The Art of Protest Songs



‘‘We Shall Overcome’’ (performed by Pete Seeger) and ‘‘Biko’’ (written and performed by Peter Gabriel) are both *protest songs*.

Protest songs convey a social or political message. They can be about many different topics: peace / war, freedom / oppression or equality / segregation.

Protest songs denounce social or political injustice. A lot of them were written during the 1960s in America to protest against racism, racial segregation or the Vietnam War. But a lot of other protest songs were written in other countries, such as South Africa, Britain, Ireland, Jamaica, and many more countries, and talk about similar issues.

Protest songs are international and timeless. For example, ‘‘We Shall Overcome” denounced segregation in America and was associated with the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s whereas ‘‘Biko’’ denounced apartheid in South Africa and was released in 1980 by a committed English singer-songwriter called Peter Gabriel. Some people even say that Beethoven’s ‘‘Ode to Joy’’, written by the German poet Friedrich Schiller in 1785, is a protest song that celebrates universal brotherhood in difficult times and it is said to be one of the very first protest songs ever written.

Another famous protest song is ‘‘Imagine’’ by John Lennon. This song, which was originally released in 1971, is still relevant today as an anthem for peace and equality between people, regardless of the colour of their skin, their religion, nationality or social class.

Protest songs will not change the world, but they are sung by artists who want to take a stand for change and make a difference.

Other famous protest songs include:

* ‘‘Strange Fruit’’, by Billie Holiday
* “Blowin’ in the Wind’’, ‘‘Masters of War’’, ‘‘The Times are A-Changin’’ by Bob Dylan
* “Fortunate Son’’, Creedence Clearwater Revival
* ‘‘Ohio’’, ‘‘Alabama’’ by Neil Young
* ‘‘War’’, “Redemption Song’’ by Bob Marley
* ‘‘What’s Goin’ On’’, by Marvin Gaye
* ‘‘What God Wants’’, ‘‘Amused to Death’’, by Roger Waters
* ‘‘Sunday, Bloody Sunday’’, by U2.
* “The Ghost of Tom Joad”, ‘‘Born in the USA’’, by Bruce Springsteen
* ‘‘Machine Gun’’, Jimi Hendrix

1. Imagine you are a music historian. The sentences below are false and you need to correct them. 🕮 Read the article and 🖍 correct the mistakes!
2. Protest songs don’t have a message.

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1. They only have one topic in common, which is love.

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1. ‘‘We Shall Overcome’’ was the very first protest song ever written.

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1. Protest songs were only sung in America in the 1960s.

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1. Nobody sings ‘‘Imagine’’ anymore.

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1. Protest songs are performed by singers who only want things to remain the way they are.

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1. Time to work on some vocabulary!  Look up on the Internet or in a dictionary the meaning of the following words or expressions from the article.

* *to convey*: ………………………………………………………………………..
* *to denounce*: …………………………………………………………………….
* *an issue*: …………………………………………………………………………..
* *timeless*: …………………………………………………………………………..
* *to release*: ………………………………………………………………………..
* *brotherhood*: ……………………………………………………………………..
* *relevant*: ……………………………………………………………………………
* *regardless of*…: ………………………………………………………………….
* *to take a stand*: ………………………………………………………………….
* *to make a difference*: ………………………………………………………….