

Music & Politics in the Classroom: “Politics and Protest in American Musical History”

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During the winter quarter of 2005, I offered a “Freshman Discovery Seminar” at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), titled “Politics and Protest in American Musical History.” Designed for UCSC's ten-week quarter system, this two-unit elective course met for two hours per week and was open to first- and second-year students (who were not necessarily music majors). The catalog description read as follows:

Starting with the era of the Revolutionary War and proceeding through post-9/11 clashes between art, government, and the culture of political activism, this seminar traces mainstream and radical musical responses to key events in American history.

Similar to Patricia Hall's course at the University of California, Santa Barbara (discussed in *Music and Politics*, Vol. 1, no. 1 [2007]), I hoped that my course would allow students to be “exposed to a historical overview, as well as variety in the type of music they listened to.” The original “sample listening list” submitted with the course proposal included the following repertoire (in rough chronological order):

William Billings, *Chester*
Francis Hopkinson, *Seven Songs Dedicated to George Washington*
James Hewitt, *The Battle of Trenton*
George Root, *The Battle Cry of Freedom* (and other Civil War songs)
Charles Ives, *They Are There!*
Scott Joplin, *Treemonisha*
Marc Blitzstein, *The Cradle Will Rock*
Ruth Crawford Seeger, *Sacco and Vanzetti*
Songs of the Wobblies (various)
Virgil Thomson, *The Mother of Us All*
Woody Guthrie, *This Land Is Your Land*
Duke Ellington, *Black, Brown, Beige*
Irving Berlin, *Mr. President*
Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit*
Aaron Copland, *A Lincoln Portrait*
Arnold Schoenberg, *A Survivor From Warsaw*
Charles Mingus, *Fables of Faubus*
Various artists, *We Shall Overcome*
Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach, *Freedom Now Suite*
John Cage, *Songbooks*
John Lennon, *Give Peace a Chance*
Phil Ochs, *I Ain't Marching Anymore*
Nina Simone, *Why? The King of Love is Dead*
Anthony Davis, *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*

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The Dead Kennedys, *Holiday in Cambodia*
Prince, *Ronnie Talk to Russia*
John Adams, *Nixon in China*; *The Death of Klinghoffer*
Various artists: *No Nukes*; *Live Aid*; *Farm Aid*
Carla Bley, *Looking for America*
Laurie Anderson, *United States I-IV*
Various by Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, etc.
Frederic Rzewski, *Attica*; *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*
Gil-Scott Heron, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*
Ani DiFranco and Utah Philips, various
Steve Earle, *Christmas in Washington*

The ten-week schedule moved rapidly through American history, with a strong emphasis on the latter half of the twentieth century:

Week 1. Course introduction; national songs (anthems); 18th century topics
Week 2. 18th and 19th century topics (Revolutionary-era and Civil War-era songs)
Week 3. 19th century cont.; WWI, the Harlem Renaissance, and Depression-era topics
Week 4. WWII and Eisenhower-era topics
Week 5. The Civil Rights era
Week 6. The Vietnam era
Week 7. Music and politics since 1975
Week 8. Post 9/11 issues
Week 9. Presentations
Week 10. Presentations

Students were evaluated on the basis of weekly assignments (targeted papers based on reading and listening assignments; mini-oral reports; etc.), attendance and participation in class discussion, and completion of a final group presentation. The class did not use a textbook; all reading assignments were made available in class or via electronic library reserves. I also referred students to a number of relevant websites, such as Freemuse: Freedom of Musical Expression (<http://www.freemuse.org/sw6334.asp>) and the Centre for Political Song (<http://polsong.gcal.ac.uk/overview.html>).

From the first meeting, students were encouraged to quickly choose a final research topic of special interest to them—in particular, I encouraged them to investigate music-political topics of international scope, even though the course itself focused on American music history. Suggestions listed in the syllabus included the following:

Music, Politics, and . . .

The Harlem Renaissance
The Depression era
The Works Progress Administration
The McCarthy era ("Red Scare")
The Revolutionary War
The Civil War

WWI or WWII
 The Korean War
 The Vietnam War
 The Iraq War
 Music and the military
 Music's function in The White House
 The music press's responses to 9/11
 Reggae's mainstream appeal in the U.S.
 Revolutionary music in Zimbabwe: Thomas Mapfumo and Chimurenga
 Latin America's Nueva Canción
 Socialist Realism in Soviet opera
 American musicians' involvement in opposing South African Apartheid
 The Black Panthers and the Black Power movement
 John Cage's avant-garde subversion of musical and social hierarchies
 Christian rock
 British punk's anarchic stance
 Industry censorship of hip hop lyrics.

Fourteen students enrolled in the seminar, and the small class size (indeed the reason for the "Freshman Discovery Seminar") facilitated candid sharing of opinions, information, and brief prepared reports. We began the quarter by developing a number of broad discussion questions:

- Why study music and politics?
- Why examine "history" or historical events (like wars) through music?
- In what ways might music be "political"?
- What might constitute political expression in music?
- Can music be political without text?
- Can music be political without relying on the explicit meaning of words?
- How might gender, race, ethnicity, etc. be expressed in music without words?
- How might musical conventions, structures, and performance practices imply social hierarchies?
- What are socially-conscious texts?
- What are the politics of popular music? What is it rebelling against (if anything)?
- How does money, commercialism, and a profit-driven cultural apparatus affect music?
- What is cultural imperialism?
- Is music treated differently during wartime?
- Can music be used as a weapon, and if so, how?

After introducing and pondering these questions, we considered specific, albeit opposing ways music might express political ideas:

1. through *patriotism* (national anthems, historical songs, pro-war propaganda music, military band music, etc.); and
2. through *protest* (music about race, class, gender, poverty, oppression; music that mobilizes, empowers, motivates, informs, and subverts; anti-establishment lyrics or groups).

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We also considered broad genres of political themes within certain styles of American music:

1. "folk" or "traditional" or "participatory" (unions, strikes, uprisings, protesting or documenting injustices and social inequality through field hollers, work songs, spirituals, blues, ballads, etc.);
2. "popular" (political lyrics, anti-war counter cultures, punk's anarchic stance, themes of racial inequality in jazz, empowerment and protest lyrics in rap and hip hop, etc.);
3. "classical" (glorifying leaders [French overtures; coronation masses], upholding religious superiority, conversion tools, court music, revolutionary themes [in the works of Beethoven and Mozart; Freemasonry]; operas about political figures and events, 19th-century exoticism, etc.).

We also broadly addressed the intersections between cultural life and political life: music as propaganda; the politics of religion; music making as a political act; the politics of censorship; and the differences between subversive music and subversive lyrics.

Weekly discussion topics, as well as reading/listening/viewing/writing assignments, were based on the following topics:

- Various versions of national anthems and the ways the Star Spangled Banner has been used since the 1780s;
- The role of contrafacta and broadsides in the early history of America's political song;
- The contrasting ideologies of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America" and Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land";
- Uses and types of Civil War songs (and how they are different from Revolutionary era songs);
- John Thomson's interwar piano method book for boys called *Let's Join the Army* ("during instruction, the teacher assumes the role of Commanding Officer, giving directions in 'orders' or 'commands' similar to the military manner . . .");
- Social critiques ("ignorance is criminal in this enlightened day!") implied by the libretto of Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*;
- Depression-era writings by John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger (in *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*);
- Themes of Communism, union organizing, unemployment, censorship, public vs. private funding for the arts (etc.) in Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*;
- Military recruitment songs (including "The Battle Cry of Freedom" for the Union Army);
- The treatment of abolitionist and suffragist themes in Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson's opera *The Mother of Us All*;
- Music and New Deal relief measures (WPA Federal Music Project, the Lomax collections, etc.);
- The arts as an organizational tool for groups like Industrial Workers of the World (the "Wobblies");
- The Harlem Renaissance and Ellington's "Tone Parallel" *Black, Brown, and Beige*;

- Lewis Allan (Abel Meeropol), Billie Holiday, and the story of “Strange Fruit” (and the recording “Strange Fruit Revisited” by Fred Ho and the Afro-Asian Music Ensemble);
- The historical significance and unifying power of “We Shall Overcome”;
- Singers as organizers and the folk revival movement (music at the March on Washington);
- Aaron Copland, *Lincoln Portrait*, and the HUAC investigations;
- Zionism; the symbolism of language in Arnold Schoenberg’s *A Survivor from Warsaw*;
- Jazz and the Civil Rights movement/African Transnationalism (Charles Mingus’s “Fables of Faubus”; Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach’s “We Insist! Freedom Now Suite”; etc.);
- Anthony Davis’s bio-opera *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* and John Adams’s *The Death of Klinghoffer* (and the post-9/11 reception of Klinghoffer);
- Black Nationalism and Free Jazz (Archie Shepp’s “Malcolm, Malcolm—Semper Malcolm”);
- The Last Poets, “When the Revolution Comes” and “Niggers are Scared of Revolution” (1970); Gil-Scott Heron, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” (1970);
- John Lennon and the FBI (documents from Lennon’s 248-page FBI file are available online);
- Henry David Thoreau’s “On Civil Disobedience” and John Cage’s *Songbooks*;
- George Crumb’s “Vietnam quartet” *Black Angels*; Frederic Rzewski’s *Attica*; Steve Reich’s *Come Out*; Christian Wolff’s *Bread and Roses* and *The Death of Mother Jones*;
- Vietnam era songs (Buffy Ste. Marie and Donovan Leitch, “Universal Soldier”; Sgt. Barry Sadler, “The Ballad of the Green Berets” [number one hit in 1966]; Phil Ochs, “I Ain’t Marchin’ Anymore”; Edwin Starr, “War”)
- Joseph Byrd’s “The Defense of the American Continent From the Viet-Cong Invasion”;
- Environmental and political issues addressed in the “No Nukes” concerts (Muse Concerts for a Non-Nuclear Future, Madison Square Garden, September 1979) and critiques of corporate rock benefits (Live Aid, Farm Aid, We Are the World, etc.);
- Charlie Haden’s Liberation Music Orchestra (and their recordings of “We Shall Overcome”; “El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido”; “Not in Our Name”; “This is Not America”; “America the Beautiful Medley”);
- The impact of Public Enemy’s “Fear of a Black Planet” (1989/90);
- Recent presidential campaign theme songs;
- Ani di Franco’s “Vote Dammit” Tour (2004) and the influence of “indie” rock labels;
- “Peace Not War” CD series (“all proceeds go to nonviolent groups active in the movement to end war and make peace”).

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In addition to the weekly assignments and additional material presented by me during class time, the students also worked on a mini-oral history project. They developed a list of specific questions and then interviewed peers and family members from several generations regarding their ideas about where music and politics intersect and how they approach the topic in terms of their own life experience. Another "field work" assignment required the students to bring to class (and briefly report on) any article relating to music and politics published in a current periodical. The topics presented in the articles were used as springboards for discussions about recent events. The articles they collected covered topics including a new book about conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler and the post-WWII denazification of German culture; the U.S. Congress vs. music file sharing; local (Santa Cruz) censorship controversies regarding racially-offensive lyrics; and the Warner Music Vote Drive.

For their final projects/presentations, the students were required to conduct independent research on any class-related topic of their choosing (but approved by me). For the presentations they had to create a handout for the class (with relevant examples and bibliography), and provide two sample essay questions based on the material covered in the presentation. The final topics in my seminar reflected the students' broad interests:

- "British Punk, Feminism, and Anarchy"
- "Socialist Realism and Soviet Nationalism"
- "U2: Commercial Whores or a Band With a Cause?"
- "Music Decency Trials of the 1980s: Censorship, the Parent's Music Resource Center, Frank Zappa, and Jello Biafra"
- "A Feminist Perspective: Female Singer-Songwriters' Expression of Violence Against Women"
- "Woodstock's Politics 1969/1999: A Conflict Between Artists and Audience?"
- "Queer Aesthetics: Displays of Sexuality as Political Expression in Music"
- "Songs for South African Freedom and the Zimbabwean Revolution"
- "Skinhead Politics and Music that Propagates Hate"
- "Folk Music and the Urban Folk Revival"

If I were to teach the class again (and I hope I can) I would include many additional materials and topics, including Don Walker's Spirew T. Agnew songs (set to variations of The Star Spangled Banner), additional film resources such as Elise Kirk's DVD titled "The White House: In Tune With History," Eddie Vedder's "Here's to the State," Steve Earle's "The Revolution Starts Now," a discussion of music and Shoah, a consideration of "musical memorials," the Dixie Chicks controversy, music in prisons, and other music and topics that have since come to my attention as central to the themes of the seminar.

The biggest challenge in offering this seminar was harnessing such a rich and potentially boundless topic in an alarmingly brief ten-week quarter. But the seminar seemed to be successful: we all learned a tremendous amount, and along the way, we became increasingly aware of the underlying ideological implications of all the music we encounter. I strongly believe that sensitizing students to such implications, by studying American history through its sonic landscapes, is a productive and effective way to combat political complacency and historical ignorance. I hope my description of our topics and materials will help others designing similar undergraduate seminars.

Supplemental Sample Bibliography

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Abstract

This article describes approaches to a ten-week, two-unit elective course (in the category of "Freshman Discovery Seminar") offered at the University of California, Santa Cruz, during the winter quarter of 2005. Starting with the era of the Revolutionary War and proceeding through post-9/11 clashes between art, government, and the culture of political activism, the seminar traces both mainstream and radical musical responses to key events in American history.