



Democracy Edition

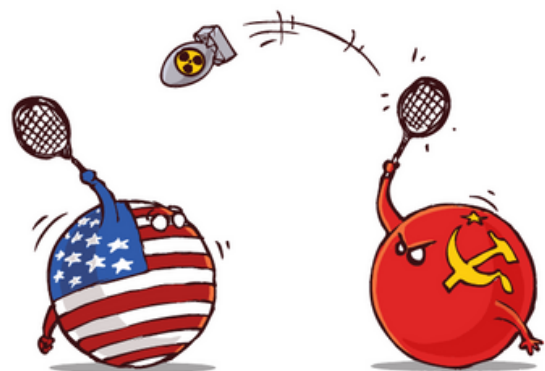
Semester 2 - October 2022

The Parliament of Western Australia (POWA) welcomes you to our online bulletin for young adults. EMPOWA brings you all the facts on how you can have your say in WA!

THE POWER OF PROTEST MUSIC

17th Century theatre critic, Jeremy Collier, said that “*music is almost as dangerous as gunpowder*” and that “*it may require looking after no less than the press or the mint.*” Critics have long feared the power of music and its ability to shape people’s thoughts and actions. In this issue we explore the powerful impact of music in protest movements and how artists from Bob Dylan to Lady Gaga have raised awareness of the fight for social change.

So, let’s “**get up, stand up**” and open our music apps, as we unlock the power of protest songs.



October 2022 marks the 60th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, a political and military standoff that placed the world on the brink of nuclear war. This 13-day event is considered the height of the Cold War, which pitched western democratic and eastern communist ideals against one another for a period of 45 years, following the end of World War II. The Cold War saw the USA and USSR, and their various allies, accumulate weapons of mass destruction, in what was known as the ‘arms race’.

The ever-present threat of nuclear war manifested itself in popular music during the Cold War-era, which dominated the second half of the 20th Century. Both East and West knew the power of music as a political vehicle and it is impossible to separate Cold War-era popular music from the politics of the day. Indeed, the strength of the messages contained in songs increased and decreased as political tensions rose and fell.

Jazz, pop, rock and folk music all provided a common ground for people who neither understood, nor agreed with the actions of their governments. While the East banned western books, magazines and jammed Western radio, music – particularly the protest song – continued to be a means of expression. Bob Dylan’s 1962 song ‘**Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall**’ is interpreted as a reference to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the horrors that would follow a nuclear war. The 1965 Barry McGuire hit ‘**Eve of Destruction**’, with its emotionally-charged lyrics referencing the civil rights movement, the nuclear threat and the Vietnam War, suggested that East and West were on the brink of ‘mutually assured destruction’: “**If the button is pushed, there's no runnin' away / There'll be no one to save with the world in a grave.**” The song was considered so powerful and controversial, that it was banned by many Western radio stations.



War and music are intrinsically linked, but before Vietnam, songs about war tended to champion traditional ideals, praise bravery and promote nationalism. The majority of songs about the Vietnam conflict, by contrast, questioned government policy and displayed confusion and agitation over decision-making. It asked questions and when those questions went unanswered, its lyrical hostility helped turn public sentiment against the war.

Phil Ochs’ ‘**I Ain’t Marching Anymore**’ was so powerful that when played at protest rallies, people in the crowd reportedly burnt their draft cards: “**Call it peace or call it treason / Call it love or call it reason / But I ain't marching anymore / No, I ain't marching anymore.**”

Creedence Clearwater Revival’s ‘**Fortunate Son**’ railed against nationalism and the apparent unfairness of the draft: “**Some folks are born made to wave the flag / Hoo, they're red, white and blue / And when the band plays "Hail to the chief" / Ooh, they point the cannon at you, Lord / It ain't me, it ain't me / I ain't no senator's son, son.**” Around the same time, the Beatles’ John Lennon would use his influence with the public to call on governments to “**give peace a chance**”.



Against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, the United States was also grappling with the civil rights movement. Civil rights protest songs were nothing new; Billie Holiday’s ‘**Strange Fruit**’, recorded in 1939, drew attention to the lynchings of Black Americans: “**Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.**”

However, in the 1960s, the civil rights movement took on a new energy, and while one of its most famous protest songs may have been accidental, Martha Reeves and the Vandellas’ ‘**Dancing in the Street**’ became a civil rights anthem: “**It's just an invitation across the nation / A chance for folks to meet / There'll be laughing, singing and music swinging / Dancing in the street.**”





By the late '70s and early '80s, a generation had grown up with the ever-present threat of nuclear war, and once again, East-West tensions were running high. Many young people felt frustrated by global events and their anti-establishment mindset gave rise to punk. The Clash's '**London Calling**' expresses concern over the once again growing threat of nuclear war: "**The ice age is coming, the sun's zooming in / Engines stop running, the wheat is growing thin / A nuclear era, but I have no fear / 'Cause London is drowning / I, I live by the river.**"

As musical tastes turned to post-punk and synth-pop, the anti-war messages continued to come thick and fast. Kate Bush's '**Breathing**' references surviving an atomic bomb, while Nena's '**99 Luftballons**' describes the release of balloons into the German sky being mistaken for missiles, triggering a nuclear war.

It wasn't just the threat of war that was inspiring protest songs; The Jam's '**Town Called Malice**' expresses anger and frustration at the economic hardships of the 1980s: "**A whole street's belief in Sunday's roast beef / Gets dashed against the Co-op / To either cut down on beer or the kids' new gear / It's a big decision in a town called Malice, ooh yeah.**"

Later, the Cranberries' '**Zombie**', written in the wake of the 1993 Warrington bombings, would lament 'The Troubles' that would continue to plague Northern Ireland until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998: "**Another mother's breaking / Heart is taking over / When the violence causes silence / We must be mistaken.**"

Other Cold War-era protest songs to check out:

'Masters of War' – Bob Dylan

'Red's Dream' – Louisiana Red

'War' – Edwin Starr

'What's Goin' On' – Marvin Gaye

'Ohio' – Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young

'Two Tribes' – Frankie Goes to Hollywood

'Russians' – Sting

'Minutes to Midnight' – Midnight Oil

'It's a Mistake' – Men at Work

'Dancing With Tears in My Eyes' – Ultravox



Ultimately, the Cold War drew to a close, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, but protest songs continued, shifting their focus more toward civil rights issues and the environment.

'**Treaty**' by Yothu Yindi drew attention to government inaction following the Barunga Statement and promises of a treaty between First Nations Australians and the Australian Government: "**Well I heard it on the radio / And I saw it on the television / Back in 1988, all those talking politicians / Words are easy, words are cheap / Much cheaper than our priceless land / But promises can disappear / Just like writing in the sand.**"

Bad Religion's '**Kyoto Now!**' expresses anger at nations' failure to agree to, or abide by, the Kyoto Protocol that was intended to lead to a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions: "**This world's going to Hell / Don't allow / This mythological hopeful monster to exact its price / Kyoto now / We can't do nothing and think someone else will make it right.**" Environmental concerns are echoed in Calexico's '**Cruel**': "**Cruel, heartless reign / Chasing short term gains / Right down to the warning signs / Birds refuse to fly / No longer trust the sky.**"



More recently, Lady Gaga's '**Born This Way**' has drawn attention to society's many inequalities and prejudices: "**No matter gay, straight, or bi', lesbian, transgender life / I'm on the right track, baby, I was born to survive.**"

Protest songs also accompanied the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, including Victoria Monet's collaboration with Ariana Grande – '**Better Days**': "**So how we gonna stop the violence, stop the hurting? / Stop the hatred, stop the murders / We're all human, that's for certain / Come together, we deserve it.**" In just the past few weeks Shervin Hajipour's '**Baraye**' ('For the Sake Of') has gone viral and become a protest song accompanying the civil unrest in Iran, following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini: "**For dancing in the streets / For the fear when kissing / For my sister, your sister, our sisters / For changing the rotten brains.**"



So, whether you're participating in democracy by marching to the steps of Parliament, or at a rally in Forrest Chase, or simply voting for your favourite tunes, music is a powerful tool for conveying messages. From call-and-response chants to viral videos, artists continue to create stirring soundtracks for civil engagement.



More songs to check out:

- 'Get Up Stand Up' – The Wailers
- 'Big Yellow Taxi' – Joni Mitchell
- 'Black Fella / White Fella' – Warumpi Band
- 'A Change is Gonna Come' – Sam Cooke
- 'Blowin' in the Wind' – Bob Dylan
- 'Born in the USA' – Bruce Springsteen
- 'Monkey Gone to Heaven' – Pixies
- 'After the Gold Rush' – Neil Young
- 'Freedom' – Beyoncé ft. Kendrick Lamar
- 'All Good Girls Go to Hell' – Billie Eilish

What do you think is the greatest protest song ever written?

Post a message on our socials with your answers.

Until next time, “keep on rockin’ in the free world”!