Rap Music as a component of African-American Culture

Music is an integral component of African-American culture, and therefore it has always been a part of African-American politics and a powerful agent of political socialization. From the inchoate field hollers during slavery to rap music at the end of the 20th century, music has been a part of black politics. James Baldwin wrote, "It is only in his music that the Negro has been able to tell his story," and observers of African-American society have frequently noted that you can tell where black people are at any given moment by their music. The wails and moans of the enslaved Africans at camp meetings and the early churches; the "steal away" songs of runaway slaves; and the spirituals, blues, jazz, gospel, and rhythm and blues—all of these can have (as many scholars have shown) implicit political meanings, messages, or insights.

In the 20th century, artists and musicians wrote and sang music with explicitly political messages; that is, they wrote and performed protest music. Sometimes this music of protest was written or performed by white artists, such as Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," penned by a Jewish schoolteacher, which in the 1940s protested lynching, or Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," which became a mainstay for civil rights activists in the 1960s. But most often, the music of protest was written and performed by black artists. Music in general and protest songs in particular were especially significant during the Civil Rights movement. The anthem of the movement, "We Shall Overcome", which has its origins in slavery, was according to Martin Luther King Jr. an important part of the rituals and traditions used to inspire and mobilize people to take part in a cause larger than themselves. Throughout the 1960s, music—"Freedom Songs"—as they were called, was as much a part of the movement as marches, sit-ins, and Freedom Rides. In 1963, Guy and Candie Carawan collected and published for SNCC a volume of movement songs, *We Shall Overcome: Songs of the Southern Civil Rights Movement*. Nina Simone's 1963 "Mississippi God Damn," recorded in the wake of the Birmingham demonstrations, was banned in parts of several Southern states; Curtis Mayfield's music inspired and chronicled the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and, to a much less significant extent, so did artists like James Brown in recordings like "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)"; the Temptations' "Message to the Blackman"; Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues"; and Nina Simone's "Backlash Blues."

These examples of influential protest or "message" songs are not isolated examples. Rather, they reflect the symbiotic relationship between protest music and protest politics during the 1960s, which can be seen in the results of a comprehensive study conducted by Robert Walker for his dissertation research at Stanford University in 1976. Walker carried out a content analysis of all 1,100 songs that appeared in *Billboard*'s (*Billboard* is the authoritative source on music sales) cumulative annual best-selling black music listings from 1946 to 1972. Walker hypothesized that the events of the 1960s had resulted in the emergence of a distinctive black consciousness and solidarity that was manifested in an increase in songs with political messages. His data showed a steady increase in "message songs" beginning after 1957, with a sustained and rapid

increase occurring between 1966 and 1969, the peak years of the Black Power movement. By comparing black to white music during this same period, Walker was able to show this increase was unique to black music. And, further demonstrating the symbiotic nature of the relationship, when the protests stopped, the protest music also stopped.

The success of integration after the Civil Rights movement resulted in the integration of popular black artists into the mainstream of the music industry. The decline or purchase by whites of independent black recording companies hastened this process, leading to the emergence of integrated or "crossover" artists, personified in the enormous crossover appeal of artists like Michael Jackson. Nelson George, a former *Billboard* African-American music critic, contends in *The Death of Rhythm & Blues* that the development of crossover artists in the post–civil rights era resulted in the death of the music as an authentic black cultural expression, writing that "In the twenty years since the Great Society, which marked a high point of rhythm and blues music, the community that inspired both social change and artistic creativity has become a sad shell of itself; unhappily, while the drive behind the movement for social change was the greatest inspiration for the music, the very success of the movement spelled the end of the R & B world." The death of rhythm and blues in the 1970s was followed by the emergence in the 1980s and 1990s of rap and hip-hop as authentic black music, raising troubling questions about the state of the black community and its culture and politics.

In 2001, Patrick Milligan, Shawn Amos, and Quincy Newell produced *Say It Loud: A Celebration of Black Music in America*, a discography of 100 years of black music. The six CDs include 108 recordings, featuring gospel, blues, rhythm and blues, rock, country, and rap. The CDs are interspersed with brief excerpts from speeches and interviews by important historical figures including Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr., Harry Truman, Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, Thurgood Marshall, and Louis Farrakhan. The accompanying 72-page booklet contains photos and essays by leading cultural critics and musicologists that place the recordings in their historical and sociopolitical context.

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