

The Influence of Music on Social Movements

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ABSTRACT

Music has long served as a vital force within social movements, articulating collective identity, amplifying emotional expression, and sustaining momentum during times of political struggle. This paper examines how music, through its emotive power, lyrical messaging, and communal performance, has functioned not merely as a background element but as a dynamic agent of resistance and transformation. Drawing on historical and contemporary case studies such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, the Arab Spring, and the Black Lives Matter movement, this study explores the multifaceted roles music plays: from protest songs that unify and inspire, to digital-age dissemination via social media and festival performances that mobilize and magnify activism. Furthermore, the paper interrogates how music shapes collective memory, psychological resilience, and political messaging in activist cultures, while also recognizing the limitations and critiques regarding its commodification and fluctuating efficacy. By analyzing genres, performance practices, and sonic structures, this work offers a critical lens into how music functions as a cultural expression and a political tool in social movements.

Keywords: Social movements, protest music, collective identity, emotional mobilization, activism, digital media, music festivals, cultural resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Music plays a vital role in social movements, driving social and political change. It evokes emotions at protests, fosters political bonding, amplifies voices, and transforms dissent into expressive forms. Protest songs raise public awareness of social movements' principles and objectives, translating political values into action. Music articulates feelings—like anger, hope, and solidarity—that are difficult to express in words. It sustains contentious politics by maintaining momentum and highlighting public policy failures. Music defines demonstrations, adding structure and emotional depth; without it, protests can feel hopeless. Cultural artifacts, including music, influence the legacy of social movements, keeping their experiences alive in collective memory. Performers face challenges in creating music amid power imbalances and censorship. The transition from live experiences to digital formats creates new interactions among performers and audiences, enhancing social movements' impact. The music of the Umbrella Movement (UM) was a key tactical element, recognized beyond its direct messages. In Taiwan, the protests and films from the occupation of the Legislative Yuan in March 2014 drew significant public and academic attention. However, to fully understand UM's songs, it's essential to consider their context. My research focuses on musical elements like melody, harmony, and rhythm, alongside an analysis of how songs are presented in music videos and the political meanings conveyed in their lyrics [1, 2].

Historical Overview of Music in Social Movements

In the wake of mass mobilization, global social movements often appear from 'nowhere'. A few activists manage to succeed rapidly under a veil of secrecy with just a handful of pamphlets and unconventionally designed placards. Protesters trigger a snowballing effect, and thousands end up marching publicly to demonstrate their grievances with the political status quo. In Hong Kong, protesters joined a march against the Fugitive Offenders Bill on 9 June 2019 on a scale unprecedented in its history. In Berlin, hundreds of thousands turned up to signify solidarity with refugees on 4 September. In the midst of such mobilization, a spontaneous donation campaign funded the protest and lent anonymity to publicity as

activists put the poster up the night before. When mass mobilization breaks out, these cultural artifacts exert their influence on social movements, and those who do not share something more fundamental, such as a common ideology or social background, are still able to use culture to protest together. Music as a cultural artifact embodies a more resilient form of collective identity than other profane artifacts such as chants and banners. There has been a growing awareness of the importance of music to social movements over the last two decades, but there has also been insufficient attention given to the specific mechanisms through which music exerts an influence. Instead of using music as a binary identification of a variable, the consequential pathways through which music has an impact are demonstrated. Music contributes to this personal bodily-emotional experience ironically and unintentionally as a derivative cultural artifact, without the movement's aid. This musical analytic focus also reveals implicit tensions in the UMs and provides insights into the development of the UM. The focus is placed on an analysis of the (1) songs performed in the autumn of 2014, and the expeditious processes (2) through which songs were put forward and adopted [3, 4].

The Role of Protest Songs

While modern communication is quick and inexpensive, music provides an alternative medium. With its rhythms and notes, music can evoke emotions that words alone cannot. It is easier to rally people with a song than a low-key speech. The right song can make a protest movement feel justified and powerful. The protest song is designed to provide a forum for a movement to discuss itself and its opponents, while addressing others outside the movement with a plain message. Enthusiastic singing of widely known songs enables participants to gain a sense of unity and identity. Movement members and potential followers may both find common beliefs with the greater audience. Once a message is presented musically, listeners are less likely to argue in opposition. Most songs that have gained some standing for movements are popular; they are known and sung by thousands of people beyond the movement itself. Earlier on, many took the form of humorous or mocking songs that reject the legitimacy of opponents. Later ones were more sober, lamenting injustices and detailing grievances without any hope for change. Subjects of songs usually involve readily available knowledge about the movement or its problems. In other words, subjects are chosen because they are rhetorically useful rather than because they are of lower or greater importance within a movement. Songs are generally negative about circumstances outside the movement, while positive messages are directed internally. Aside from musical aptitude, movements rarely needed or wanted outside help for their protest songs. Though the folk music revival, with its growing popularity of protests, was in full swing, civil rights songs came mostly from within black communities. After some efforts to adapt existing white material to the movement, composers began to formulate original texts and tunes. There were also many popular sources among black folk traditions before the civil rights movement, such as spiritual hymns, call and response routines, ringing refrains, and bitter sorrows. After the emergence, many songs were written and heard locally, then adopted and spread through personal contacts, wide media coverage, and republication in mass-distributed songbooks. Songs were constantly reinterpreted, neglected, and forgotten, so civil rights advocates would seldom hear the same complete rendition twice. Instead of something new, it was as if participants always joined a service that had existed for many years. In 1962, a few months before the march on Washington, a song leader distorted a tune used there previously to the now famous words "We shall overcome". After only a few performances, it took on the character of a civil rights song, and hearing it during mass meetings cast deep feelings into the participants' minds, helping them to surge forth against mounting tensions [5, 6].

Music Genres and Their Impact

In the current political milieu of the United States, music, song, and sound continue to be exploited and molded into important modes of social change and resistance. Nonetheless, it is a contention of this essay that music lacks the unique sociality and power requisite to incite the mass mobilization and sustained action of movements that are generally understood as social movements. Music's intrinsic qualities — rhythm, melody, and timbre — compel attention in ways that enliven thoughts and feelings. In contemporary social movements, however, arousal and inspiration manifest as cooling inflows of content without deeper engagement with the implications of social change. The sociality that imprints itself on feelings in social moments is accordingly lost. In such a milieu, it is more than likely that music will 'become a chorus in capitalism's Karaoke machine' for corporate oligarchs and native populations alike to exploit. While there is great hope for the emergence of new movements and radical imagination across very significant public groups such as Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and the Arab Spring, and currently mobilizing populations across the globe, this essay will argue that music lacks the relevant

qualities to be a function of social movements in the contemporary United States. The following sections will explore how sounds and sentiments have been molded into modes of social change and resistance in the United States in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Discussed in turn are folk, free jazz, and punk rock, among other genres, as well as musical practices such as singing and the lyre. Discussed are movements widely considered to be social movements. It is understood that they exist on a spectrum of interactions with the wider social field broadly labeled as the social movement sector (SMS). This term is taken from the account of the gay and lesbian movement(s) where he defines the social movement sector as 'the people, groups, and institutions that together produce collective claims' such as protest events, songs, memes, and novels [7, 8].

The Psychological Effects of Music on Activism

The relationship between social movements and music has been extensively studied in political science, sociology, and ethnomusicology. However, the possible convergence of social movements, collective singing, and reconciliation through music is a less explored dimension. This paper analyzes collective singing as a process-based research tool to measure emotions in social movements and discusses the functions of collective singing within U.S. peace activism based on interviews with participants about a recent peace march. Interviews revealed seven functions of singing in activism, including bonding, diffusion, outreach, empowerment, wellness, strategic challenges, and emotional and practical amplification. Activation functions were related to activism, while reconciliation functions were connected to dealing with trauma. Based on these observations, the paper argues that collective singing is important because emotional expression is recognized as crucial for engaging with collective trauma and facilitating reconciliation. Music has a profound influence on human emotions, and there is a strong link between music and social movement theory. Music influences emotions and has a substantial role in creating and shaping social movements. Music is evocative in the psychological domain and increases mobilization and participation through the availability of organization. Music is emotional and provocative. The way music evokes and generates emotion influences collective experience, solidarity, and the scope and shape of protest. The role of music in activism is a complex phenomenon. The effect of music in social movements is multifaceted and includes easily accessible psychological, social, and structural functions. An extensive examination of the relationship between music and activism reveals a wealth of insights into the ways music impacts psychological effects, either enabling or constraining activism [9, 10].

Case Studies of Music in Social Movements

In February 2011, social media enabled thousands of Egyptian activists to use the digital platform of Facebook to organize protests against the political violence perpetrated by the regime of Hosni Mubarak. Two months later, Egypt's president resigned, along with 80% of the members of the cabinet, and government reshuffling was completed. In 2013 and 2014, members of the regime (which was forcibly ousted) were tried, both in the courts of justice and in the courts of public opinion. But the dream of a "new Egypt" with freedom, dignity, and social justice has since become elusive, and some of the post-revolutionary developments have been extremely disappointing. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, which promised social justice but was a pious and authoritarian regime, the subsequent military coup, the mass killings and detentions, and the crackdown on civil society and freedom of expression pushed Egypt to the brink of authoritarianism once again. Nevertheless, the protest persisted in new and surprising forms, some of which could not be stopped, such as the uproar of viral hashtags on Twitter. What is most striking about the protests in the aftermath of the revolution is that while they resisted immense threat posed by the state, they not only drew employment to existing performances in novel ways, but also created many new ones that featured Cantonese pop songs, bisous of K-pop stars, street calligraphy and other popular cultural practices. Music as part of a wider field of social practices, and relocates attention away from the political status of the protesting groups to focus on more ordinary aspects of their daily lives and social identity. This approach does not deny the importance of the state or power in orchestrating social movements; on the contrary, it explores how power might be resisted even while it is enacted and performed. Music, as manifested in performance practice, benefits from not emphasizing the organization of social movements or their political aims. It leads to further reflections on what embodiment means for social practices and on the nature of the collective styles [11, 12].

The Role of Music Festivals in Activism

Music festivals have become cornerstones of many activist movements. Athletic and art-based festivals can offer a sense of hope and belonging in global struggles that can leave an individual feeling lost. There is a tangible synergy felt between festival goers when they collectively feel admiration for a venue, band,

or the festival itself. This feeling brings them together to share and connect, understanding cultural, regional, and social background differences toward a united cause. At the large music festival stage, thousands become lost in sound while the bonded harmony of chant and cheers or shouting words of anger amplify cultural differences and similarities in action. Festivals have become an economic force in the music and cultural industry. Dances, chants, marches, and music concerts for causes ranging from anti-war protests to climate change to the demand for social justice are everywhere, capturing the attention of the dancing world. In these opportunities for activism, one unexamined dimension is music, especially its festival form. In recent years, global activism efforts have been cross-pollinated by the internet and other means and aimed to end wars, prevent climate change, and protect human and animal rights. Music lends urgency and emotional vindication to activist movements, addresses responsibility and consequences, and creates social/political awareness among vast audiences. Festivals are large spectacles of acoustic, ornamental, and olfactory diversity; beautiful bones built to frame moments of cultural expression. Yet they can also be moments of strife where the insect-like hope of a collective is shunned by those who think they know better. Within these two sides of celebratory and repressive are spectrums where variable geometric, temporalities, and phonics warp, create, and sustain feelings of belonging in a group that would otherwise be disheveled, separated, and crushed on their own [13, 14].

Digital Age: Music and Social Media

The highest volume of online discussions about an artist or their new song occurs just before or after the video release. Interest spikes mainly during new content releases; ongoing discussions are linked to these events rather than intermittent spikes. Fans discuss upcoming content and leaks before a release, often sparked by engaging teasers or promotional materials. Following a video launch, discussions and video views surge, then taper off into silence, often peppered with irrelevant topics. This aligns with findings on fake online user participation in electronic word-of-mouth. Thoughtful discussions about the artist emerge as they engage in attention-grabbing strategies before releasing new content, turning private excitement into public discourse. The teaser kicks off a series of activities that maintain fan engagement, leading to peak viewings shortly after release. This cycle returns control of the conversation to the artist until the next promotional push. The Web 2.0 landscape, including platforms like Twitter and Instagram, thrives with advanced social technologies. In this context, the role of catchy, attention-grabbing prompts for starting discussions is crucial. Although digital platforms enable widespread content creation, leading to a mix of quality, some exceptional works can catalyze rapid sharing and enhance viewer engagement in discussions [15, 16].

Challenges and Critiques

Amidst the myriads of social, political, and economic changes taking place in tandem with the development of new media technologies, the emergence of Chinese social movements in the decades leading up to the twenty-first century attracted extensive global scholarly attention. Music, as a preservation of cultural and social memory, is a powerful medium through which the socio-cultural continuity and distinctiveness of any given community are perpetuated. Musical practices contribute toward collective understanding of social action and common identification of cultural experiences, thus forming a foundation upon which collective action grows stronger. Sociality of music is thus a key to examining the continuity, transmission, and distinctive forms of pioneering social movements. Music is an important element of social movements. Music-making is often used in social movements as an emotional and symbolic tool to express grievances or challenge authorities, mobilise solidarity, and articulate desired outcomes. On the one hand, performance from the vocative contingent provides sharing and fulfillment beneath all the words, either explicit or implicit, and deepens the cognitive understanding. On the other hand, through the intention to play music before the assembly, the reproduction and retention of culture and emotional experience are expected. A growing literature addresses these questions about what music conveys, its meanings, and how it shapes and is shaped by its context of use by reference to social movements across time and space. However, current analyses treating music as a contextually constructed and contested social resource for social movements leave much unexplored about how musical practices are implicated in constituting social movement spaces, empowering or disempowering agents, and consequently changing their properties. Thus far, most studies have examined individual agents or specific songs, styles, or genres. However, less is known about the social structures of music in social movements and what social mechanisms are produced, reproduced, or contested by studying their musical practices. Hence, little is known about how a social sound structure is shaped by musical practices in social movements, how such a sound structure tunes and re-tunes its being through

time and spaces, and how such tunings transform the properties of space, agents, and power relations therein [17, 18].

Future Directions in Music and Activism

This paper examines a current event, the Umbrella Movement (UM) in Hong Kong, and explores its music to gain insight into how music serves as a cultural representation of social movements and creates its force toward social change. The UM broke out on the night of 26 September 2014 and represented the highest peak of the demands for democracy against the government's rejection of the implementation of universal suffrage in the Chief Executive election. Music was a music protest tactic, with artists actively engaging in different aspects, which is key to understanding not only why it gained massive support among ordinary citizens, but also what important factors shaped its characteristics and paths. Music was produced mainly to be performed live via social media, and various social movements and Hong Kong musicians and artists collaborated on this. This paper examines the UM through its music to grasp how music is a cultural representation that captures visual and aural experiences, and with the analysis of the music performance on social media, illuminates how music creates a force toward social and political change. Growing out of the Occupy Wall Street movement, the UM was a pro-democracy movement of mass sit-ins called by students, joined in later phases by citizens. Music was performed on site and live-streamed. Massive support was drawn to the movement, and in Hong Kong, bus fare hikes prompted mass protest actions in 2012; the lack of political reform resulted in the territorial elections of the Legislative Council being returned uncontested. Music plays a significant role in shaping or opposing collective identity by performing social movement events, and songs shape cultural representations on social movement events, where music as an art form elaborates expressive, relational, temporal, harmonic, textural, stylistic, and dramatic properties, while cultural and social qualities of music provide ethnographic insight into the life of events. Social movement music emerges in events, carried from one event into another, and iteratively extended from single voices into songs, mass song performances, and aural spectacles, and at the same time, interactively crafted by performers, speakers, audiences, media commentators, and music professionals. Social movement song performance involves social power, public drama, and performance democracy [19, 20].

CONCLUSION

Music's influence on social movements is both profound and multifaceted. From the grassroots energy of protest songs to the expansive reach of digital music sharing, it fosters emotional solidarity, conveys political messages, and energizes participants. It serves not only as a tool for mobilization but also as a historical record of struggle and resistance. Despite its potential commodification or temporary impact in certain contexts, music continues to be a resonant force that empowers communities and sustains movements across global and temporal divides. In an era increasingly defined by digital interaction and fragmented public discourse, music remains a uniquely visceral and unifying medium through which social change is imagined, performed, and remembered.

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