Protest Songs and Civil Rights Songs

Throughout history, music has been used as an expression of emotion, frustration and story-telling. Some of those stories have been painful to hear, such as racism and slavery.

Protest songs were written in protest against a variety of things, but many were written about slavery, and performed right up to the present day.

Recent events have made musicians use music to express their feelings again – some have performed songs to bring people close together during lockdown and others have protested against the racist incidents in America.

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Quality Standard Approved

Why Do People Protest?

injustice

peace

anti-war

freedom

Brexit

jobs

fracking

new roads going through towns

new airport runways

stopping of benefits

hospital closures

new presidents

human rights

environment

animal rights

Strange Fruit

A teacher called Abel Meeropol wrote a poem called 'Strange Fruit'. It was written in response to seeing photographs of the lynchings of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in 1930. He then turned it into a song.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood on the root.
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging' eyes and the twisted mouth.
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh.

Read the lyrics before listening. Choose two words that describe the mood or atmosphere that they create. Think why you have chosen them.

Strange Fruit

Listen to this version of Strange Fruit sung by Billie Holiday.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI

- Which instruments are playing the accompaniment to this song?
- There are only a small number of instruments playing. How does this affect or support the feel of the song? Can you explain your answer?
- Is there a steady tempo?
- Does the tempo suit the song?
- If the tempo was different, would the feel of the music change? Can you explain your answer?

Listening Activity

A Change Is Gonna Come by Sam Cooke

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPr3yvkHYsE

As you listen to the song, decide which of the listed instruments are playing.

Then use the worksheet to compare 'A Change Is Gonna Come' with 'Strange Fruit'.

Don't forget to use musical words in your answers if you can.

Music to Fit a Purpose

? Would either of these two songs be suitable for a protest march? Explain your reasons.

? What would you have to think about when choosing music for a large group of protesters to sing?

Consider the recent events in the news. Perhaps you might choose the civil unrest in America following the death of a black man by Police officers? Maybe you feel strongly about an issue related to the Coronavirus outbreak?

Write your own lyrics for a protest song – remember to use appropriate language for the topic you have chosen.