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  
Abby 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
The Dead Kennedys, *Holiday in Cambodia*
Prince, *Ronne 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).
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
- 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”).
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”
- “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 new 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


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.