

“If I Have a Son” and Other Songs of the Movement for Black Lives

A social movement can be documented through its accompanying soundtracks. That is, music composed for or during the movement, memorialising its activities, objectives, effectiveness (or lack thereof), reasons for existing, and its hearts cry. The movement for Black lives in (mostly) North America can be experienced through such a soundtrack. This paper evaluates the movement through the lenses of four songs: Common and John Legend’s “Glory”, Beyoncé’s “Formation”, Kendrick Lamar’s, “(We Gon’ be) Alright”, and Ruth B’s “If I Have a Son”. “Glory” connects the twenty-first century American movement for civil rights to its origins in the turbulent, only partially successful, movement of the twentieth century. “Formation” shows how the movement for Black lives caused an intentionally controversy-free, self-proclaimed ‘beyond race’ artist to take her first professional steps towards owning her Blackness. With Kendrick Lamar’s “(We Gon’ be) Alright” we see that the Civil Rights anthem of the 1960s, “We Shall Overcome” has been displaced, and we seek to find out why. Ruth B.’s “If I Have a Son” gives a very personal answer to the question, “Why fight at all?”

By examining the audio-visual components of each song, such as lyrics and music videos, and non-musical aspects, such as the reception each song received and its social impact, we will see that the definition of the term ‘protest song’ must include both the polemical and the reflective. We will also gain access to the lifeblood of the movement for Black lives, so far one of the most significant movements of the twenty-first century.

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