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## **Protest songs make a comeback**

Source: Lisa Leff/Associated Press/12.11.14

BERKELEY, Calif. — Demonstrators around the country are raising their voices to condemn the deaths of unarmed black men at the hands of police. Protest songs are being sung alongside chants of "I can't breathe" and "Hands up, don't shoot."

The deaths have inspired a musical outpouring that hasn't been seen in the United States since singer and activist Pete Seeger helped make "We Shall Overcome" a standard of the 1960s civil rights movement. Older songs are being put into service for a new generation. New songs are being widely shared, including some from major-label artists. Holiday classics are also being rewritten, including an anti-police version of "White Christmas."

"Facts aren't fueling this fire. Feeling is what is fueling this fire, and until we express those feelings and those feelings are understood, we aren't going to get too far," said Daniel Watts. He is a Broadway performer who starred in a flash mob protest in New York's Times Square in response to Eric Garner's death.

Protests broke out across the country after grand juries decided not to indict, or charge, police officers in the deaths of Garner and Michael Brown. Both men were killed over the summer by white police officers trying to arrest them.

### **"My Brother Crying"**

One of the tunes gaining a following on the streets and social media was written six weeks ago by Luke Nephew. He is a 32-year-old New York poet who has composed songs for different kinds of protests. His song has four lines, starting with "I still hear my brother crying, 'I can't breathe.' Now I'm in the struggle singing. I can't leave."

Hundreds of people sang those words last week as they blocked bridges and got arrested in New York. Earlier that day, the grand jury announced its decision in the Garner case. That so many knew Nephew's song, and the way it has caught on since then, might owe as much to good preparation as the power of its lyrics.

Nephew first introduced the song at an early November meeting of activists preparing for the grand jury's decision. They shared it with their groups so that as many people as possible could sing along when the time for protests came. A recording was posted on YouTube and links were posted on Facebook and Twitter.

"We said, 'Make sure you are taking this back to your organizations. Make sure you are learning this,'" recalled Jose Lopez, with the group Make the Road New York.

### **Posting To Instagram**

Gospel singer and radio host Darlene McCoy is the founder of a protest group called Mothers of Black Sons. As she watched the protests on television at home in Atlanta, Georgia, she heard protesters sing the song as they were arrested. She was so taken with the images of

people raising their voices in unison while being handcuffed, she replayed the broadcast to write down the words.

McCoy immediately recorded herself singing Nephew's song, posted it on Instagram and challenged other singers to do the same. At least 45 people have done so, including Catrina Brooks, a former "The X-Factor" reality show contestant from Michigan. Her version has been viewed nearly 750,000 times.

"The funny thing is, you have to do it in 15 seconds," McCoy said, referring to the site's maximum video length. "And that's a challenge for some artists."

Some protesters are rediscovering popular music of the past. They are singing Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come" or Michael Jackson's "They Don't Really Care About Us."

Nephew is a bit baffled by how seldom music has been a part of American protest movements in recent decades. He thinks it's partly because people are no longer accustomed to singing together. It's also, he said, partly because younger Americans are turned off by traditional folk and gospel tunes that do not speak to their personal experience.

"It's amazing how much of a vacuum there is," he said. "God bless Pete Seeger, but where is his children's generation?"

## **Rewriting Christmas Carols**

Questlove, a drummer for the hip-hop band The Roots, urged fellow musicians via Instagram and Twitter last week "to be a voice of the times that we live in." He noted that "protest songs don't have to be boring or non-danceable."

Several professional musicians have already released tribute songs to Brown and Garner. These include Alicia Keys, Long Beach rapper Crooked I, Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morelo and hip-hop producer J. Cole.

Amateurs have gotten into the act too. In St. Louis, a group disrupted a symphony performance of Brahms' "Requiem," singing a "Requiem for Mike Brown" and scattering confetti hearts from the balcony.

Other protests adopt a Christmas theme with what they call "justice carols." These rewrite the words to holiday classics, so instead of "O Little Town of Bethlehem," they sing "O Little Town of Ferguson."

During the Vietnam War era of the 1960s and 1970s, Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" came to symbolize the times. But whether any of the current songs have the same meaning for the current generation, it isn't exactly clear.

"It often takes time for ideas to percolate through and for people to step back and take a breath and write meaningful tunes," said Ian Peddie. He is an English professor at Georgia Gwinnett College who studies the intersection of popular music and human rights. "There has to be that period of incubation."

## **Possible Response Questions:**

- Write a protest song in response to recent events. Explain the meaning in connection to the events.
- What protest songs have you heard? Do they influence you to think one way or the other? Explain.
- Select any passage and respond to it.