

Social Justice: The Influences of Music

A Short List of Powerful Songs

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It is often stated that if you want to gain an understanding of the dynamics of a particular time and place in any given culture, you need only look at all disciplines within the arts. They will inform you of wartime, peace, tragedy, triumph, and who was in power during the time of origin. While embracing the idea that art reflects life, it is only natural that music serves as a perfect vehicle for artists to express social conditions. Artists in every genre and medium have used their skills to tell stories about some facet of life where music could better offer the expressions of marginalized people.

Below is a growing list of artists who have used their music to tell stories that address social injustice.

****Teachers please vet the music BEFORE playing it for your students, regardless of recommendation****

E - Everyone

MS - Middle School

HS - High School

CB - Collegiate and Beyond

I Am an Abolitionist - William Lloyd Garrison

Audience - E

Written in 1848 (13 years before the Civil War) as a motivation to fight against slavery in America.

Black and Blue - Fats Waller

Audience - HS

Made popular by Louis Armstrong, the use of racial double-entendres set the tone for racial disparity.

Freedom Over Everything - Vince Mendoza

Audience - CB

This multi-movement orchestral composition was recorded in 2021 by the Czech National Symphony Orchestra. Mendoza writes, "I wanted to make the structure of this concerto represent what was reflected in Dr. King's quote: 'The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.'"

Blood on the Field - Wynton Marsalis

Audience - HS

This multi-movement depicts the trials and tribulations of slavery.

We Insist: Freedom Suite - Max Roach

Audience - CB

Context includes The Emancipation Proclamation and African Independence. Displays the contrast of the teachings of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Strange Fruit - Abel Meerapol

Audience - MS

This song was sung by Billie Holiday to offer a graphic depiction of the lynching of African Americans.

Bury my Heart At Wounded Knee by Buffy Sainte Marie

Audience - CB

This song depicts how America has treated Indigenous people. Stripped of their land rights, etc.

Get Up, Stand Up for Your Rights - Bob Marley

Audience - HS

An anthem imploring people to take control of their own lives by fighting for their rights as free members of society.

Give The People The Right To Vote - Sweet Honey In The Rock

Audience - E

Lyrics offer a brief history on voting rights, “no taxation without representation.” This song represents a long history of denying certain individuals the right to vote while drawing attention to voter suppression laws.

Higher Ground - Stevie Wonder

Audience - MS

Lyrics implore all factions of our society to be better as we strive for higher ground.

Alabama - John Coltrane

Audience - MS

The song represents a grief-stricken melody paying homage to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church that killed 4 Little Girls. While the piece is without lyrics, the subject of the piece may be unsuitable for young listeners.

Mississippi Goddam - Nina Simone

Audience - CB

This composition was written as a reprimand to Southern states in regards to the brutal treatment of African Americans. Some notable events include the assassination of Medgar Evers and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombings.

Why? (The King of Love Is Dead) - Gene Taylor, Nina Simone, vocals

Audience - HS

Premiered only three days after the murder of Martin Luther King at the Westbury Music Fair on Long Island, NY.

What’s Going On - Marvin Gaye

Audience - E

One of the most popular songs ever written against the Vietnam War, poverty, police brutality, and many other social injustice matters.

Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud - James Brown

Audience - CB

Song from the 1960s encouraging African Americans to embrace their blackness with self-confidence and pride.

Cry Freedom - Dave Matthews Band

Audience - HS

Written in honor of Steve Biko, South African anti-apartheid activist.

We Shall Overcome - Pete Seeger

Audience - E

This became an anthem during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Blowin’ In The Wind - Bob Dylan

Audience - E

This composition was one of the most popular protest songs during the Civil Rights Movement.

A Change Is Gonna Come - Sam Cook

Audience - MS

This Civil Rights anthem provided hope for marginalized people of color.

Fables of Faubus - Charles Mingus

Audience - HS

This piece was written to bring attention to the acts of Arkansas governor, Orval Faubus. Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent school integration at Little Rock Central High School.

Imagine - John Lennon

Audience - E

Written to address a world where peace prevails without turmoil.

U.N.I.T.Y. - Queen Latifah

Audience - CB

A powerful song for women to embrace promoting self-respect and equality.

Redemption Song - Bob Marley

Audience - HS

In the spirit of Marcus Garvey, this song spoke of self-empowerment.

Fight The Power - Public Enemy

Audience - CB

One of the early Rap groups that spoke out against police brutality.

Glory - John Legend

Audience - MS

This was the theme song for the movie Selma depicting a pivotal march led by Martin Luther King.

Changes - Tupac

Audience - CB

The message is mostly targeting African Americans and the need to make changes in their lives. Tupac is referring to mass incarceration, drugs, police brutality, education, etc.

Be Free - J. Cole

Audience - CB

Another song addressing police brutality and the BLM Movement.

Same Love - Macklemore and Ryan Lewis

Audience - CB

This song addresses marriage equality.

Composition for Wind Band

Compositions Informed by Social, Political, and/or Environmental Events

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