

“Press Play for Justice”: The Black Protest Song Canon in the Era of #BLM

In the wake of George Floyd’s killing at the hands of the police in May 2020, Kendrick Lamar’s classic protest anthem ‘Alright’ saw a 71% increase in streams, even as the artist himself declined to make a public statement. The platinum certified, Grammy recognised, street ratified, and activist endorsed single ‘Alright’ is a nominee for the new Black National Anthem; its first iterations as a street protest chant occurred during an altercation with police and the then Movement for Black Lives five years prior. Similarly, Childish Gambino’s ‘This Is America’ saw a major spike on Spotify amid the protests calling for justice for George Floyd’s death. The single soared from No. 97 to No. 2 in Spotify’s U.S. charts overnight, gaining 1.117 million streams in the process.

In this paper, I analyse a series of songs widely regarded by popular media as the #BlackLivesMatter canon, while examining the impact of music on the politicisation of citizens. By employing music as a historical lens, I will argue that the confluence of protest rhetoric and music, and their prominence in protest activities and digital media, has afforded new possibilities for intervention in the political process, while impacting music listening and practices. There is a tension between music made political by listeners’ uses, the musicians’ own positionality and the money-focused structures of the music industry. Studying the BLM movement through its music is an attempt to understand and reconstruct an important element of these protests that will provide insight into the movement’s future impact and international influence. My research illuminates paths for engaging in anti-oppressive politics through music while highlighting protest music as an interdisciplinary and (sub-/trans-) national object of study.

Word count: 292

Short Biography

Rebecca Pericleous is a seminar leader and doctoral student of Musicology at King’s College London. Her research interests focus on intersections between music and protest, drawing on theories from political science, literary studies, media studies and sociology. Born and raised in Nicosia, she has been involved with local activist collectives and bicomunal groups who share a vision for a unified Cyprus. She has volunteered as a music workshop leader with the Hope for Children Centre, an international humanitarian and independent shelter for unaccompanied child refugees and young adults. In addition, she is a committed volunteer to the PADILEIA mentoring programme, a scheme which aims to provide access to higher education for refugee communities in Jordan and Lebanon. An active photographer, Rebecca has been documenting political sentiment and action in the United Kingdom, the United States and beyond, exploring insight into the uneven geographies of activism across time and space.

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