentrate on protest music that is largely impacted by the rise of social media and streaming music services, which primarily focuses on liberal social movements.

The American History of Protest Music

In America, what eventually evolved into protest music influenced by on-demand streaming services evolved from advances made in communications technology. Basically, the earliest form of protest music has been around since the Revolutionary War. “Yankee Doodle," now a children’s song, was a ditty originally used by the British to mock the colonists. The colonists in turn adopted the song to counter the British.

The enslaved Africans and their descendants had their own songs: “hymns with themes of freedom or escape.” The songs of the enslaved were borne of familiar rhythms and phrases. One song, “Go Down, Moses,” even served as code to help Harriet Tubman guide slaves on the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, the Union Army sang the song “John Brown’s Body.” The song was about the legendary abolitionist who attempted to raid Harpers Ferry. For much of America’s early history, protest songs were simple in lyric and structure. The songs were shared orally, dependent on rhymes and repetitive lines for easy transmission. They possessed a practical function that encouraged unity and motivation from its singers and listeners.

As time passed, and new genres of music came into existence, protest songs became an art form as much as any other form of music. They became a more widespread phenomenon throughout the country thanks to the invention of electrical music and radio. Thus, pop music was born. People could now recognize and connect with a song “outside of the oral tradition” of sharing songs by performing them live and learning them by ear. Because radio ensured that songs could be played again and again from time to time, songs could now adopt a more complex, stylistic structure, and thus convey more complicated themes and messages. Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit,” a song about Southern lynching, exemplified these characteristics for the first

time as a protest song and may as well be considered the mother of modern protest music. Radio brought songs like "Strange Fruit" to an audience spanning the nation. Although "Strange Fruit" was banned from public airwaves for being too controversial for the time, too many people had already heard the song, and its censure only made it more popular.

The mid-twentieth century was something like a golden era for protest songs with the popularity of folk and soul music coinciding with the social movements that swept the nation. The protest songs of these genres in this era grew very popular thanks to the invention of the television, which introduced live visual performances on late-night TV. Also, concerts became a new forum where artists and fans could interact with each other more directly, ensuring that the message was delivered to a huge crowd of people, in person, all at once. In this manner, Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" became an anthem for the working class, as listeners considered him to be an honest voice, a person who did not "pander" to the crowd. Guthrie's work went on to inspire Bob Dylan. Yet unlike Guthrie, Dylan did his best to never "[suggest] that he was a movement leader." Despite Dylan's efforts, the civil rights movement and Vietnam War protesters embraced his songs "Times They Are a Changin'"and " Blowin' in the Wind" to the point that today Dylan is almost exclusively known for his folk protest music. His songs were immortalized in history as the anthems of the 1960s. At the same time, soul music took off and became almost synonymously known as "freedom music," because the genre was strongly influenced by the music of black artists whose concerns were directed towards those of racial injustice. The tones of soul music varied greatly, from the angry "Mississippi Goddam" by Nina Simone to the "melancholy hopefulness" of Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come."

Likewise, the commonly heard phrase, "the revolution will not be televised," came from a song by the same name written by Gil-Scott Heron, a black artist who incorporated poetry and jazz together to make the song. The true meaning of the song was that the revolution would not be watched on television because everyone would be protesting instead. And once if the revolution is successful, then the television networks that once misnarrated or ignored the revolution would be taken down and replaced. The song

essentially argues that protest movements not a thing of the media or the government, but "the activists and those who wanted to make a change." Heron's song has become a major influence for many socially conscious rappers, like Public Enemy, who quote the iconic phrase in their own song "Countdown to Armageddon" in 1988.

In the 1980s and 1990s, those visual and musical performances on TV evolved, and the music video was born on MTV and VH1, thus allowing artists to express themselves through a visual means as well. This visual element is critical, as it contributes to how the song is recorded into history as the artist intended. As social justice movements faded into the background, protest songs of this era were primarily social and political commentary. Rap music went mainstream, and it continued the ongoing narrative of the struggle of being black in America, such as dealing with police brutality, best exemplified and anthemized by N.W.A.'s "F--- Tha Police." At the same time, the punk-rock scene established the "first concentrated feminist rock movement" - the riot grrl genre. While it was very short lived, the riot grrl scene was one of pure frustration. The music of this era generally spoke for the underdogs of society, the poor, the neglected and victimized by those in power, and sought to empower them. This practice of giving voice to those who did not have it in the past and empowering them proved to be a critical form of dissent on the global scale and continues today.

At the turn of the 21st century, the political climate of the United States was tumultuous following the 9/11 attacks and President George W. Bush's decision to invade the Middle East. The 2000s were starkly marked by the aftermath of 9/11, and the proliferation of the 24-hour news cycle only amplified the fear and paranoia that the American people felt. Despite this transformation in the media industry, several artists were critical of the political climate. Rock singer Neil Young released "Let's Impeach the President" over a music video that entirely consisted of critical TV news headlines, while Green Day released their iconic album American Idiot, a direct, biting criticism of President Bush. But these songs were merely isolated, standout expressions of an angry and frustrated attitude that clouded over the nation. The decade did not see an actual social movement – there

was no formal, nationwide "organized [group] that [strove] to work towards a common social goal" that protested the actions of the media and the government. While people were indeed shocked by devastation wrought upon the world as a consequence of the Iraq War, they never consolidated their frustration into a centralized movement the way the American people had done in the 1960s in protest of the Vietnam War and civil rights injustice.

But this lack of a substantial social force did not persist into the next decade. With the election of the nation's first black president Barack Obama, more niche, national affair issues such as wealth inequality, race, feminism and queer identity rose to popularity, just as it had done in the 1980s and 1990s through the short-lived riot grrl genre and the rise of hip hop and rap. With a Democrat, and a black man at that, in the White House, liberal artists were finally able to find their catharsis and bring about a new style of songwriting in response to social and cultural issues. Beginning in the early years of Obama's presidency, songs more focused on empowering the audience began to proliferate and motivate people, as opposed to the condemnatory nature of songs relating to sociopolitical issues during the Bush administration. This stark contrast in the tone of protest songs in these two periods could be attributed to which party possessed political power in the District of Columbia, but this obvious difference could also be due to the major shock, confusion, fear and feeling of powerlessness that Americans felt during the 2000s.

Streaming Like Wildfire All Over the World

For one to realize just how efficient and easy it is for a song to reach the ears of millions of people, they must look at social media's impact on the music industry. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter rose to popularity during the Obama era. Their activities and influence skyrocketed since then, and their relationship with music streaming services is now stronger than ever in today's political climate. Social media allows consumers a space to discuss and provide opinions on the music they listen to and to provide ways to share that same music with others. For example, Instagram lets users share a sample of a song on their Instagram Story feature. Its parent

company, Facebook, also introduced a “Listen with Friends” that allows for real-time music sharing. Snapchat periodically introduces a new filter that comes with the latest trending song. A significant portion of the content on the newest social media phenomenon, TikTok, consists of lip-syncing to popular songs both old and new, like its predecessor Musical.ly. All these ways of sharing music through social media work incredibly well thanks to their partnership and compatibility with music streaming services.

Music streaming services are simply “a way of delivering sound — including music — without requiring you to download files from the internet.” Users typically find, listen, save and download their music from services such as Spotify, Apple Music and Soundcloud, just to name a few. The marriage of social media platforms and streaming music services has quite predictably made a significant contribution to the music industry, which had been struggling economically up until the proliferation of said music streaming services .

Despite this mutually productive marriage between these two industries, one platform stands out in the fact that it is not exclusively considered a streaming music service: YouTube. In 2018, the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) conducted a survey that revealed 46% of all global on-demand streaming time (excluding China) is spent on YouTube, compared to 23% on paid streaming services, and 22% on free streaming services. It is free and does not require downloading. Yet while YouTube’s free, legal video streaming service has a huge impact on the global dissemination of the genre of rap and hip-hop, it is SoundCloud that aspiring rappers and artists use to start their career, all the while keeping an eye and ear out for their American music idols. They take note of the rebellious theme and the commentary on social and political affairs that pulsates through the lyrics and apply it to their own lives and environments.

From there, music artists in general, not just rappers, depend on virality to spread their message best catalyzed by the music video that typically accompanies protest songs. Thanks to social media, consumers are now capable of protesting and supporting a cause simply by sharing, retweeting, reposting, liking, and commenting on the song. The more views,

streams and interactions that a song garners, the more people are likely to support the cause the song makes a case for. From Lil Dicky's "Earth" regarding climate change to Childish Gambino's "This is America" regarding gun violence, school shootings, racism and police brutality, today's protest songs rely on virality and a timing that aligns with current events to gather support, firstly from the artist's fan base, then to other consumers. This is achieved through trending lists on YouTube or on popular, curated playlists like ones that can be found on Apple Music and Spotify. This model is quite reliable, to the point that it seems, from a consumer viewpoint, as though many music artists can count on the political sensibilities of their fans to make a viral song.

In recent years, the sociopolitical climate is centered around President Donald Trump. The liberal catharsis of Obama's era accelerated and intensified into a surge of unified protest that fed off virality. This virality was so potent that singer-songwriter MILCK was able to teach her song "Quiet" to a group of protesters *over social media* before performing it at the Women's March on Washington. The march not only set the stage for the #MeToo movement, but also was a direct response to the misogynistic, bigoted comments and behavior that Trump made. Trump's words, actions and policies make him an easy target of political songs.

Even rap, a genre that initially looked up to Trump first as a wealthy figure, then as a manipulative moneybag, dramatically changed its tune to condemning Trump with Nipsey Hussle and YG's "F--- Donald Trump." The song is significant in its blunt, daring chorus, which effectively works as a marching chant. Artists like Fiona Apple and the Cold War Kids refer to his "locker-room talk" and "small hands." A Tribe Called Quest calls out Trump for his Muslim ban, views on deportation and stance on police brutality in "We the People…" And this is not the only way music artists have protested Trump. Adele, Neil Young, and even Queen have banned Trump and his campaign managers from playing their music at events. This national, unified response to a singular issue that brought about actual, collectivized action is reminiscent of the social movements of the 1960s. Yet the very injustices that they tackle are more in line with the issues of the protest songs of the 1980s

and 1990s: race, feminism, and immigration.

This virality across social media and music streaming services influences artist-activists across the Pacific and the Atlantic Oceans, in Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and Japan. Many have been using rap specifically to speak out against military regimes, human rights violations, and nuclear waste production because of its rebellious reputation. But as rap becomes "a dominant form of dissent against repressive regimes," nations around the world such as Turkey, Tanzania, Angola, Iran, Malaysia, Morocco and even Spain have been arresting rappers for vocalizing their protests since 2010.

In Spain, rappers have been arrested for criticizing the monarchy and denouncing the police. They are then convicted under Article 578, a very broad and vague law forbidding any acts encouraging terrorism. An interesting aspect of this issue is where these rappers cite their influences – they mention Snoop Dogg shooting Donald Trump in a music video, Eminem wanting to see presidents dead in "We As Americans" and Ice-T's song "Cop Killa." After the Spanish government convicted 12 rappers in 2017, other rappers released a song together in protest on YouTube, and consequently "made rap even bigger." Across the Pacific in 2018, Thailand's people were protesting their oppressive military control. A rap group called Rap Against Dictatorship released a fierce, biting music video on YouTube that gained over 20 million views in two weeks. This music video is a flagrant violation of the strict censorship laws that the military had imposed, but also demonstrates just how oppressive the government had become at the time. These foreign rappers are making similar statements that their American counterparts have made, and only gained the bravery to do so after encountering them through music streaming services.

And these governments should be afraid: pop music – not just rap – does a very good job at priming a population's attitude towards a certain issue. Case in point: "Born This Way" by Lady Gaga. A study conducted in 2014 yielded evidence that "popular music affects public opinion by altering the standards for subsequent political judgment." The study observed subjects who listened to Gaga's song at different levels: being shown the lyrics as it

played, simply listening to the song, listening to the instrumental version, and a control group where the subjects did not listen to the song. The researchers then evaluated the participants' stance on homosexuality and on policies regarding gay rights. They found that "upon listening to Lady Gaga's song (either with or without lyrics presented), individuals tend to take into account genetic explanations to a larger extent when they form their attitudes toward gays and related policies."

This, according to the researchers, was evidence of classic media priming. Priming is a psychological effect where exposure to a certain stimulus affects how one responds to a subsequent stimulus. Media priming is a phenomenon where exposure to certain topics in the media stimulate certain ideas, which can then affect the standards by which people make political decisions. In other words, it's exactly what the Thailand military government was afraid of. Thailand's first democratic election since the military took over was set to occur in the few months after Rap Against Dictatorship's music video came out. They were afraid of the influence that the song's searing lyrics might have on the election results. However, as valid as their fear was, the people of Thailand remain in the grip of the military as of December 2019.

So, what is the future of protest music? In America, at the very least, it does not seem it will be very critically acclaimed. Despite all the sociopolitical upheavals occurring in the Trump era, and all the music artists lashing out, critics in more recent years find very few songs that possess that same remarkable quality that truly inspires change in the same way Woody Guthrie's work did. According to pop music critic Chris Richards, "contemporary protest pop feels increasingly prominent, deeply unimaginative and embarrassingly insufficient." Today's protest music invokes the songs of old, attempts to tap into the collective sense of nostalgia too much, and focuses on changing people's opinions as opposed to taking collective action. The closest that any song has gotten to do that in recent years is Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" - it strives for a very real optimism and possesses a real chantable chorus that has been shouted in the streets. But if innovation and novelty in protest music is non-existent in this era, social

media and music streaming services have certainly brought the subgenre to other places in the world where basic democracy and freedom of speech is threatened at a more severe level than in America. Perhaps, in the future, we'll be taking pointers from them instead.