The Voice of the People: The Influence of Music on Politics

Chelsea Ashworth

William Jessup University
Abstract .........................................................................................................................3
Introduction ..................................................................................................................4
Purpose ..........................................................................................................................4
What is the Purpose of Music? .....................................................................................5
Music and Government Collide ....................................................................................7
   The Soviet Union .......................................................................................................7
   David Bowie and East Germany .............................................................................11
Protest Songs in America ............................................................................................13
   War ............................................................................................................................15
   The Folk Movement and War Protests .................................................................16
Social Issues: Civil Rights and Protest Music .............................................................20
   Macklemore and Marriage Equality .......................................................................20
   Nina Simone, Beyoncé, and Feminism .................................................................22
   African-American Music and Racial Politics .......................................................25
The N.W.A. and the Message of Modern Rap ...............................................................26
   Kendrick Lamar: A Rising Voice .........................................................................27
   Racial Music and Major Broadcasts .....................................................................29
Policy Proposal .............................................................................................................30
Conclusion ...................................................................................................................32
References ....................................................................................................................33
End Notes .....................................................................................................................36
Abstract

This paper focuses on the history of the often-ignored history of music and musicians’ influence on public opinion and public policy. Using examples from the United States and abroad, it explores the enmeshment of iconic eras of music and milestone political eras and movements. Though “hot button” issues of both the past and present are addressed, the overarching theme is the importance of recognizing music as a metaphorical “temperature gauge” of culture. At the end of this paper is essentially a policy proposal for the policymakers. A policy mandating continuing education for legislators in the arena of current popular culture will be outlined. A particular focus of this policy is required immersion in the popular message music of the day.
The Voice of the People: The Influence of Music on Politics

Introduction

Politics, causes, and movements do not exist in a vacuum. While the act of policymaking is in the hands of government officials and comes to fruition via the efforts of those with extensive understanding of political science and knowledge of the law, legislators and voters alike are not exempt from the infiltration of passion and emotion in their political views and voting choices. Especially for the majority of citizens without access to the realms of high politics, music has the power to formulate and mold political views and to stir regular people to incite political change. Throughout history, music has been the glue that has bonded oppressed groups, a tool for spreading political awareness to everyday people, and the distinctive mark of any given era. In academic settings, history is traditionally viewed politically, economically, and industrially, and direct attention is rarely given to the cultural backdrop of the time. In reality, “history” is an all-encompassing term, referring to political events and scientific progress, as well as to the arts that provided commentary on the state of the world, and in many cases spurred social justice and policy change. After all, it is difficult to think of the Vietnam War without thinking of the hippie culture of its many protestors, or to think of the Prohibition era without associating the legislation with the rebellious jazz culture of speakeasies.

Purpose

Though enjoyed by most in some capacity, the arts today are generally dismissed as pure entertainment, irrelevant to the fields of politics, history, and science. Albums win awards, popular songs cycle on the radio, but music is typically not seen by legislators as a powerful, policy-changing force. Some music, such as unfiltered gangster rap, is even dismissed as a
harmful influence on society. Regardless of the subjective “good” or “bad” quality of music and its message, it is dangerous for those in power to deny the effect of music on everyday people, and, by extension, mobilized causes and calls for policy change. Music gauges the temperature of society. Angry, despairing lyrics indicate a faction of society containing angry, despairing, and likely politically dissatisfied people. Whether directly criticizing the country’s state and calling for change, or passively providing a commentary on a life of discontent, music expresses a condition. As a legislator, understanding the condition of his or her constituents is essential to fulfilling his or her promise to be a true representative of the people. In order to accurately understand the state of the people they claim to represent, a legislator cannot rely on presumptions, stereotypes, or just the orthodox vocalizations of politically active voters. They must immerse themselves into all factions of all their constituents’ lifestyles. This includes the arts, and particularly the message of current popular music.

This paper will explore the history of music’s monumentally important role in various milestone eras of United States policy with three key goals in mind. The first goal is to prove that music is more than entertainment and has the power to form opinions and unify individuals. Elaborating on this premise, the second goal is to prove that, because of its impassioning and unifying power, music can incite policy change. In detailing past and present examples of music’s powerful role in politics, this paper will explain that music does not simply observe what is happening in culture and politics, but changes what happens in culture and politics. Finally, a policy mandating continuing cultural competency education for current politicians and future political candidates, including immersion in the arts and popular music, will be proposed.

What is the Purpose of Music?
The universality of music remains a curious phenomenon. Musicologists and anthropologists have attempted for ages to explain why melody alone has the power to convey and evoke an emotional response in human beings. Though individual responses vary, people from every part of the globe tend to associate sound with feeling. Duke (2014) points out that, much like the roar of a dangerous animal evokes fear in humans worldwide, music in minor keys is generally interpreted as melancholy, heavy beats may provoke the urge to dance, and singing in unison promotes a sense of community (p. 2-4).\(^1\) If emotional and unifying responses can be evoked solely based on the cadence of an instrumental piece of music or the lyrics of “meaningless” songs intended purely for entertainment, an even stronger sense of passion can certainly emerge from music with a religious, ideological, or political message. Communal events from church services to national anthems to rock concerts show that as more voices join in a meaningful song, emotions rise and unity with one’s fellow enthusiasts is solidified. Various songs of unity are associated with key eras in American history, including church hymns, slave and work songs, and battle marching songs.

Professor Amy Beal (2008) categorizes the two ways of expressing political ideas through music and lyrics. The first is through patriotism, which includes “national anthems, historical songs, pro-war propaganda music, [and] military band music” (p. 3).\(^2\) The second music venue for political commentary is through protest songs, which includes “music about race, class, gender, poverty, oppression,” “music that mobilizes, empowers, motivates, informs, and subverts,” and “anti-establishment lyrics or groups” (Beal, 2008, p. 3).\(^2\) This paper will cover governmental use of patriotism in songs throughout the world, but primarily focus on the category of “protest” songs, specifically English-language, politically-charged songs released by influential artists that contributed to political views and policy change in the twentieth century.
Music and Government Collide

The universal capability of music to convey and evoke emotion has classically been used as a form of manipulation. Everything from the ominous instrumental soundtrack of a horror movie to the synthesized, patriotic music of communistic governments has stirred the human soul both through melody and lyrics. Participatory music in particular has the power to solidify participants’ commitment to its message. Ironically, though music is frequently dismissed as frivolous entertainment, it has proven to be recognized threat and asset to governments throughout history. Most Americans laud patriotic music as a healthy expression of national pride, and are moved by the swell of “The Star-Spangled Banner” in a public arena. The iconic closing line of the first verse “O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave, o'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave?” is a resounding testament to the freedom United States citizens have to enjoy both the patriotic music of their homeland and the countless other genres of music produced both domestically and in other countries (Key, 1999, p. 3). Nations with authoritarian governments, however, have classically banned outside music and forcibly promoted anthems that crossed over the line from patriotic to nationalistic.

The Soviet Union

The Soviet Union is well-known for ultimately enforcing its communistic agenda through threats of punishment. Two ways they attempted to squelch rebellion before it began, though, was by excessively promoting the superiority of Soviet culture and communism through propaganda, and by formally banning all alternative ideologies from penetrating the insular culture. In the area of music, Soviet leaders felt particularly threatened by Western music, including rock ‘n’ roll, jazz, protest and message music, and popular dance music. Though nothing compared to the rock ‘n’ revolution of the 1960s, the American jazz of the 1920s was the
first musical threat to befuddle Soviet leaders with its subversive, unpredictable melody, dance culture, and transracial artist and fan base. To the U.S.S.R., jazz was symbolic of unconstrained Wild West, and the America that represented the opposite of their socialist ideals. The Artistic Control Commissions did their best to remove American jazz influences, and particularly saxophones, from the country (Woodhead, 2013, p. 36).  

The Soviet Union’s counterattack against Western music was the synthesis of a “wholesome” Soviet culture. Understanding that people would always be interested in music and desire to have some semblance of arts and culture allowed for leisure and artistry, the government went to great lengths to manufacture a unique, state-approved culture that ostensibly did the dual task of both satisfying the people’s desire for arts and promoting Soviet pride, unity, and ideals. The Commissariat of Public Enlightenment arranged for operatic concerts with “safe” classics and Soviet-inspired new symphonies (Woodhead, 2013, p. 36). Woodhead (2013) describes this synthesized culture as embarrassing, garish nonsense, saying “Official culture meant men with bad haircuts belting out patriotic anthems at beefy matrons in cardigans, dancing bears, and massed choirs of soldiers” (p. 2). Some historians think that Soviet music had a far more sinister effect. Noebel (1974) writes that infamous Soviet dictator Vladimir Lenin believed that destroying an enemy’s music was the key to destroying an enemy’s society as a whole (p. 44).  

Toleration for jazz ebbed and flowed in Soviet culture, but it consistently remained a genre associated with rebellion against the Soviet ideology, as well as with loose morals. The unshakable politicization of jazz brought tangible frightening effects for its producers and supporters. During the Great Terror, musicians and concertgoers, particularly those who had been in communication with Westerners, were arrested and murdered. Jazz was more tolerated
during World War II, as some musicians made themselves “Soviet-friendly,” with some even gaining positions in official swing bands for the Soviet military. Post-war, however, repression resumed, and virtually every musician who enjoyed freedom and popularity during the war was arrested, with a particular crackdown on Jewish musicians (Lücke, 2007, p. 4, 6-7).

Jazz, however, was nothing compared to the concern that the influx of rock ‘n’ roll caused Soviet Union leaders. In 1964, the U.S.S.R. saw a regime change. Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who had promoted socialism and Soviet culture as hip, had lost majority support and was replaced by even less “modern” leaders. This pivotal event happened at the exact time that a monumental force entered the nation: a British band called The Beatles (Woodhead, 2013, p. 25). When examining The Beatles at face value, it is curious how impactful and threatening to authorities they proved to be. In reality they were four impish young men with scraggly haircuts, who sang lighthearted music that provoked dancing and singing. And, though in the later 1960s The Beatles became more political, the content of their earlier songs was limited to peppy dance floor music and schmaltzy love songs. But the presence of The Beatles’ music in the Soviet Union, through sneaky late night radio broadcasts and smuggled records, served as much more than simple entertainment to Eastern European listeners. Fan Artemy Troitsky reminisces that the Beatles had “the spirit of freedom” and boldly asserts that “the Cold War was won by the West . . . not by nuclear missiles, but by the Beatles” (Woodhead, 2013, p. 3 & 25). The national fascination with the Beatles grew, spawning Russian imitation groups who stumbled through the English lyrics as they spread Western songs throughout the country. Others constructed shrine-like havens to bask in the spirit of the free, Western 1960s with other Soviet fans. In spite of the labeling of the Beatles by government officials as “cultural AIDS,” the Beatles proved, ironically, to actually be cultural aids to the repressed non-culture of the Soviet Union. They
confirmed their subversive reputation when, in 1968, they released the satirical song “Back in the U.S.S.R.,” which openly disregards the self-important restrictions and synthesized culture of the Soviet Union while simultaneously paying homage to the country’s Beatles fans, saying:

Well the Ukraine girls really knock me out

They leave the West behind

And Moscow girls make me sing and shout

That Georgia's always on my mind . . .

Take me to your daddy's farm

Let me hear your balalaikas ringing out

Come and keep your comrade warm

I'm back in the U.S.S.R. . . .

Yes, I'm free!

(Lennon & McCartney, 1968)\(^7\)

Though reviled for obvious reasons by the Soviet government at the time of its release, a long-awaited victory for the Soviet Beatles movement was enjoyed by fans and government leaders alike, including Mikhail Gorbachev and Vladimir Putin, when Sir Paul McCartney played the song to 100,000 Russians in the Kremlin’s Red Square on May 24, 2003 (Woodhead, 2013, p. 1-2).\(^4\) In communistic, insulated societies, counterculture is often the only way to individualize and secede from the strict, socialistic ideals imposed upon a people. Andrei Tropillo, a man who dedicated his life to supplying U.S.S.R. citizens with millions of banned Beatles records,
explains the impact “This is what the Beatles did. They opened the door to Western culture, and that produced a cultural revolution that destroyed the Soviet Union” (Woodhead, 2013, p. 271).

**David Bowie and East Germany**

Much like the communistic rule of the Soviet Union, the East German government during the Cold War actively censored all forms of art that contradicted the socialist ideal. At the peak of the Cold War, English music artist David Bowie, attempting to recover from his harrowing personal life, took up residence in a nondescript neighborhood in West Berlin. It was there he was inspired to pen the title track of his legendary album, *Heroes* (Gillman, 2013, p. 1-2). After routinely spotting his friend and his friend’s German girlfriend meeting by the infamous Berlin Wall every day, he wrote the iconic song that serves as both a classic love song and a powerful metaphor for the division of the German people during the Cold War. The upbeat song “Heroes” turns political in its latter half, saying:

David Bowie’s “Heroes”:

I, I can remember

Standing by the wall

And the guns shot above our heads

And we kissed as though nothing could fall

And the shame was on the other side

Oh, we can beat them, forever and ever

Then we could be heroes, just for one day . . .
Maybe we're lying, then you better not stay

But we could be safer, just for one day

(Bowie, 1977)\(^9\)

In a poignant act of defiance, David Bowie performed a concert, including the song “Heroes,” in a divided Berlin in 1987. The wall served as a backdrop to the stage where Bowie performed to West Berliners, while thousands of East Berliners flocked as closely as possible to their side of the Wall to hear the music. Bowie famously called out them, “We send our best wishes to all our friends who are on the other side of the Wall,” and proceeded to play the song “Heroes” for all Berliners to enjoy. Bowie recalled the pivotal concert:

I’ll never forget that. It was one of the most emotional performances I’ve ever done. I was in tears . . . it was like a double concert where the wall was the division. And we would hear them cheering and singing along from the other side . . . even now I get choked up. It was breaking my heart. I’d never done anything like that in my life, and I guess I never will again. When we did “Heroes” it really felt anthemic, almost like a prayer. (Calamur, 2016, p. 2)\(^{10}\)

Just one week after the concert, U.S. President Ronald Reagan famously ordered “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” And, just two years later, in 1989, the Wall was obliterated, and Bowie returned to his beloved Berlin to play concerts to a united Germany. Bowie is still heralded as key figure in propelling public German resistance to communism and the Cold War. Upon his recent passing on January 10, 2016, the German Foreign Ministry released an official tribute to Bowie, posting on their Twitter account “Good-bye, David Bowie. You are now among #Heroes. Thank you for helping to bring down the #wall,” followed by a YouTube link to the
This is a testament to the immortal impact of music with a message and music as an act of defiance.

**Protest Songs in America**

While heavily oppressed communist societies like Russia and Germany dealt with direct confiscation of all Western music, the United States saw this rebellion manifest itself in a different format. The aforementioned examples of music-fueled political movements named two British musicians, the Beatles and David Bowie. The United States, of course, was tremendously impacted by the iconic “British Invasions” of the 1960s and 1970s. The pop culture infiltration of English musicians such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, the Who, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Eric Clapton, the Animals, and many more profoundly influenced and propelled the hippie counterculture and related rebellion-oriented movements in the United States (Perone, 2004, p. 22-24). However, not only has the U.S. enjoyed the freedom to welcome domestic and foreign music, they have also been one of the world’s top pioneers of multiple original music genres. Country western (and the various offshoots of Americana), jazz, gospel, blues, soul, disco, hip hop, and countless more nuanced subgenres are inarguably the product of American creative ingenuity.

With a culture constantly in flux and battling wars of both a social and physical nature, American groups have always responded to cultural events with original music. Marcus (2005), author of a Bob Dylan biography, comments on the enmeshment of music with culture, beginning in particularly at the culturally pivotal era of the 1960. Referring to the “utopian” blossoming civil rights movement and rising counterculture communities, he writes “No one heard the music on the radio as part of a separate reality. Every new hit seemed full of novelty, as if its goal was not only to top the charts but to stop the world in its tracks and then start it up
The many factions of American music have produced and continue to produce political commentaries on issues like war, racism, gender issues, crime, and the injustice faced by all sorts of people groups. These political commentaries left lasting impressions on listeners. For the everyday person, helplessly witnessing these issues and facing these issues themselves, hearing the impassioned cry of a well-known music artist placing these struggles into lyrics was often the refreshing call to action they may not have felt capable of initiating themselves. In his classic 1964 song The Times They Are A-Changin’, Bob Dylan offers a commentary that remains strikingly relevant today:

Come senators, congressmen

Please heed the call

Don't stand in the doorway

Don't block up the hall

For he that gets hurt

Will be he who has stalled

There's a battle outside ragin'

It'll soon shake your windows

And rattle your walls . . .

And don't criticize

What you can't understand . . .
For the times they are a-changin'

(Dylan, 1964)\textsuperscript{13}

The fact that Dylan’s words sound as relevant today as they did in 1964 is telling. Society is always on the cusp of change, and, fundamentally, the issues America is facing today are not drastically different from the issues America was facing at the time Dylan first proclaimed that the “times were a-changin’.” As it delves into examples of American music inciting political change, this paper will address problems like war and foreign policy, women’s issues, racial tension, poverty, and social injustice – all hot button issues then and now.

War

There is no type of protest song more famous than the anti-war song. War protests were particularly distinctive markers of the hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Much like the celebrity endorsements of today, extremely famous figures made their political stances, particularly on America’s involvement with Vietnam, known through their music. Perhaps the most famous example of a musician who capitalized on their fame to protest war was John Lennon, along with his controversial bride Yoko Ono. Lennon, of course, was revered as arguably the most dynamic Beatle, and Ono was generally regarded as the bizarre and hostile force partially if not wholly responsible for Lennon’s segue into solo interests and the eventual dissolution of the Beatles. When they married in 1969, they checked into an Amsterdam hotel and invited the press to join them. Believing no spectacle to be beyond the unconventional couple, news of the invitation garnered the attention of the public. When the press gathered, prepared for a lascivious exhibition, they were met with a Vietnam War protest, that the Ono-Lennons dubbed a “Bed-In for Peace.” Shortly after, they organized another “bed-in,” in a
Montreal hotel room, where they recorded the now iconic song credited to the Plastic Ono Band, “Give Peace a Chance.” Ono and Lennon cited the avant-garde project as an experiment in new methods of promoting peace. Though ultimately regarded as an act of “self-indulgence,” Lennon and Ono’s efforts resulted in the coining of a new term, an immortalized song, and a large mark on the social and political history of the Vietnam War Era (Archer, 2009, p. 1).\(^1\)

**The Folk Movement and War Protests**

Bands that combined a rock ‘n’ roll image, folk sound, and war protest lyrics rose to prominence in the Vietnam War era. Perone (2004) notes that these folk-protest musicians were effective in the political movement niches they wrote about, particularly by performing at anti-war and civil rights rallies to show support. They ended up changing the face of pop music (p. 21).\(^1\) These avant-garde folk musicians, like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Woody Guthrie, Johnny Cash, and Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young, unexpectedly won the hearts of enough mainstream Americans to gain traction and regularly enjoy slots on the Top 40 radio. Yet another uniquely American genre had been born.

Bob Dylan was the very picture of a one-of-a-kind genius. Born Robert Zimmerman, he changed his surname to “Dylan” at the age of 18 as an homage to the poet Dylan Thomas, who influenced Dylan’s ability to write the intricate, clever lyrics he paired with a wailing harmonica and raw acoustic guitar. Dylan’s nasally, uncontrolled, and glaringly unconventional singing voice drew, and still draws, criticism from many. David Crosby of Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young humorously recalls in his autobiography the first time he saw Dylan’s unusual style in person “I didn’t like him or his vocal quality because everybody loved him and I wasn’t as big as him and I was jealous as hell . . . I thought vocals should be pure and choirboyish . . . But there he was, expressing the value systems I respected and doing it marvelously” (Crosby and
Crosby’s observation is key in understanding the importance of music. An artist’s charisma, matched with moving lyrics and invigorating instrumentation, lead to a musical experience that inspires loyalty in an audience. The unpretentious, even amateur quality of the music of Dylan and his contemporaries appealed to people who were tired of essentially “pre-packaged” pop hits, often containing light, vacuous lyrics and earning repetitive radio play by default, much like some of the frustratingly sugary pop of today. Ironically, the attractive “realness” of artists like Dylan, who often collaborated with female folk sensation Joan Baez, led to this popularization of their edgy niche (Hajdu, 2001, p. 8). Since folk was considered a natural, unspoiled, and essentially a layperson’s genre, audiences saw the likes of Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, and Joan Baez as both their idols and equals (Hajdu, 2001, p. 73-74). These were artists whose interest was not a fast track to fame, but, rather a platform to practice their craft and promote their deeply held personal beliefs. Crosby and Gottlieb (1988) recall:

When Woody Guthrie burned THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS into his instrument and into his art, he foreshadowed a generation of musicians and artists who found their voices while Nixon debated Khrushchev, Fidel Castro consolidated the Cuban Revolution, while the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee organized sit-ins and boycotts and freedom riders started for the South. The new activists were young and they spoke to their peers directly, as equals. (p. 45)

David Crosby, jealous of Bob Dylan’s early days of fame, would find his own band, Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young, a key player in the same war-related music activism. The most impressive example of Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young’s action in war protest followed the tragic shooting at Kent State University in Ohio. Unarmed students of the university had been protesting the Cambodian Campaign, a series of military operations part of the American
Vietnam War. National Guardsmen ended up killing four students and wounding nine more. David Crosby’s bandmate, Neil Young, was deeply compelled to respond to the incident. In record time, within mere hours, he had written lyrics and music and the band had recorded the song. Shortly after, it was released as a single. The heart-wrenching lyrics read:

Tin soldiers and Nixon's comin'
We're finally on our own
This summer I hear the drummin'
Four dead in Ohio
Gotta get down to it
Soldiers are gunning us down
Should have been done long ago
What if you knew her and
Found her dead on the ground?
How can you run when you know?

(Young, 1970)17

Crosby describes watching Neil Young, overcome with rage at the graphic pictures of a young girl kneeling over a dead student, who had been shot straight through the mouth, sit down and write the song on site. They called the rest of the band, flew them to the nearest studio, and recorded the song that very night. The band felt compelled to not only express grief for the incident, but draw attention to where they believed the blame belonged: the Nixon
Administration and the wagers of the war. The song was released within the week and broadcasted on radio stations nationwide – besides the one it was banned from for speaking out against the Nixon Administration, especially because the National Guardsmen were under orders from the governor of Ohio, not the federal government. The moment following the whirlwind of the spontaneous writing, recording, and releasing process, was the moment, Crosby says, that he and the band felt some semblance of power over a situation that rendered the average citizen of American powerless and hopeless (Crosby & Gottlieb, 1988, p. 186-187). He goes on to explain what he feels is the root problem in situations like the one at Kent State “There’s been a huge frustration in me ever since I started to become conscious of the fact that the people who held most of the power – because they held most of the money – were so different from the people that I liked . . . I see it as a key element, a primary cause of the problems that mankind has everywhere” (Crosby & Gottlieb, 1988, p. 188).

Crosby’s point rings completely true today. The hippie movement, certainly laden with ludicrous lack of participation in society, immorality, psychedelic drugs, and unreasonable utopian ideals, is often dismissed as only an alternative lifestyle for restless, pretentious, and irresponsible young adults (Yablonsky, 1968, p. 308). Though in many cases true, the root of the determined counterculture efforts of the hippies lies in a truth that transcends eras and generations. High politics is concentrated to a small group of very powerful people. These people are capable of acquiring these positions oftentimes due to wealth and social standing. And, though the United States is a democracy, it is often left with corrupt legislators who do not always represent all or any of their constituents the way those constituents would like, especially when it comes to entrance into conflicts, foreign and domestic acts of violence, and support of nuclear war. This brewing contempt felt by many citizens reaches a breaking point when an
incident like the one at Kent State University occurs. Music artists have served and continue to
serve as a public voice when the individuals that comprise the public are bewildered by tragedy
and have no means of publicizing their anger and disapproval.

Social Issues: Civil Rights and Protest Music

Music has been a powerful tool in protesting the atrocities of war and landmark events
involving violence and governmental abuse, but it has also zeroed in on social issues throughout
history. With its inherent capacity to evoke emotion with the magnetic potion of poignant
melody, compelling instrumentation, and meaningful lyrics, music often appeals to the emotional
side of a social issue. Law and politics are often viewed through a utilitarian or business-minded
lens, with emotions, instincts, and personal convictions considered inferior or irrelevant factors
in mobilizing political change. Though feelings and emotions are fallible and can be
manipulatively preyed upon by someone with an agenda, the presence of feelings and emotions
in political views and movements does not negate the validity of a position when logic and
practicality are also present. In truth, scientific, business-minded, and practical as they may be,
humans are equal parts emotional and logical creatures. Music has the powerful ability to declare
a hard truth through a creative, emotion-evoking means. This has proven to be an especially
effective tool in the policy faction related to civil rights. Race relations, women’s issues, and,
most recently, marriage equality, have all gained national and international attention via music
artists with a message.

Macklemore and Marriage Equality

Seattle-based rapper Ben Haggerty, better known by his stage name Macklemore,
originally gained widespread fame for his catchy, lighthearted song “Thrift Shop.” Along with
his bandmate and producer Ryan Lewis, Macklemore surprised and swept the nation with his 2012 conscious hip hop ballad, “Same Love.” The song, from Haggerty’s perspective, explores the painful struggles of gay people in his family, community, church, and in the traditionally homophobic hip hop industry. Haggerty explains that he was motivated to record this song not only to demand marriage equality legislation, but to call out the hostility toward gay people in his own field of hip hop. In a 2012 interview following the song’s release, he said “[Homophobia and misogyny] are the two acceptable means of oppression in hip-hop culture. It’s 2012. There needs to be some accountability. I think that as a society we’re evolving and I think that hip-hop has always been a representation of what’s going on in the world right now” (Andersen, 2012, p. 1).19 Though Haggerty himself is heterosexual, his passion for what he believes to be a civil right is evident in “Same Love” and its accompanying music video. Haggerty emotively raps the transparent lyrics:

   It's the same hate that's caused wars from religion

   Gender to skin color, the complexion of your pigment

   The same fight that led people to walk outs and sit-ins

   It's human rights for everybody . . .

   When everyone else is more comfortable remaining voiceless

   Rather than fighting for humans that have had their rights stolen

   I might not be the same, but that's not important

   No freedom 'til we're equal, damn right I support it

   (Haggerty, Lewis, & Lambert, 2012)20
The song became a theme song for countless gay rights campaigns across the nation, particularly in Haggerty’s own state of Washington. It perhaps peaked in influence at the 2014 Grammy Awards, where Macklemore, producer Ryan Lewis, and guest singer Mary Lambert performed the song alongside celebrities Queen Latifah and Madonna, while 34 heterosexual and homosexual couples on the stage below them were legally married on live television. At this time, same sex marriage was legal in California, but had not yet become a federal mandate (Rolling Stone, 2014, p. 1). Haggerty and his now-wife, Tricia Davis, in a show of solidarity, did not marry until June 27, 2015 – the day after the U.S. Supreme Court declared the states’ bans on same sex marriage unconstitutional. Nunn (2012) comments on the musical and lyrical integrity of the track, deeming it a breakthrough for the notoriously vacuous reputation of popular music, calling “Same Love” “a far cry from the cheese-fest that usually puts commercial interest first, tenuous rhyming couplets second, and poignancy last” (p. 2). Haggerty firmly believes that this clearly anthemic song directly influenced his home state of Washington’s referendum allowing same sex marriage (Andersen, 2012, p. 1).

Nina Simone, Beyoncé, and Feminism

As they have in many fields, women throughout the twentieth century have struggled to be taken seriously as musical artists. Sex appeal has always been key in female artists gaining attention. However, respect is not often awarded to female musicians who are openly sensual. It presents a strange dichotomy that both expects and reviles female sexuality. Many female artists, however, dispelled stereotypes associated with being a female music artist and remain classic pillars of American music to this day. Two women, one of the past and one of the present, took particular efforts to advocate feminism in their music in two very different ways.
Nina Simone, a too-often ignored icon of classic jazz music, promoted feminism in the political sector via her music. Simone, originally intent on being a traditional classical musician, found herself entering the music industry in the 1950s, following a time where female singers, particularly female African-American blues singers, were successful but were regarded “simply as popular entertainers” associated with “sexuality and working class urban vices more than with technical skill or acquired artistry” (Feldstein, 2005, p. 1356). The unassuming Simone found herself emerging into a subgenre of her own, both in her musical style and in her public image. With her technical expertise on the piano and perceived “authentic blackness,” she obliterated gender and racial stereotypes and is lauded internationally to this day as being equal parts talented, sophisticated, and unabashedly down to earth. Simone was one of the artists primarily responsible for bringing attention to “the shame of American segregation and racial violence” to fans in Europe with her “burning political discourse” (Feldstein, 2005, p. 1358). Her efforts toward promoting feminism, particularly the ability of female musicians to open political dialogues were inherent, not explicit. One only had to observe her image, personality, and musical style to find themselves confounded by her natural resistance to the typical pre-conceived notions of that time.

Beyoncé Knowles, heralded as a modern day queen of popular R&B music, is an open advocate for feminism in a far more brazen manner than Simone. Knowles is lauded for her exquisite physical beauty and sensual image. However, she has made efforts to dispel the rampant assumption that the word “feminist” refers to only one kind of woman, and that that type of woman is a resentful, adversarial opponent of men, propagator of aggressive agendas, and an overall hostile, irrational person. Following the release of her song “Flawless,” which has an openly feministic message, Knowles was criticized by non-feminists and self-identified
feminists alike for claiming to be a feminist, yet wearing seductive, traditionally feminine clothing and having a husband and child. In her track “Flawless,” Knowles includes a sample of a speech by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who, ironically, addresses the exact errant presumptions made by the song’s critics. Overlaying music in “Flawless,” Adichie’s powerful speech says:

> We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, “You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man.” . . . We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. “Feminist”: the person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.

(Knowles, Nash, Hollis, Martin, & Adichie, 2014)

The sheer popularity of Knowles has attracted large amounts of attention to the deeper issues she addresses in her songs, and this song in particular. Wenninger (2014) praises Beyoncé’s attempts to lift the limits placed both on women in general and those who identify as feminists, saying “[Beyoncé] wants people to realize women do not have to lose their femininity or sex appeal to gain equality or positions of power” (p. 1). Though the philosophical musings of a pop and R&B icon like Beyoncé may seem tangentially related to policy at best, the issue of feminism and the “social, political, and economic equality of the sexes,” as Adichie puts it is far from irrelevant in politics. Not only is it an issue found in a number of hot button sub-issues in American politics—such as equal pay, women in positions of political power, and the definition of “reproductive rights”—it is an issue that the public is talking about. In this song and others, Knowles and others like her act not as mere creative entertainers, but as a mouthpiece for the general public.
African-American Music and Racial Politics

Of the many genres America as a whole can claim original credit for, the various genres pioneered by African-Americans are arguably the most influential and uniquely American. Jazz, discussed earlier in this paper as a major force of rebellion in the former U.S.S.R., finds its origins from the black Americans of New Orleans. The folk revival that inspired many of the protest songs by iconic artists like Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie was heavily influenced by blues music, which, again, originated with the black Americans of the Deep South. Today’s prominent genre of hip hop and rap was invented by New York African-Americans, and influenced by an amalgamation of soul, jazz, reggae, R&B, and more – all genres credited to the black communities of the United States and Caribbean (Bynoe, 2006, p. xx-xxi). From the work songs of Southern black slaves to modern day rap sensations, the black community has contributed massively to American music, all with a backdrop of ongoing oppression.

One of the earliest twentieth century African-Americans to not only impact music but draw blatant attention to a glaring racial issue was Billie Holiday. With her soulful, iconic voice, she moved millions with her mournful musical rendition of Abel Meeropol’s poem “Strange Fruit.” The chilling lyrics present a disturbing juxtaposition of the rampant lynchings of the Jim Crow South against the backdrop of the land’s natural, distinctive beauty:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,

Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,

Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,

Strange fruit hanging 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 burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,

For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,

For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,

Here is a strange and bitter crop

(Meeropol, 1937)²⁶

The N.W.A. and the Message of Modern Rap

Rap and hip-hop is undoubtedly the most influential and politically volatile musical genre in modern America. In the late 1980s, N***s With Attitude, better known as N.W.A. grabbed the attention of their colleagues, the emotions of general public, and, shockingly, the wrath of the FBI. Disillusioned with their own discriminatory arrests and harassment by the Los Angeles Police Department, along with the brutality and even fatal shots faced by other African-Americans both in their hometown of Compton and in other urban areas, the famous rap group released their famous song “F*** Tha Police” in 1988. As the name implies, the song is “peppered with lewd and vulgar language punctuating a string of grievances about police misconduct in Compton” and includes “a series of threats and violent fantasies about retaliating against the police” (Hochman, 1989, p. 2).²⁷
Despite demands from law enforcement to not perform the song in public, the band relentlessly performed the song to large crowds that sang the titular line with the impassioned rage of the group members themselves. The result was a shocking, unprecedented response from the federal government. In 1989, Los Angeles-based assistant FBI office director Milt Ahlerich spoke out against the band, reminding the public that 78 police officers had been “feloniously slain in the line of duty during 1988 . . . and recordings such as the one from N.W.A are both discouraging and degrading to these brave, dedicated officers” (Hochman, 1989, p. 1).27 First Amendment activists and members of the music industry were horrified at this government commentary. Danny Goldberg, a white entertainment executive affiliated with the group, said “It is completely inappropriate for any government agency to try to influence what artists do . . . It is completely against the American tradition of free speech and government non-interference for government agencies to criticize art, because such criticism carries with it an implied threat” (Hochman, 1989, p. 2).27

**Kendrick Lamar: A Rising Voice**

Unfortunately, it is obvious that the police-citizen tension addressed by the N.W.A. was not a mere phase of decades past. Los Angeles still has not forgotten the police beating of Rodney King and subsequent riots in 1991, and similar incidents continue to plague urban America. “F*** Tha Police” eerily mirrors the modern concern of police brutality today. 2015 Grammy winner Kendrick Lamar Duckworth (known by his stage name Kendrick Lamar), a Compton native like his N.W.A. predecessors, expounds on the fear of the police, crime, poverty, and resulting political alienation of the people in his hometown and other black ghettos. His 2015 song “Hood Politics,” present on the album *To Pimp a Butterfly*, which earned him Rap Album of the Year, says:
Slow motion for the ambulance, the project filled with cameras

The LAPD gamblin', scramblin', football numbers slanderin'

N----s name on paper, you snitched all summer

The streets don’t fail me now, they tell me it's a new gang in town

From Compton to Congress, it’s set trippin’ all around

Ain’t nothin' new but a flow of new DemoCrips and ReBloodlicans

Red state versus a blue state, which one you governin’?

They give us guns and drugs, call us thugs

Make it they promise to f--- with you

No condom they f--- with you, Obama say, "What it do?"

(Duckworth, Stevens, & Bruner, 2015)28

Duckworth and his contemporaries are voices for the many disillusioned people living in crime-ridden areas laden with frequent shootings by the police and shootings of the police. One particular message is very clear in Duckworth’s work: people in Compton have no sense of political relevance. In areas dominated by cyclical poverty, where gang violence is commonplace, and drugs and prostitution are regular forms of livelihood, no one feels compelled to start a grassroots neighborhood cleanup or write to their Assembly representative about policy change. In areas where literacy may even be scarce, scraping together to survive certainly trumps registering to vote. Paired with the rampant fear of law enforcement, these circumstances make for a formula of political alienation and even hostility. Duckworth says in his song “Compton”:
Now we can all celebrate, we can all harvest the rap artist of NWA America target a rap market, it’s controversy and hate

Harsh realities we in, made our music translate

To the coke dealers, the hood rich and the broke n----s that play

With them gorillas that know killers that know where you stay

(Duckworth, Smith, Cason, & Jordan, 2012)29

Racial Music and Major Broadcasts

Racially charged “message music” has swept headlines in recent months. From Beyoncé Knowles’s controversial, pro-Black Panther Super Bowl Halftime Show to Kendrick Lamar’s moving performance protesting prison violence, police brutality, and slavery at this year’s Grammys, media shows that the racial tension associated with the 1960s is far from over. Perhaps the most notable recent example of an anthemic, racially charged song that has won multiple awards is “Glory,” which is the theme of the moving Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. biopic, Selma. The powerful lyrics read:

The movement is a rhythm to us

Freedom is like religion to us

Justice is juxtapositionin' us

Justice for all just ain't specific enough . . .

That's why Rosa sat on the bus

That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up . . .
The biggest weapon is to stay peaceful

We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through . . .

Now we right the wrongs in history

No one can win the war individually

(Stephens, Lynn, & Smith, 2014)\textsuperscript{30}

**Policy Proposal**

This paper addresses controversial and longstanding clashes of political ideology throughout history. However, while the instinct in reading such a paper is to support or reject the examples throughout according to one’s own opinions and morals, this paper is not intended to endorse or oppose any particular song, artist, or philosophy. Though “hot button” issues of both the past and present are addressed, the overarching theme is the importance of recognizing music as a metaphorical “temperature gauge” of culture. The job of a responsible legislator is not to offhandedly deem any given piece of music to be “right” or “wrong” or personally appealing or unappealing, but rather to assess the lyrics, tone, and core message of the music. The music of today can be a cry for help. It can be a cry for action. It can be the only semblance of a voice for an otherwise voiceless community.

As elected officials, legislators have an obligation to hear the voice of their constituents, which is not limited to the voice of registered voters and the politically active. Not only is it an elected official’s duty to represent all of his or her constituents, but he or she will undoubtedly be a more effective legislator if they consider diverse viewpoints in taking legislative action. When it comes to tackling the negative conditions like the ones represented in Kendrick Lamar’s
music, legislators often address the problem at the surface. Cleaner neighborhoods, better law enforcement, and, in some cases, increased government benefits are presented as the solution to problems of crime and poverty. However, instead of proposing that the graffiti be painted over or the profane music be censored, perhaps legislators should ask why the graffiti, profane music, or other controversial assertion is there in the first place, and, most importantly, what its root message is underneath the offensive façade.

Searches for concepts like “cultural competency for legislators” or “continuing education for legislators” bring up countless bills and policies requiring cultural education for healthcare providers, teachers, and other professionals who deal with the public, but there are no such policies in place for legislators themselves. Rigorous education is required for professionals who are responsible for the well-being of the public, and much of it these days is focused on cultural competency, but whose actions are more relevant to the well-being of the public than an elected official? After extensive research on the power of culture, particularly music, it is clear that this is a faction of constituents’ lives that legislators must be aware of. Therefore, there should be a policy mandating continuing education for elected officials. Whether they are the mayor of a small town or a United States senator, every legislator should be compelled to delve into the raw, unconventional insight offered by the music of the people. Though seemingly bizarre, legislators, in whatever arena they are employed in, should personally reflect on and communally discuss the moral and political implications of current popular culture, especially message music. This policy would not include hoopla of any sort – no extravagant travel or luxurious incentives. This is not designed to be another form of pandering lobbyism or a taxpayer expense, but rather regular amounts of time set aside for exploring these issues at their source. How this would look – whether it would be through an “honor system” independent study of sorts, or consist of group
efforts to compile relevant information for discussion – can be determined by the venue in which these legislators work.

Conclusion

In *The Republic*, Plato (n.d.), via his teacher Socrates, says of music

“Music must conform to the law of simplicity. He who violates it cannot be allowed to work in our city, and to corrupt the taste of our citizens. For our guardians must grow up, not amid images of deformity which will gradually poison and corrupt their souls, but in a land of health and beauty where they will drink in from every object sweet and harmonious influences. And of all these influences the greatest is the education given by music, which finds a way into the innermost soul and imparts to it the sense of beauty and of deformity” (p. 37).31

This, of course, could spark an entire debate about censorship and free speech in the context of America. The key point, however, is that Plato and Socrates believed in musical censorship because they saw the power music had to stir the soul, and stir the people to action. Music was not seen as a trivial or benign source of entertainment, but rather a revolutionary potential catalyst that would threaten the “simplicity” of their ideal society. The same logic can be applied to American thought. However, rather than responding to this potential threat with fear and subsequent squelching of controversial music, those with lawmaking authority should realize and respect the power of music. And, regardless of their personal reaction to the music, those in power should make every effort possible to tackle the root of message music: the voice of the people.
References


Dylan, B. (1964). The times they are a-changin’. *The times they are a-changin’*. New York City, New York: Columbia Records.


End Notes


