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RCM Sparks

Protest Songs: Music Used For Social Change

RCM Sparks is the Royal College of Music's learning and participation programme.
To find out more and get involved visit www.rcm.ac.uk/sparks

Protest songs or 'activist' songs are songs about a cause or campaign.

People protest about injustices in the world – things that they don't think are fair. These are areas of our lives that people think could and should be different and they want things to change.

Often, this will be about groups that aren't treated equally or fairly, or things we could all do better. With animals and the environment, they are voiceless and cannot protest so people protest for them.

Here are some things that people protest about:

- Animal rights
- Environmental rights
- Women's rights
- Civil rights
- Black Lives Matter

And lots of other things too...

- Anti-War protests
- The rights of refugees and immigrants
- Disabled rights
- Religious rights
- LGBTQ+ rights

Why do we have Protest Songs?

Protest songs are a way of setting the feeling of the protest to music. They can also be used as a way of condensing an idea into a memorable form.

Some protest songs really echo the feeling of the issue in the style of the music. For example, some songs are very peaceful, others loud and energetic, some have a sad sound and some are actually quite catchy.



Explore

- Are there any things that you have heard people protesting about?
- Has anyone you know gone on a march to protest about something?
- Have you marched or got angry about the way certain groups are treated?
- Who can make the changes people are asking for?
- Why do you think some Protest Songs are catchy?



Watch

In **this video** you will meet a famous composer of protest songs called Ethel Smyth.

Ethel was a composer and a Suffragette - that means that she wanted women to be able to vote for who was in power in the government. At the time, only men were allowed to vote, and it also wasn't very common for women to be musicians.

Ethel wrote a protest song called 'March of the Women' which became an anthem for the Suffragette movement, and it was sung on marches by women protesting for the vote! Watch the video to hear more about Ethel's cause and how she used music to capture the spirit of the Suffragette movement.



Listen

Here are some great examples of protest songs. These are songs that people still listen to or are very famous because of the cause they support. Sometimes they are songs that have been used again and again for different campaigns. Have a listen – you might even find you recognise some of them!

Anti-War Songs:

War - Edwin Starr

Give Peace a Chance - John Lennon

Civil Rights:

We Shall Overcome - sung by Joan Baez

Women's Rights:

Respect - Aretha Franklin

March of the Women - Ethel Smyth

Environment:

Big Yellow Taxi - Joni Mitchell

Political:

Nelson Mandela - The Specials

Get Up Stand Up - Bob Marley

Poverty:

Ralph McTell - Streets of London



Create

Write your own protest song

- 1) Start by choosing a cause that you want to write about, for example the environment
- 2) Listen to the 3 backing tracks provided – **Change, March** and **Protest** – and choose one that you would like to use to create your song
- 3) Now write your own song lyrics, to fit with your chosen backing track, about your cause. Use the tips below to help you!

TIP: Writing your lyrics

- Think about what your message is. Could you write it on a placard? Practice saying (or shouting!) your slogan
- Your message needs to reach people and make sense to them, so make sure it is clear and understandable
- Keep the listener's attention – it should be catchy and really memorable
- Make the chorus of the song out of slogans and big statements – for example 'Save the Earth!', 'No more war!', 'Hear our voices, loud and proud!'

TIP: Fitting your lyrics with your song

- When you listen to the backing track, follow the melody that is played on the flute and clarinet. Make up words to this tune. Follow it loosely – it's only a guide
- If your song has sections which repeat, like a verse or chorus, then you can either use the same words each time, or make up new words if you want to and you have time
- When there are words already in the song like 'change' or 'protest', fill in the gaps afterwards with your own lyrics
- Shout your slogans where there is space in the song to do so!