

Has music ever significantly changed the course of history?

“Where words fail, music speaks.”
- Hans Christian Anderson

From the ancient drumbeats of war to the anthems of modern revolutions, music has had a lasting impact on history. It has acted as a catalyst for social change and a powerful tool for political movements. As Jimi Hendrix puts it, “If there is something to be changed in this world, then it can only happen through music.”¹

Can music really ‘speak’? Can combination of words without or with instruments truly change history? This essay explores the extent to which music has impacted historical events, movements and social groups by using evidence and constructing arguments based on them. This essay supports the contention that music has significantly changed and impacted the course of history. History, in this essay, encompasses the history of common people, social movements for change, protest and the people.

Music as the Pulse of Dissent

Music has played an integral role in social and political movements and revolutions. A noticeable example is the use of Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s ‘Hum Dekhenge’ (We Shall See) which in recent years has become an anthem for protests in India and subsequently throughout the Indian diaspora against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) passed by India’s right wing BJP government in December of 2019. This Act is discriminatory towards some religious minorities. A few years later in 2024, the government finally lost a majority in the Indian parliament and there is good cause to believe that the song played a not insignificant role. The power of this song can be traced back to an event that took place on 13 February 1986 in Pakistan when Iqbal Bano, the famous Pakistani ghazal singer, sang this song in front of an audience of 50,000 people wearing a black sari (sari was banned as a non-Islamic outfit and black is the color of protest as well as mourning). This performance was done in protest of the increasing tyranny of dictator General Zia-ul- Haq, who had already Islamized Pakistan². That very night the houses and businesses of all those who organized and some who attended this performance were raided.

¹ “Jimi Hendrix Quotes (Author of Starting at Zero).”

² A verse from the song illustrates the message of the song: “When these high mountains of tyranny and oppression will start blowing away like fluff, when this earth will tremble underneath our feet, when lightning will strike the heads of our ruler with thunderous roar, we shall be there to see...”

Recordings of the session were found and destroyed. Preempting this, one recording by means of subterfuge was smuggled to Dubai and circulated³.

Combating the ‘Gay Plague’

Music from the USA in the 1980s and 1990s exemplifies the role and power of music in changing social perceptions towards marginalized and demonized minorities, for instance the LGBTQ community. Homosexuals, and by extension anyone with an alternative romantic lifestyle, were heavily stigmatized for most of the 20th century. This stigma was further acutely accentuated in the late 1970s and 1980s with the arrival of AIDS (then identified as GRID: Gay Related Immunodeficiency Disease) in the US. Initially the disease spread faster among the homosexual community than any other, and they faced ostracization, neglect not only from the government but also healthcare providers and often from their own families.

Government response to the AIDS crisis was minimal, as early cases received little to no attention which led to a lack of public awareness with the government continuing to remain inactive even as the death tolls and cases kept rising. It wasn't until 1985 when then US president Ronald Reagan publicly mentioned the disease. The delay in the response and lack of federal funding and guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) caused a rapid increase in the disease and death tolls. Enter Freddy Mercury and his brilliant music that was instrumental in turning this tide. He forlornly sang "The days were endless, we were crazy, we were young", a lyric from a song Mercury wrote as an anthem for and a tribute to all those suffering from HIV/AIDS⁴. Mercury himself emerged as one of the multiple high-profile cases to have been diagnosed with AIDS (though he didn't make it public). His music helped bring out the disease from the shadows into the light, that too at a time when the media was hand in glove with the general populace in singling out and discriminating against gay men, especially those suffering from AIDS. Mercury's death in 1991 changed the public perception of the disease.

The director of Freddie Mercury: The Final Act, James Rogan, recalls that *The Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert for AIDS Awareness* at Wembley Stadium in London was a jam-packed show with legends like Elton John, David Bowie, George Michael, Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant, The Who's Roger Daltrey and Annie Lennox⁵. In his words "I had grown up in the era of AIDS where it was a dark shadow, it was all tombstone adverts. It was spoken about with a lot of fear, and I remember the concert as something that changed that conversation."⁶

³ "Singer and the Song."

⁴ "Songs That Soundtracked the AIDS Crisis: Queen's 'There Are the Days of Our Lives.'"

⁵ Walfisz, "Culture Re-View: How Freddie Mercury's Death Changed AIDS Perceptions."

⁶ Kelleher and Kelleher, "How Freddie Mercury's Tragic Passing Saved Lives in the Fight against HIV and AIDS."

Anthems and Identities

What are national anthems? A national anthem is a hymn or musical composition that evokes a sense of belonging and patriotism towards one's country. These are not mere words of a poem; each word holds a deeper meaning about that country and its people. It is not hyperbole to state that national anthems have shaped history. "La Marseillaise", the national anthem of France, stands as a powerful testament to this. The anthem was composed during a particularly volatile period in French history, and significantly changed the course of French history by fostering national unity, inspiring revolutionaries, and symbolizing the enduring spirit of the French people.

The anthem was composed in 1792 by Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle, a captain in the French army. He wrote the song after Austrian and Prussian troops invaded the country to suppress the French revolution. The original name of the song was "Chant de guerre pour l'Armée du Rhin" (War Song for the Army of the Rhine), the name itself provocative and openly stating the intentions of the anthem, which was to boost the morale of the French soldiers to fight against the foreign invaders. One French general wrote "We have been fighting one against ten, but La Marseillaise was fighting too on our side"⁷. Another general wrote "Send me 1,000 men and 1 copy of La Marseillaise and I will reply with victory."⁸

National anthems do more than invoke a sense of patriotism. Certainly, it reflects a country's culture and past but also its future. It tells us more about the country, what it stands for and what ideals it holds. In January of 2021 Australia altered its national anthem to reflect its indigenous population and culture. The anthem will no longer call Australia "Young and free", but rather "One and Free". The aim of this was to reflect the country's indigenous past. Former Australian prime minister Scott Morrison, who is a conservative, said "Changing 'young and free' to 'one and free' takes nothing away, but I believe it adds much".⁹ On December 5, 2020, Australian national teams' rugby players sang the new national anthem for the first time in their indigenous language to showcase how the country was now proud of its indigenous past.¹⁰

Music for the Power

If a genre of music could be 'rags to riches', then surely that could be applicable to Hip Hop, which emerged from the underrepresented, disillusioned, and at the crossroads of impoverished

⁷ "HISTORY OF LA MARSEILLAISE THE FRENCH NATIONAL ANTHEM on JSTOR."

⁸ "HISTORY OF LA MARSEILLAISE THE FRENCH NATIONAL ANTHEM on JSTOR."

⁹ "Australia Changes National Anthem to Reflect Indigenous Past."

¹⁰ "Australia Changes National Anthem to Reflect Indigenous Past."

ghettos of urban America and the political protest movements of Black Nationalism of the early 1970s of the African American community of the Bronx, New York. Reese, referring to its origin, identifies it as an 'outlet for people of colour' anger.' The urbane African American youth (a community that had just in the 1960s witnessed a civil rights movement), continued to be ignored, disenfranchised, abused, and angry with the system (mainly middle- and upper-class white) that continued to deny them upward mobility, which in turn ensured that the African American community could not break through the cycle of poverty.¹¹

The influence of hip-hop as a genre and its music played a major part in retaining the identity of African Americans during this volatile period, tamping tensions down, and diverting the energies of the black community so that they expressed themselves through hip hop. The culture of hip-hop eventually spread to all parts of the world, with the genre ending up dominating the music industry. From being the music of the sub-culture, it has become a multi-million-dollar industry. Hip Hop is more than a genre, it is a lifestyle. From being the music of the oppressed African American community, Hip Hop now trespasses geographic, class, racial and lifestyle boundaries.

Songs written by artists usually reflected the problems faced by the community, racism and police brutality. Songs like "Fight the Power" by Public Enemy and "Changes" by Tupac Shakur tackled these issues head on. Female MC's such as Queen Latifa, in her hit song "U.N.I.T.Y", became the voice of the disrespect faced by women in society, street harassment, domestic violence, and even slurs against women in hip-hop.¹² Hip-hop artists and their music have played integral roles in movements like The Million Man March, Vote or Die, and Black Lives Matter teaming up with social workers, political activists, and community leaders to address these issues and to make a social change in their society in hopes of a better future. In the 2016 police shootings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, rap music and protest went hand in hand with each other. Pro black demonstrations often played Kendrick Lamar's 2015 song "Alright", which was a celebration of triumph over adversity in the face of systemic oppression and injustice. Social workers used hip-hop to connect and communicate with communities, understand their needs and move for change at a deeper level.

In an era when the inner-city communities were stricken with poverty, drug proliferation and gang violence, hip-hop gave the youth a sense of identity and belonging. The culture fostered a sense of unity amongst the juvenile population. In an era of economic hardships, racial discrimination, and lack of opportunities the youth turned to hip-hop to express their feelings and

¹¹ *The History Of Hip Hop.*

¹² "Academics Research People News and Events Campus Life You Are Here: Home Blog 50 Years of Hip-Hop: Exploring the Transformative Influence of Hip-Hop on the Field of Social Work BLOG 50 Years of Hip-Hop: Exploring the Transformative Influence of Hip-Hop on the Field of Social Work."

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emotion. Hip-hop workshops, mentorship programs, and community events brought and still bring young individuals together, instilling in them a sense of hope for a better future. Successful artists who had come from a life of challenges often acted as role models and guiding lights to those who faced similar issues in their lives.

Over the last five decades, hip-hop evolved from a genre to a movement for social change and empowerment. It has a unique ability to shed light on social issues, provide a method of communication and expression that lead to empowerment of all marginalized communities.

In conclusion, music has changed the course of history through its influence, impact on communities, modern revolutions, and has acted as a catalyst for change, uniting people and helping them rise above their differences and transcend the boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, class and religion. The examples mentioned in the essay, from national anthems, to protest songs, to being the voice of the neglected, proves without any doubt that music is more than just a collection of melodious notes and sounds... it is a driving force for change and progress. It speaks.

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