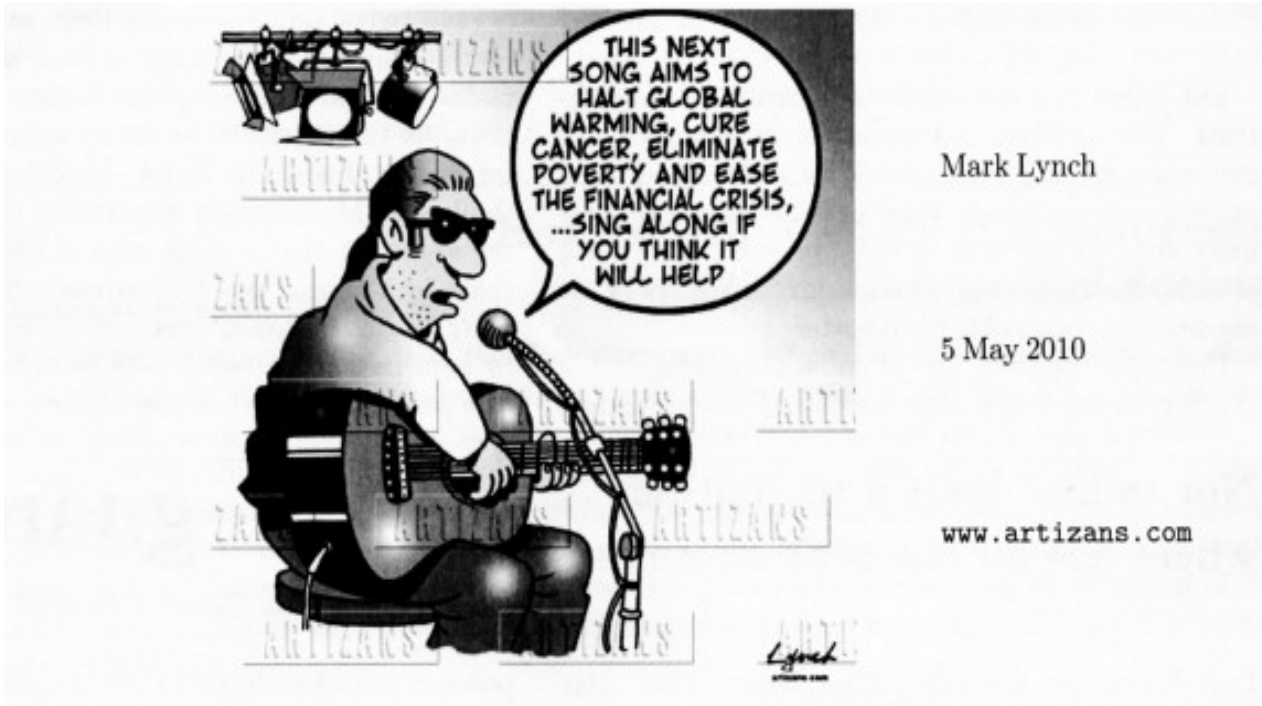


## What is at stake with protest songs ?

### Document 1



Mark Lynch

5 May 2010

[www.artizans.com](http://www.artizans.com)

### Document 2 -

#### The Economist

## The politics of hip-hop

Can rap change the world?

June 26th 2008

“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture,” intoned Elvis Costello, a pop star. So a columnist approaches the subject of hip-hop (which includes rap) with caution. One cannot hope to capture its sound or fury on the page. Instead, we will ask what it signifies. Is it “pavement poetry [that] vibrates with commitment to speaking for the voiceless,” as Michael Eric Dyson, a professor at Georgetown University, believes? Is it “an enormously influential agent for social change which must be responsibly and proactively utilised to fight the war on poverty and injustice,” as the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN), a pressure group, contends? Or is it mostly “angry, profane and women-hating...music that plays on the worst stereotypes of black people,” as Bill Cosby harrumphs?

None of the above, argues John McWhorter, in a

new book called “All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can’t Save Black America”. Mr McWhorter, a fellow of the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think-tank, is a hip-hop fan. He likens the group OutKast to Stravinsky. He admits that some hip-hop lyrics display an ungentlemanly attitude towards women, but he doubts that listening to violent lyrics causes people to behave more violently. If it did, there would be more opera fans stabbing their ex-lovers outside bull-fights.

Mr McWhorter also thinks people take hip-hop far too seriously. Those who disapprove of it vastly overestimate its capacity to corrupt. And those who expect it to foster a political revolution that will dramatically improve the lot of black Americans are going to be disappointed.

The most popular rappers are brilliant entertainers. They have also done a lot to make people aware of the difficulties facing poor urban blacks. But their political views are neither particularly acute nor central to their work. Consider the hot album of the moment: “Tha Carter III” by Lil Wayne. [...]

On the last track Lil Wayne does get serious. He laments that “one in every nine black Americans are locked up”[...]. Troy Nkrumah, the chairman of the National Hip-Hop Political Convention, thinks it wonderful that Lil Wayne is speaking truth to power. But if Lil Wayne is to be taken seriously, it needs to be pointed out that his “one in nine” figure is inaccurate — it is true only of black men aged 20–34, not black Americans in general. [...]

Earnest hip-hop fans often argue that “commercial” rappers such as Lil Wayne are beside the point. Hip-hop’s revolutionary potential is best expressed by “conscious” rappers who focus on important issues rather than babes, bling and booze. The Roots, a group from Philadelphia, are often cited as an example. Their message? “If I can’t work to make it, I’ll rob and take it. Either that or me and my children are starving and naked.”

But crime and starvation are hardly the only options. Even without a high-school diploma, a black man can probably find a job if he looks. And some manual jobs, such as plumber or cable technician, pay quite well. “It may well be that you can’t write much of a rap about training someone to fix heaters or air conditioners,” sighs Mr McWhorter.

Conscious rappers are often well-meaning. [...] When it comes to contentious political issues, hip-hop

offers no plausible solutions; only impotent and sometimes self-destructive rage. [...]

Mr McWhorter summarises the message of hip-hop as: “Things will keep sucking until there is a revolution where the white man finally understands and does a complete 180-degree turn.” This was true half a century ago in the segregated South. But today, it is nonsense.

Some people argue that hip-hop is politically consequential because activists can use the music and the culture that surrounds it to communicate with young people who might otherwise shun politics. There is something to this. For example, in 2004 the superstar P. Diddy fronted a fairly successful voter-registration campaign called “Vote or Die”. And HSAN once co-sponsored a rally to protest about a proposed \$300m cut to the New York City school budget. The cut never happened. HSAN trumpets this as a great victory. But it is hardly evidence that hip-hop can change the world. That \$300m is a tiny slice of what New York spends on its schools, and lack of money is far from the main obstacle to improving them.

Civil-rights activists in the 1960s were inspired by protest songs, but the songs did not drive the movement. Political change requires hard and often tedious work, as the thousands of weary volunteers working for Barack Obama can attest. Incidentally, one might think that Mr Obama’s spectacular rise undermines the argument that a black man can never get a fair shake in America. But Mr Nkrumah shrugs that even if Mr Obama is elected president, he will be powerless to implement progressive policies because the corporate power structure will not let him.

### **Document 3 - Not talkin' bout a revolution: where are all the protest songs?**

*The Guardian*, by Jonathan Luxmoore & Christine Ellis, February 22, 2016

From anti-Vietnam war ballads to miner’s strike songs, folk artists have long voiced countercultural anger. With so much ammunition today, could folk music be about to wake from its recent docility?

[...] In a year that marked the 800th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta and 750 years since the Simon de Montfort parliament, the four [folk singers Nancy Kerr, Martyn Joseph, Sam Carter and Maz O'Connor] celebrated the pursuit of democracy and sung songs new and old, written about the rights and liberties that people have fought to achieve and protect over the centuries. “The topics in our songs all deserve to be celebrated — but we’d also like to highlight some

uncomfortable truths which matter to vulnerable people today,” says Kerr. “Folk music reflects the creativity of working people, who often used it as a political voice. This kind of project could link present concerns with previous radical struggles and help us find a new collective voice.”

Kerr [...] believes current issues, from fracking to climate change to welfare cuts, offer rich material. She is disappointed that what she terms the “artistic left” seems to have backed off from the politically focused music that MacColl and co once sung. Where have all the protest songs gone?

The reasons behind the silence range from the generational to the cultural and economic. While politics remains a prominent subject in the arts as a whole [...], some claim that changing social habits have eroded music’s political significance.

“Protest songs are no longer seen as an effective form of communication,” says Malcolm Taylor, a folk music expert and former librarian at the English Folk Dance and Song Society. “There’s so much ammunition for them, and if you wrote one that happened to catch on, you could potentially reach millions. But whereas Billy Bragg and his generation would have strapped on their guitars and headed for a street corner to make their point, today’s discontents prefer Facebook and other social media.”

Bragg’s generation in the 1970s and 1980s could also draw inspiration from the US, where legendary protest artists such as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax had ended up on Senator Joe McCarthy’s blacklist, and later arrivals such as Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs and Joan Baez lent musical backing to the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements. Music was, for a time, a powerful countercultural force.

In the UK, too, folk music was long a tool of political protest, influencing writers from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Dickens and Hardy. [...] In the late 19th century, thanks to pioneering collections by Cecil Sharp, Lucy Broadwood and others, folk music gained respectability. Many believe it lost its bite in the process. But in the 1950s, MacColl roundly rejected the genteel, sanitised legacy of Sharp and his co-collectors and set about turning folk music into a vehicle for radical change. MacColl’s own revival of Travellers’ Songs highlighted the plight of Roma communities, while compositions of his own, such as Freeborn Man and Song of the Road, also fed into a political agenda. [...]

The UK’s folk protest tradition lived on in the songs of Bragg, and veterans such as Dick Gaughan and Steve Knightley. But since then, few younger performers have seemed interested in addressing political issues on stage. And while the protest mantle was assumed by punk and new wave bands raging against the Thatcher government, their own counterculture has long since been co-opted by polite society and exploited by the UK’s booming music industry.

Much the same appears to have happened with mainstream hip-hop, which once existed as an expression of protest but has since been largely depoliticised by the

effects of fashion and business sponsorship.

Taylor believes all forms of protest music have eventually been “appropriated by the establishment to make money”. The veteran folk artist Martin Carthy agrees. “There are still some good and effective protest singers and songwriters around, but it’s not like it was in the 50s and 60s”, he says. “The promoters have long since cottoned on to the commercial potential of protest music; you’d have to be very determined and energetic to make yourself authentic and visible without them.”

The decline of radical politics in the 1990s alongside the rise of New Labour undoubtedly contributed to folk music’s new docility, the genre offering little in the years when the Occupy movement and anti-Iraq war demonstrators have taken to the streets in protest.

But things might be changing. Jeremy Corbyn’s rise to political prominence has spurred new radical thinking, which could well gain a platform in music. [...]

“We may not see the like of We Shall Overcome [the seminal civil rights anthem] again. But we can still smuggle some subversive, powerful, galvanising ideas through in music. And this may well be a time when people are wanting to hear them again.”

#### **Document 4 - 5 reasons why your protest song is making things worse**

[www.musicradar.com](http://www.musicradar.com), by Tim Can, February 6, 2017

##### *Why fighting the power could be counter-productive*

During such turbulent eras musicians have traditionally turned to making protest music, but from Bob Dylan’s meaningless Blowin’ in the Wind to Mike Reid’s challenging UKIP Calypso, protest songs are exclusively dreadful pieces of music. Theoretically, their musical shortcomings are mitigated by their ostensibly world-changing powers, but in reality, their effect is limited to say the least. [...]

##### 1. You can’t change anyone’s mind

No matter how catchy your melodies or funky your beats, don’t fool yourself: your opponents aren’t going to be swayed by your arguments. Even if your message is objectively accurate, it’ll likely have the opposite effect to that which you intended according to this research paper, which notes that “If people counter-argue unwelcome information vigorously enough, they may end up with 'more attitudinally congruent information in mind than before the debate,' which in turn leads them to report opinions that are more extreme than they otherwise would have had.”

Let’s take this famous saucily-titled anti-cop jam as an example: despite the evidence submitted to the N.W.A. Court, US law enforcement declined to go F themselves. Who could have imagined such a shocking turn of events?

## 2. Social media is an echo chamber

Unsurprisingly, Facebook has become the primary source of news for younger generations, but once you've dropped your 2-step folktronica truth-bomb on your timeline it's only likely to reinforce your similarly-minded friends' opinions.

This is because - as everyone apart from the supremely naive realised years ago - social media is an echo chamber that can isolate us from opposing political ideas. What's more, when people 'like' something they're given the feeling that they're helping, reducing the likelihood they'll actually do something useful.

On the plus side, perhaps you might radicalise your mum, or at the very least get a couple of SoundCloud plays off someone you spoke to briefly at a party in 2007.

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## 3. You're making money for the man

So, you're fully committed to dismantling the exploitative capitalist system with your freaky breakcore sounds, but who is really benefiting from your supposedly anarchic antics? You've bought a computer (which is unlikely to be organic and locally-sourced), forked out to your ISP to upload the data, and everyone who finds your music is almost certainly going to be data-mined to within an inch of their lives by unscrupulous tech giants.

What's more, your incendiary bangers may be bookended by ads, making a mockery of your anti-establishment stance.

## 4. Your elitist views aren't valid

If you're reading this - let alone making socially-aware future bass music on a MacBook in your local independent coffee shop - you're not just a regular Joe. You're a member of the liberal elite, an ill-defined section of society that everyone hates. It doesn't matter that you're working in the service industry and scraping by on an income that your parents would consider a pittance: your snobby, highfalutin attitudes are driving a wedge between the classes and you're indirectly responsible for the rise of right-wing populism in Europe.

Perhaps instead of banging on about identity politics you should write an aspirational song about poppin' bottles in the club like everyone else?

## 5. Individualistic self-expression is useless

In his documentary *HyperNormalisation*, film-maker Adam Curtis argues that individualistic self-expression is actually antithetical to effecting political change:

"I sometimes wonder whether the very idea of self-expression might be the rigid conformity of our age. It might be preventing us from seeing really radical and

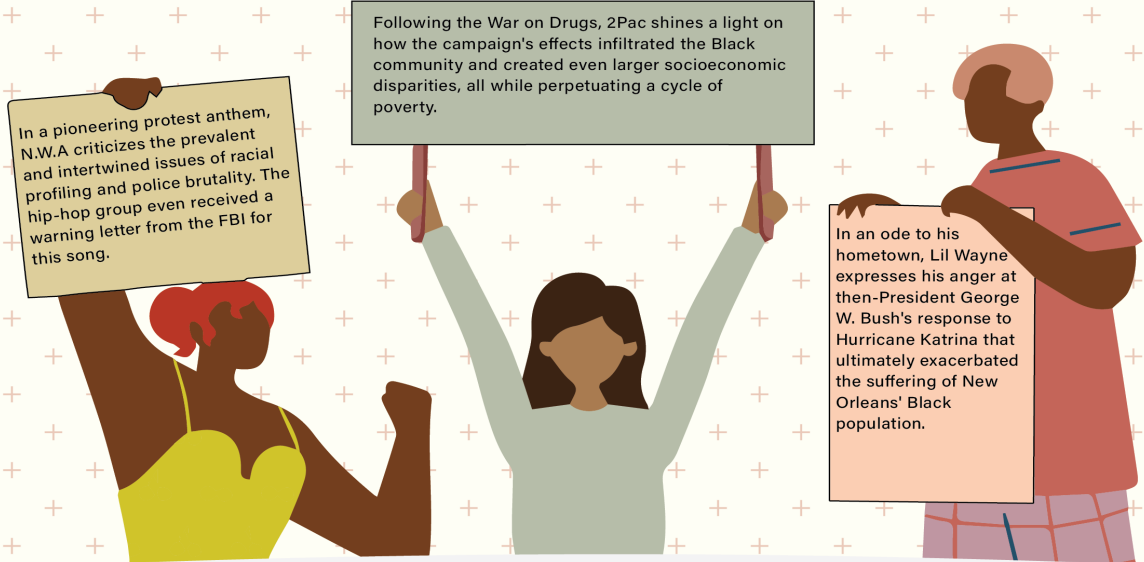
different ideas that are sitting out on the margins - different ideas about what real freedom is, that have little to do with our present day fetishization of the self. The problem with today's art is that far from revealing those new ideas to us, it may be actually stopping us from seeing them."

Who could possibly have thought that dedicating the entirety of one's life to programming the most anal neuro bass patches possible alone in a darkened bedroom would result in a navel-gazing attitude?



# HIP-HOP ACTIVISM THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Since the birth of hip-hop in 1973, the musical genre has frequently been used as a mouthpiece for activism. With the recent influx of protest anthems in the wake of George Floyd's death, let's rewind the clock to see the social commentary songs that came before them.



In a pioneering protest anthem, N.W.A criticizes the prevalent and intertwined issues of racial profiling and police brutality. The hip-hop group even received a warning letter from the FBI for this song.

Following the War on Drugs, 2Pac shines a light on how the campaign's effects infiltrated the Black community and created even larger socioeconomic disparities, all while perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

In an ode to his hometown, Lil Wayne expresses his anger at then-President George W. Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina that ultimately exacerbated the suffering of New Orleans' Black population.

1988

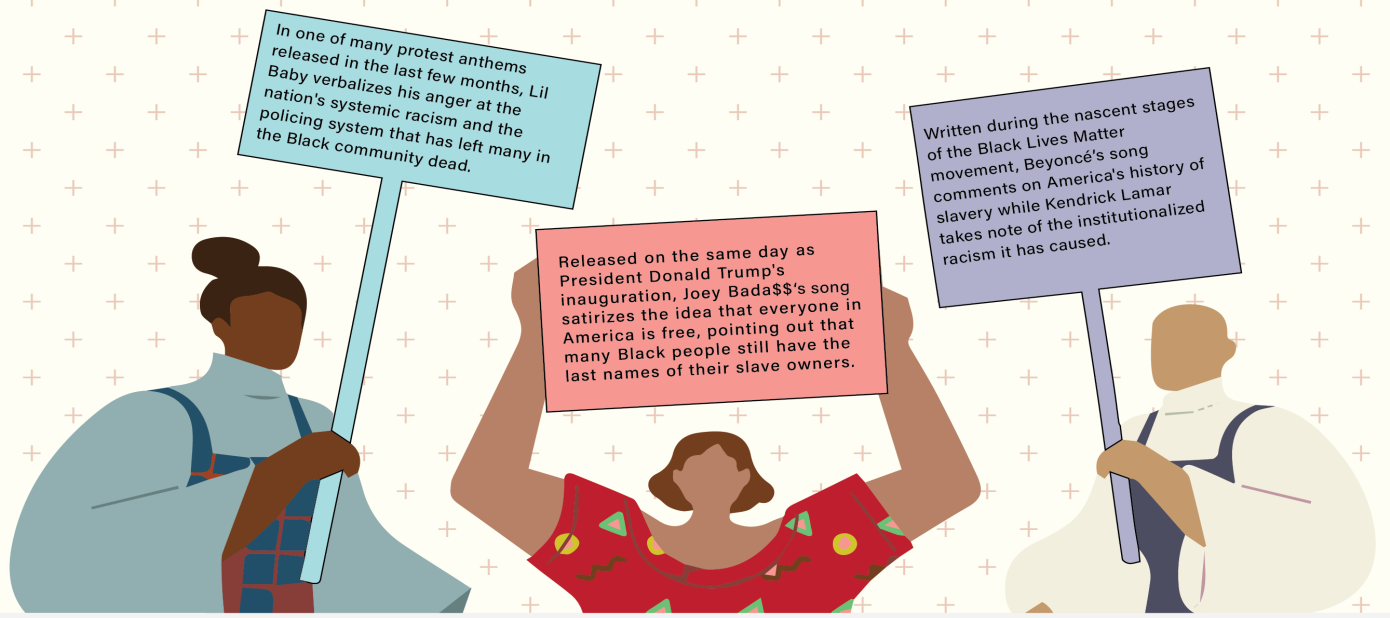
"Fuck Tha Police" by N.W.A

1998

"Changes" by 2Pac

2006

"Georgia... Bush" by Lil Wayne



In one of many protest anthems released in the last few months, Lil Baby verbalizes his anger at the nation's systemic racism and the policing system that has left many in the Black community dead.

Released on the same day as President Donald Trump's inauguration, Joey Bada\$\$'s song satirizes the idea that everyone in America is free, pointing out that many Black people still have the last names of their slave owners.

Written during the nascent stages of the Black Lives Matter movement, Beyoncé's song comments on America's history of slavery while Kendrick Lamar takes note of the institutionalized racism it has caused.

2020

"The Bigger Picture" by Lil Baby

2017

"Land of the Free" by Joey Bada\$\$

2016

"Freedom" by Beyoncé ft. Kendrick Lamar

Sources: PBS, New York Times, Genius Lyrics, Britannica, Black Lives Matter, Donald Trump. Graphic reporting by Vivian Xu, Music | Fine Arts editor. Graphic by Farrah Au-Yeung, assistant Graphics editor