

## **Sonic Reducer: Protest Music and Performance**

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Jacques Attali has said, “Music is a herald, for change is inscribed in noise faster than it can change society.” This is especially true of 1960s popular music: at its height, it heralded a changing hegemony, as when Dylan sang, “Something’s happening but you don’t know what is...do you, Mr. Jones?” But the days are long gone when the radio can provide a soundtrack of significant sonic protest.

Although we are living in an era rife with ideological struggle, protest music has been limited in its scope. Perhaps this is because, as Attali has also said, “Where there is music, there is money.” Or, to put it another way, how can you rage against the machine from deep inside the machine?

This question is particularly important given that new modes of dissemination, such as TikTok and YouTube which have replaced radio. Social media has diminished the power of single songs to have single meanings, but in this talk, I locate new modes of protest in live performance, arguing that while songs can no longer hold the mass power they once did, there are new ways that they can be marshalled to dispute historical, institutionalized power dynamics. Beyonce’s song “Formation” as performed at the Superbowl, Kendrick LaMar’s performance of “The Blacker The Berry” while clad in chains at the 2016 Grammys, Childish Gambino’s video for “This is America,” all reference issues around #black lives matter, but they are not so much protest *songs* so much as protest revelations; performed in ways and places that make societal inequities more visible, rather than more audible. My argument is that, while political content in music is inherently fraught with the tension between its roles as commodity and as an authentic emotional appeal, only in the live setting can that tension be eliminated, fused, and put to work.

Gina Arnold holds a Ph.D. from Stanford University in Modern Thought & Literature. She is a former rock journalist and reporter for *Rolling Stone* magazine as well as the author of four books, most recently "Half A Million Strong: Crowds and Power at Rock Festivals from Woodstock to Coachella," on the University of Iowa Press, and is co-editor, with George McKay, of the forthcoming Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock. She teaches at the University of San Francisco and at San Jose State University.

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