

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #71

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Songs of Freedom, Songs of Protest Part One



As always, reader responses give me ideas for future **Book Notes**. In this and next week's **Book Notes**, I'll be following the suggestion of several readers who, in response to the two **Book Notes** in June on patriotic music, thought it might be interesting to canvass America's tradition of protest music.

If one of my *The American Tapestry Project's* major threads is "Freedom's Faultlines", those tales of race and gender, those tales of exclusion and the many times America did not live up to its stated ideals, then the songs those excluded sang as they fought for inclusion ring patriotic. For, as the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in his last speech the night before he was murdered, "Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right!" [1]

And, those "rights" found some of their most memorable expressions in songs of protest exhorting America, as King said, "Be true to what you said on paper." [2]

In this **Note**, we'll answer "What is a protest song?", and we'll consider three approaches to exploring protest music: a chronological approach, a thematic-genre approach, and although it sounds kind of silly a "Greatest Hits" approach. There actually are "Top Ten", "Top Fifty" protest song lists from reputable sources floating around the internet. Finally, we'll dive into two of the genres for a closer look at songs protesting environmental issues and, most famously, anti-war songs from World War I through the War in Viet Nam to Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In next week's **Book Notes**, we'll look at the classic abolitionist songs, the great songs of the civil rights and the women's movements. We'll conclude by taking a close look at the protest song most frequently identified as the greatest protest song of all time – the **GOAT** of protest. For now, it'll remain anonymous, but its back-story might come as a surprise.

What is "Protest Music"?

What qualifies as a protest and what is being protested?

While the musical style may be rock, classical, pop or folk in form, a protest song comments on current events as it seeks to alter or change society or society's values. Protest songs are cause-oriented. They speak to a social wrong needing correction. They are almost always linked to movements seeking change.

They have two purposes, maybe three: 1) to expose a wrong; 2) to draw attention to the movement seeking to right that wrong, and, 3) to energize the movement's supporters. Martin Luther King, Jr. said freedom songs "invigorate the movement – they give it unity and spirit". [3]

Protest songs, then, can be sorted according to the social movement for which they sang. In American history, examples abound. A shortlist includes the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage and the quest for voting rights, organized labor, the struggle for human rights, civil rights for black Americans and indigenous people, anti-war activism, feminism, gay rights, animal rights, and environmentalism.

Some protest songs were obscure, known only to the movements adherents; others became pop hits moving society in new directions. An example of the latter is Helen Reddy's 1970s feminist pop hit *I am Woman* which sang "I am woman, here me roar/In numbers too big to ignore. . . Oh, yes I am wise/But it's wisdom born of pain. . ." [4] Sometimes a song **not** written as a protest becomes thought of as a protest song because of its association with a cause. The classic example is Lead Belly's version of *Goodnight Irene* which came to be understood as a protest against Jim Crow laws causing black anguish where the singer laments he can only see Irene in his dreams. [5]

In a completely different vein, a protest song can be almost philosophical in its abstractness yet still be understood as opposing injustice. Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony's* choral ending *Ode to Joy*, based on Schiller's poem, hails the universal rights of all people. [6] It sings:

from Ode to Joy

Joy, bright spark of divinity,
Daughter of Elysium,
Fire-inspired we tread
Thy sanctuary!
Thy magic power reunites
All that custom has divided;

All men become brothers
Under the sway of thy gentle wings. [7]

Protest songs are also old – they were not invented in the 1960s as some myopic boomers tend to think. For example, *The Rights of Woman* is an 18th-century song punning on Thomas Paine’s **The Rights of Man**. Written in Philadelphia in 1795, signed by “A Lady” and sung to the tune of “God Save the King”, it included such lines as “God save each female’s right”, “Woman is free” and “Let Woman have a share”. [8]

Protest songs are also “heady” – they’re meant to make you think. Phil Ochs, a major but now almost forgotten 1960s singer, once said, "A protest song is a song that's so specific that you cannot mistake it for bullshit." [9]

The vast majority of American protest music fits in my *The American Tapestry Project’s* “Freedom’s Faultlines”, because American protest songs primarily sing of the excluded people’s quest to be included in American liberty and American freedom.

American protest songs are actually older than the country itself, with some dating to the American Revolution. The most famous of which is *Yankee Doodle*. *Yankee Doodle* started out as a British insult aimed at rustic – let’s say rube-like – American colonials the British thought dumb and oafish. “Doodle” being an English word derived from the German *doedel* meaning fool or simpleton.

The Americans had the last laugh.

They adopted the song, made it a marching tune and threw it back in the Brits’ faces. Usually played as a children’s song, *Yankee Doodle* was originally an Army marching song played by a fife and drum corps.

Nineteenth-century American protest songs dealt with three major issues: war, and the Civil War in particular; the abolition of slavery; and women’s suffrage. Not exactly a protest song, but also not exactly pro-War, the most famous Civil War tune was probably *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*. Among abolitionist tunes the classics include *No More Auction Block for Me*, *I Feel Like a Motherless Child* and *Slavery Is a Hard Foe to Battle* which ends with the stanza:

from Slavery Is a Hard Foe to Battle

“But the day is dawning nigh that Slavery must die,
And everyone must do his part accordin’;
Then let us all unite to give every man his right,
(and woman, too!)

And we’ll get our pay the other side of Jordan.

Then wake up the North, the sword unsheathe,
Freedom is the best road to travel!” [10]

[**] With lyrics written by a family member, in the mid-19th century *Slavery Is a Hard Foe to Battle* was sung by the Hutchinson Family Singers. An actual family – all of the group’s members were from the Milford, New Hampshire family of Jesse Hutchinson, a farmer, and his wife Mary. They are the forerunners of the great protest singers, songwriters, and folk groups of the 20th century. Their career covered all the major social and political events of mid-19th century America.



They sang about rural life and social issues, temperance, abolition, politics, war, and women's suffrage. Focusing on idealism, equal rights, and moral improvement, it can be argued the Hutchinson Family Singers invented the American tradition of protest music. [11]



[***] In the 20th century, the union movement, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights Movement and the War in Viet Nam dominated the protest genre. The early 20th century's most famous union movement singer and activist was Joe Hill. Hill traveled the country organizing workers and singing political songs. Known for his catch phrase – “pie in the sky” – Hill's most famous song was *The Preacher and the Slave*, in which he criticized religious types for advocating peace on earth while awaiting what he called “pie in the sky”. Joe wanted his pie now right down here on mother earth. *The Preacher and the Slave's* chorus sang:

from The Preacher and the Slave

“You will eat, bye and bye,
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay!
You'll get pie in the sky when you die”. [12]

A union organizer, songwriter, and a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (known colloquially as the "Wobblies"), Hill crisscrossed the country as an early version of Woody Guthrie's rambling man. He sang of the harsh and frequently violent life of migrant workers. Hill called for workers to organize to improve their lot. In doing so, he incurred the loathing of mine and railroad bosses.

Hill became a martyr to the labor movement, and became a folklore legend, in Salt Lake City in 1914/1915, when two men shot and killed a grocer and his son. That same night, vaguely describing a fight over a woman, Hill arrived at a doctor's office with a gunshot wound. Accused of the grocery store murders, Joe Hill offered no alibi or other story of how or who shot him.

In a controversial trial, Hill was convicted of the grocers' murders. Neither political debates nor international agitation nor clemency appeals from workers groups could save Joe Hill. In November 1915, Joe Hill was executed. [13] Recent evidence seems to suggest Hill was shot in an argument over a woman, Hilda Erickson, daughter of the owner of the rooming house where Joe Hill boarded. So, Joe Hill died to protect a woman's reputation. He became the iconic martyr of the labor movement celebrated in numerous folk

and protest songs. The most famous of which, simply entitled *Joe Hill*, became a 20th-century “hit” when performed by folk icon and doyenne of American folk and protest music Joan Baez.

Woody Guthrie’s *This Land Is Your Land* is undoubtedly the most famous of the Depression Era’s protest songs. Others, more obscure, include Aunt Molly Jackson’s songs about Kentucky coal miners including *Hungry Ragged Blues* and *Poor Miner’s Farewell*. A folk singer and union activist, Aunt Molly Jackson was literally a coal miner’s daughter. In a life littered with tragedies, she became a member of the United Mine Workers and wrote protest songs like *I Am a Union Woman* and *Kentucky Miner’s Wife*. In the 1930s, she went to New York City to raise money for striking Harlan County coal miners. She stayed a decade and was part of the Greenwich Village folk revival inspiring Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. [14] Her *Hungry Ragged Blues* begins:

“I’m sad and weary, I’ve got the hungry ragged blues;
I’m sad and weary, I’ve got the hungry ragged blues;
Not one penny in the pocket to buy one thing I need to use.
I woke up this morning with the worst blues I ever had in my life;
I woke up this morning with the worst blues I ever had in my life;
Not a bite to cook for breakfast, poor coal miner’s wife.” [15]

The music of the African American civil rights movement and the cause of black emancipation from first slavery then Jim Crow is wide, deep, and rich. We’ll examine it and the women’s movement next week. In the remainder of this **Note**, we’ll ever so briefly survey 20th-century environmental movement protest songs and the rich history of American anti-war songs.

You might think in the age of Global Warming and Climate Change, there would be more environmental movement protest music, but from the early 19th century’s *Woodman, Spare That Tree* to Joni Mitchell’s 1970’s *Big Yellow Taxi*, Mitchell’s song remains preeminent. And, sadly, even more, relevant in 2021 than it was in 1970. Recognized as the first environmental “protest” song, 1837’s *Woodman, Spare That Tree* includes such verses as:

That old familiar tree,
Whose glory and renown
Are spread o’er land and sea
And wouldst thou hack it down?
Woodman, forbear thy stroke!
Cut not its earth, bound ties;
Oh! spare that ag-ed oak
Now towering to the skies! [16]

Still considered the best environmental protest song, Mitchell composed *Big Yellow Taxi* on her first trip to Hawaii. She says she took a taxi to the hotel and when she woke up the next morning and threw back the curtains she saw beautiful green mountains in the distance. Then, when she looked down, there was a parking lot as far as her eye could see. She said it broke her heart... this blight on paradise for “They paved paradise to put up a parking lot”. [17]

The catalog of anti-war protest songs is so large and so varied, it’s hard to know what to include, what to briefly mention and what to simply pass over. Some of the songs are so famous as not to need noting, such as *Universal Soldier*, the

Buffy Sainte-Marie tune made famous by Donovan. Others are obscure or entirely forgotten, like the World War I pacifist song *I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier*. Most people have forgotten if they ever knew, that there was a strong church and Bible-centered pacifist opposition to entering World War I.

Once President Wilson led the U.S. into the war in 1917, that pacifist sentiment got swamped in patriotic war fervor, but the pacifist *I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier* had its moment in the mid-19-teens. One of the very first anti-war songs, recorded in 1914 by *The Peerless Quartet*, it was a major hit in 1915 selling 650,000 copies. Attempting to connect the women's suffrage movement with the anti-war movement, the song sings a mother's lament after losing her son in the war: "I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier/I brought him up to be my pride and joy". [18]

Protest music covered all issues in the 20th century, but the big two were the Civil Rights Movement and various incarnations of anti-war sentiment.

With the conspicuous exception of World War II – when national unity reached an unprecedented level never since recaptured – anti-war songs range from World War I through the War in Viet Nam and even reach into the 21st century with a number of anti-Iraqi War songs, such as Neil Young's *Let's Impeach the President*, criticizing George W. Bush, to Tom Wait's *The Day After Tomorrow* to Bruce Springsteen's 2007 album *Magic* one of whose tune's chorus asks: "Who'll be the last to die for a mistake. . . whose blood will spill, whose heart will break". [19]

Overwhelmingly, twentieth century anti-war songs fixate on the War in Viet Nam. The list is long. For the obvious reason, Baby Boomer's loom large in the listings. *Rolling Stone Magazine's* list of the ***Top Ten Protest Songs of All Time*** is boomer-laden with Country Joe and the Fish at #10 with [*I Feel Like I'm Fixin to Die Rag*](#). It also includes the Buffalo Springfield's *For What It's Worth* and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's *Ohio*, which is actually about the Kent State shootings during an anti-war campus protest. [20]

The list of singers and groups singing songs protesting the War in Viet Nam include Pete Seeger and The Weavers, who sang not only of war but of civil rights; Seeger's *Where Have All the Flowers Gone* was the signature song of that early era. Obviously, or maybe not so obviously, since he later rejected being called a protest singer, Bob Dylan's *Masters of War*, tops *Rolling Stone's* list. Joan Baez, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Edwin Starr; *Volunteers* by Jefferson Airplane; and The Doors' *Unknown Soldier*; Tom Lehrer's *So Long, Mom* and Arlo Guthrie's eponymous *Alice's Restaurant* are among the dozens of singers and songs from that era.

Many of you – most of you – know all these songs or at least have a vague memory of having heard them. Since neither space nor time permits, I'm going to focus on one of the era's leading figures whose star fades in and out of notice. Sadly, mostly out.

[****] Phil Ochs did not like to be identified as a "protest singer". He preferred to be called a "topical singer" commenting on the issues of the day. Not a "boomer", he was born in 1940, Ochs a prolific singer/songwriter and performer penned scores of songs during the turbulent '60s and '70s. [21] Politically active



throughout the decade and feeling pressure from not only the politics of the 60s and early 70s but also the pressure of fame where he always seemed to be everyone's "second choice" as voice of a generation, Ochs journeyed to the middle East then South America before returning to the States and living with his sister in Far Rockaway, New York where, diagnosed with bipolar disorder and alcoholism, he committed suicide at 36 in

1976.

Influenced by Woody Guthrie, weren't they all, Pete Seeger, Buddy Holly and others, Ochs most famous songs are *I Ain't Marching Anymore*, *Draft Dodger Rag*, *Love Me, I'm a Liberal*, *Outside of a Small Circle of Friends*, *Power and the Glory*, *There but for Fortune*, and *The War Is Over*.

Probably the most famous of Ochs anti-Viet Nam War songs was/is *I Ain't Marching Anymore* which, for the rest of his career, became his signature song performed to cheering audiences. It sings of a war weary soldier who laments its always the old who ask the young to die. It begins:

from I Ain't Marching Anymore

Oh, I marched to the battle of New Orleans
At the end of the early British wars
The young land started growing
The young blood started flowing
But I ain't marching anymore. . . [22]

I first became aware of Ochs in the mid-60s in Cleveland Heights, Ohio while I was in college and Ochs, whose parents had moved to Cleveland, occasionally performed at local folk clubs. By the time I got to Cleveland, Ochs was a local legend but had already moved on to Greenwich Village where he quickly became a key figure in the folk music scene. He wrote pointed songs about current events: war, civil rights, labor struggles and other topics. He described himself as a "singing journalist", saying he built his songs from stories he read in *Newsweek*. [23]

By the summer of 1963, he performed at the Newport Folk Festival and in his return appearance at Newport in 1964 he sang his *Draft Dodger Rag* – a satirical song that quickly became the anthem of the anti-Vietnam War Movement. It sings:

from Draft Dodger Rag

Oh, I'm just a typical American boy
From a typical American town
I believe in God and Senator Dodd
And a-keepin' old Castro down
And when it came my time to serve
I knew, "Better dead than red"
But when I got to my old draft board, buddy
This is what I said
"Sarge, I'm only eighteen, I got a ruptured spleen

And I always carry a purse
I've got eyes like a bat and my feet are flat
My asthma's getting worse" [24]

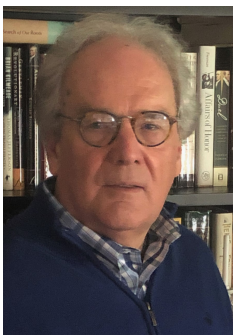
Along with Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, Ochs was involved in the creation of the Youth International Party, known as the Yippies. Ochs helped plan the Yippies' "Festival of Life", which was to take place at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Ochs supplied "Pegasus the Immortal", the pig the Yippies nominated for president in 1968. [25]

Not a protest song, but better way to remember Phil Ochs is his *There But For Fortune*. The song consists of four verses, each one of which ends with the line "there but for fortune may go you or I". The first verse is about a prisoner. The second verse describes a hobo. The third verse is about a drunk who stumbles out of a bar. The final verse describes a country that has been bombed. Which is to say, count your privileges, pocket your ego and walk humbly.

Protest songs – topical songs – songs in “The American Grain” – an integral and important thread – threads – in ***The American Tapestry Project***. Rather than just reading the names of songs, for a more complete experience of these songs listen to Episode #13: “*Songs of Protest Seeking Freedom*” of my ***The American Tapestry Project*** on WQLN/NPR which can be found here <https://www.wqln.org/Listen/Podcasts/The-American-Tapestry-Project> Next week songs of the women’s movement and the great songs of the African American experience and quest for inclusion – Songs of the Civil Rights Movement.

Tune in to my podcast, ***The American Tapestry Project*** on WQLN NPR 91.3FM public radio where I explore the post-1968 shattering of the American story by asking “What is the ‘story of America’? Is there such a thing? Is there only one story, or are there many stories? If there are many stories, how are they woven, can they be woven, together to tell ***the*** story of America?”

Past programs can be found on WQLN’s website [here](#), and on NPR One [here](#).



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