

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Protest music found a home in contemporary pop

In the streets and on 'Billboard,' artists crafted a soundtrack to archive and document this summer's latest iteration of the fight for Black lives



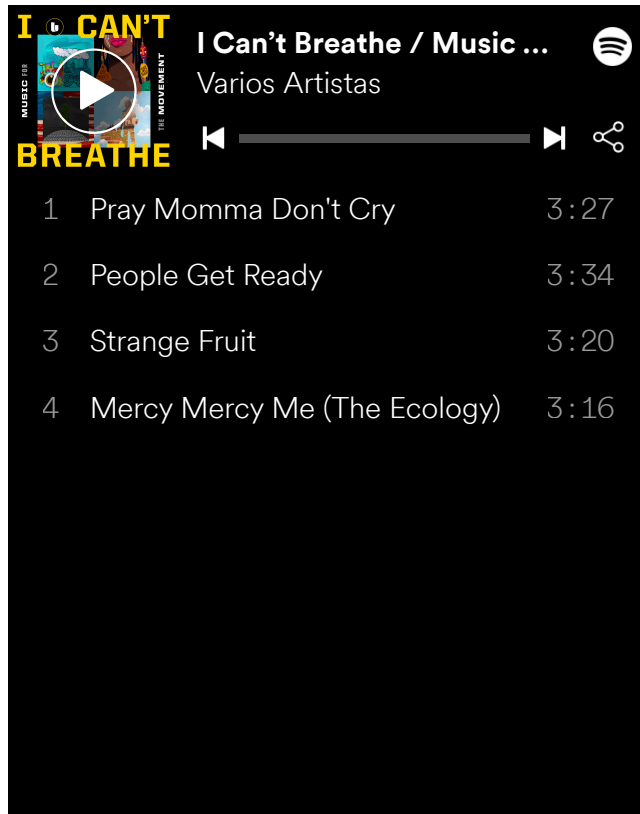
BY TAYLOR CRUMPTON

October 16, 2020

Over the summer, many musicians participated in a centuries-old tradition, the creation of protest music, a form of rhetorical advocacy that addresses injustice and to persuade listeners to initiate political and social change.

In the streets and on *Billboard* charts, musicians crafted a soundtrack to archive and document this summer's latest iteration of the fight for Black lives. Their songs encapsulated our collective anger, hope, rage, sorrow and joy. And protest music found a home in contemporary pop.

Whether it was to capitalize on the social movement's relevance in pop culture, such as DaBaby's Black Lives Matter remix of "Rockstar" with Roddy Ricch. Or a therapeutic outlet to express their frustration at the criminal justice system like Rapsody's "12 Problems."



And some of the music trended. "The Bigger Picture," Lil Baby's first protest song that encapsulated his response to the police brutality that resulted in George Floyd's death, received more than 65.4 million audio and video streams (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/abigailfreeman/2020/07/02/lil-babys-the-bigger-picture-is-the-most-streamed-protest-track-after-death-of-george-floyd/#4e5087036cd5>), within 13 days. On "The Bigger Picture," he rapped, "*I find it crazy the police'll shoot you and know that you dead, but still tell you to freeze*" (<https://genius.com/Lil-baby-the-bigger-picture-lyrics#note-20090029>), " in the accompanying music video, the Atlanta rapper stands next to Councilman Antonio Brown in a Black Lives Matter shirt, his fan base of more than 14 million followers thrust Lil Baby and *My*

Turn, his latest studio album, to No. 1 on *Billboard*. Lil Baby donated the song's proceeds to several nonprofit organizations, such as The Bail Project, Black Lives Matter and the legal team for Breonna Taylor.

ADVERTISEMENT

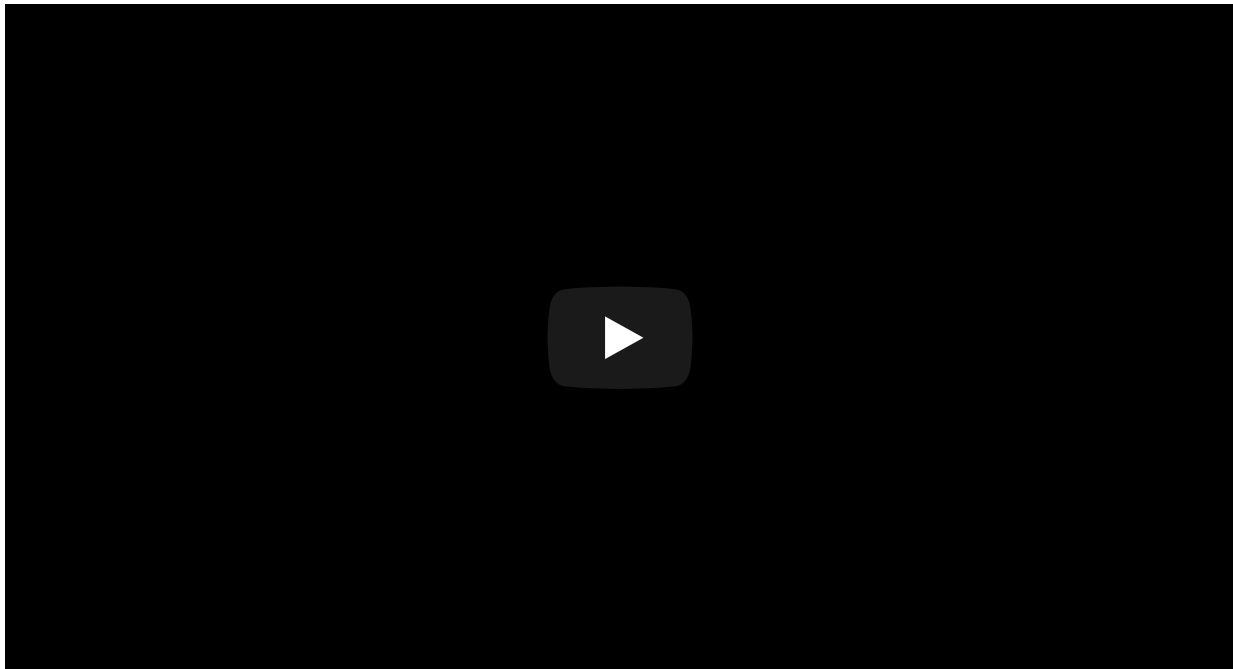


Protest music is embedded in pop music. When the contemporary music industry began in the 1930s, pop music consisted of big band, jazz and ragtime. Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," a protest song coded into a jazz tune, was the first to crossover into mainstream pop music. As pop music evolved, contemporary folk musicians used their Americana appeal to perform their protest songs on broadcast televisions because listeners were receptive to their musical style. After Woodstock in 1969, musicians no longer coded their protest songs in pop music because then it was trendy to be counterculture.

As a result of this summer's era of social movements is the comfortableness to discuss systematic racism in pop culture. At the 2020 BET Awards, Black entertainers recited the names of those lost to police violence in a segment titled, *BET Awards Highlight: Black Lives Matter: Ending the Racism Pandemic* (<https://www.bet.com/video/betawards/2020/highlights/black-lives-matter-ending-the-racism-pandemic.html>) . Later in the awards show, Anderson .Paak performed "Lockdown," (<https://genius.com/Anderson-paak-lockdown-lyrics>) " his song released on

Juneteenth about the violence experienced by protesters from law enforcement at this summer's protests around the country. He sang, "*Oh my/Time heals all / but you out of time now (Now) / Judge gotta watch us from the clock tower (True) / Lil' tear gas cleared the whole place out I'll be back with the hazmat for the next round,*" and was joined by Jay Rock who delivered an impassioned a cappella verse, "*Ready for the revolution, who ready to ride? / It won't be televised / So tell me, who ready to die?*"

While Keedron Bryant captured the hearts of countless Black moms across the nation as he cried out on "I Just Wanna Live," the prayer his mother wrote after Floyd's death. Bryant made an appearance on The Undeclared's just-released EP, *I Can't Breathe/Music for the Movement* (<http://hollywoodrecs.co/MusicForTheMovement>) .



Many Black musicians are faces of their own social and political ideology, especially during election years. The Black Lives Matter movement was birthed during the Obama administration (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/17/black-lives-matter-birth-of-a-movement>) .

The highly publicized deaths of Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin and countless names of Black people who lost their lives to police were streamed across social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. The #SayHerName and #BlackLivesMatter hashtags, for instance, inspired several musicians to produce Black Lives Matter-influenced music in 2015 to elevate the movement's cause, such as "Hell You Talmbout" by Janelle Monae, "Baltimore (feat. Eryn Allen Kane)" by Prince and "Be Free" by J. Cole.

The movement unified musicians and organizers in solidarity; they performed call-and-response chants and songs in the streets in order to build kinship and solidarity.

In 2015, attendees at a Black Lives Matter conference at Cleveland State University chanted "we gon be alright" – a reference to Kendrick Lamar's Grammy-nominated song "Alright" – after they successfully blocked police officers from leaving the area. One year later, Lamar spoke about the adoption of "Alright" by the Black Lives Matter movement in an interview with *The New York Times*: "When I'd go in certain parts of the world, and they were singing it in the streets. When it's outside of the concerts, then you know it's a little bit more deep-rooted than just a song." Lamar continued, "It's more than just a piece of a record."

RELATED STORIES

Curtis Mayfield created a hybrid of spirit and soul that became the soundtrack for a movement (<https://theundefeated.com/features/curtis-mayfield-created-a-hybrid-of-spirit-and-soul-that-became-the-soundtrack-for-a-movement/>)

'I Can't Breathe' is indeed the 'Music for the Movement' (<https://theundefeated.com/features/i-cant-breathe-is-indeed-the-music-for-the-movement/>)

Finding the voices of young Black activists in Louisville (<https://theundefeated.com/features/finding-the-voices-of-young-black-activists-in-louisville/>)

I cried for Breonna Taylor and all the Black women in my life

(<https://theundefeated.com/features/i-cried-for-breonna-taylor-and-all-the-black-women-in-my-life/>)

Brittney Griner: What it means to wear Breonna Taylor's name on my jersey

(<https://theundefeated.com/features/brittney-griner-what-it-means-to-wear-breonna-taylor-name-on-my-jersey/>)

Black athletes were exhausted with bearing the dead on their shoulders

(<https://theundefeated.com/features/black-athletes-black-lives-matter-protest/>)

Naomi Osaka made sure Black lives mattered at the US Open

(<https://theundefeated.com/features/naomi-osaka-made-sure-black-lives-mattered-at-the-us-open/>)

The next year in 2016, then-quarterback Colin Kaepernick started his protest against racial injustice by taking a knee during the national anthem at a San Francisco 49ers game. His actions politicized the NFL for its racialized power dynamics between its Black players and predominantly white team owners. Kaepernick ushered in a new era of social activism in Black athletes on how to use their celebrity status for social change.

On the eve of Super Bowl 50, Beyoncé released “Formation” (<https://www.mic.com/articles/134573/formation-lyrics-meaning-behind-beyonc-s-new-black-power-anthem#.S6K1YUUEo>) .” Known in pop culture for its explicit pro-Black lyrics, the song was accompanied by a Black Panther Party (<https://www.mic.com/articles/134594/the-important-message-behind-beyonce-s-dancer-s-outfits-capped-off-her-most-important-week#.c38QISrqW>) -inspired performance at the football’s biggest event of the year. Beyoncé’s decision placed her in the legacy of Black musicians who created moments in pop culture to garner attention for social movements and their stance on cultural activism. Beyoncé captivated American audiences to focus on Black lives in the 2016 historic presidential election year, where residents had the opportunity to elect the first woman president. Months later, she performed the song again at a campaign rally

for then-Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton. “We have to think about the future of our daughters, of our sons, and vote for someone who cares for them as much as we do,” she said at the rally (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/see-beyonces-powerful-speech-at-jay-zs-hillary-clinton-rally-116255/>) .

>In 2004, Sean “Diddy” Combs created “Vote or Die,” a campaign slogan created to garner the youth vote for the presidential election. The youth vote in the 2004 presidential election was the biggest turnout since 1972, according to Thomas E. Patterson, author of *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty*, a book that examined declines in voter participation. Sixteen years ago, musicians such as Mary J. Blige, Mariah Carey and 50 Cent focused their political advocacy on “Vote or Die.” That same year, Combs said the slogan was selected because the occupant of the Oval Office, who was then-President George W. Bush, makes life-threatening decisions that affect millions of Americans, according to *WWD*. Combs spoke about the musicians’ influential power in pop culture: “We have the power to make things cool, hot and sexy, from the clothes we wear to the cars we drive to the bling we buy (<https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-features/p-diddy-in-8216-vote-or-die-8217-campaign-706486/>) .”

Now Combs will relaunch his “Vote or Die! (<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/sean-combs-vote-or-die-campaign-relaunches-with-young-voters-study-tv-episodes>) ” campaign to persuade Generation Z, a voting bloc of 24 million first-time voters, (<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far/>) to participate in this year’s presidential election.

DIA DIPASUPIL/GETTY IMAGES

Megan Thee Stallion attends Rolling Stone Live: Atlanta at The Goat Farm 2019 in Atlanta.

Recently, rapper Megan Thee Stallion penned an op-ed for *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/opinion/megan-thee-stallion-black-women.html>) about her advocacy for Black women: “In the weeks leading up to the election, Black women are expected once again to deliver victory for Democratic candidates. We have gone from being unable to vote legally to a highly courted voting bloc – all in little more than a century.” She closed: “We know that after the last ballot is cast and the vote is tallied, we are likely to go back to fighting for ourselves. Because at least for now, that’s all we have.”

On the season premiere of *Saturday Night Live*, the 25-year-old rapper used her debut performance to make a politically charged statement to Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron for his treatment of the Taylor case.

In her op-ed, she described it as “good trouble, necessary trouble,” a nod to the late Congressman John Lewis, but in the history of pop music, her performance was the latest in a lineage of Black musicians who incorporated their political stance into entertainment.

Taylor Crumpton is a music, pop culture and politics writer from Dallas. Taylor’s writing has appeared in a variety of publications, including Wall Street Journal, Harper’s Bazaar, NPR, Pitchfork, Nylon, Playboy, Marie Claire and others.

YOU MAY LIKE

Sponsored by Taboola

Cha-Ching. Earn Unlimited 1.5% Cash Rewards.

Wells Fargo Cash Wise Visa®

The Greatest 3-Point Shooters in NBA History, Ranked

New Arena

Hey friend! Can I help you save on car insurance?

Progressive | Auto Insurance Quotes

CCPA Notice