

Music As a Tool for Social Change

According to Oliver Sacks (*Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, 2007), a primary function of music in all societies is collective and communal, serving as an aid for religious ritual and to bring and bind people together. People sing and dance together in every culture, probably since they gathered around the first fires, a hundred thousand years ago.

Throughout history, music has, over and above its traditional function, also played a key role in social and political movements. From protest songs to anthems of solidarity, music has been used to express opposition, promote solidarity, and inspire action for social change.

In the post-1960s world, the 60s idealistic notion that “music can change the world” is perceived as nothing but wishful thinking. However, let’s look at the relationship between music and social change both during and after the 60s and see whether or not this is actually wishful thinking.

Under the rubric of “Freedom Songs,” music has played a vital role in the protest songs of the abolitionist, civil rights and labor movements. In the mid-20th century, a good example of the power of music in bringing about change was the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Songs such as “We Shall Overcome” (a gospel song strongly

associated with the American civil rights movement) and “A Change Is Gonna Come” (by Sam Cooke) have become anthems for racial equality activists. These songs helped unite the movement and gave voice in the struggle for justice.

Coinciding with the music of the Civil Rights movement, was the folk music that supported the late 50s and early 60s campaigns for social change, especially those dedicated to the anti-war cause. Then there was the folk and folk-rock music (the “protest songs”) of the 60s struggle of the New Left and the youth movement for social change, primarily in opposition to the Vietnam War. In the later 60s, rock music became the soundtrack for socio-political revolution.

However, this soundtrack for revolution phenomenon wasn't limited to the United States. An outstanding example of how music can support a revolution occurred in South Africa. The anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (1940s to the 1990s) in the 1960s was a time when black South African activists, poets, playwrights, and musicians struggled against the injustices of Apartheid state through the use of music. This has been documented by a film called *Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*. (The 2002 film takes its name from the Zulu and Xhosa word *amandla*, which means “power.” The documentary includes a collection of authentic South African “Freedom Songs” produced by Dave Matthews

and his music label.)

Another outstanding example of how music can support a revolution is what happened in Czechoslovakia. “The Velvet Revolution” (or “Gentle Revolution” was a non-violent transition of power in what was then Czechoslovakia, occurring from November 17 to November 28, 1989. Significantly enough, this peaceful revolution that established the Czech Republic was instigated not only through the demonstrations on International Student’s Day (November 17, 1989 in Prague) but also by a rock band—“The Plastic People of the Universe.”

When the Czech rock band Plastic People of the Universe was first outlawed and arrested because the Communist governmental dictatorship perceived that their Frank Zappa-influenced music was “morbid” and had a “negative social impact,” the celebrated poet Havel organized a defense committee that, in turn, evolved into the Charter 77 organization, which set the stage for Czechoslovakia’s broader democracy movement. Thus, Havel’s rag-tag community of writers, musicians, and political activists brought down the Communist dictatorship in his country. Havel saw the cracks in the wall of the regime: the underground publishers, the theater groups, and the Jazz Section, an official Party organization now sponsoring rebellious music. As the influential American social and political activist, Paul Loeb, has observed (talking about

Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia): “You start out defending a rock band and you end up bringing down a dictatorship—and who could have predicted it?”

“Banned and jailed under Czech communism, the Plastic People of the Universe helped to bring the regime down in 1989. Inspired by Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground, and friends with Vaclav Havel, their incredible 40-year history is one in which music and politics are inseparable.... Many rock musicians have preached revolution, although few can claim to have sparked one – but Brabenec, saxophonist and clarinetist for the Plastic People of the Universe, did. Indeed, of all the revolutions against communism that felled the Iron Curtain and transformed Europe 20 years ago, only one could claim rock’n’roll as its catalyst: that in Czechoslovakia, called the "Velvet Revolution", partly because it was peaceful – the clenched fist wearing a velvet glove – but also because the band that unwittingly lit the fuse, the Plastic People, were heavily influenced by the Velvet Underground.” (Ed Vulliamy, The Guardian, 9/5/09)

Today, in the 21st century, music is still a driving force for social change. Artists such as Kendrick Lamar, Beyoncé, and J. (Jermaine Lamar) Cole use their platforms to raise issues of police violence, inequality and the Black Lives Matter movement. They draw attention to important issues and engage in conversations that might not have

happened otherwise. Taylor Swift has also used her fame to support political causes of social justice.

Moreover, music can unite people through cultural, racial and geographical divisions. The universality of music allows it to cross language and cultural barriers, creating a shared experience that can help break differences and build understanding. So music has a unique ability to bring about social change and promote unity. Whether it's through protest songs or cross-cultural collaborations, music can inspire people to work for a better, fairer society.