

#CreativeRiots – Protest Songs

“So when you’re tired of your story – try singing, sing with a group so you can carry your tune together...”

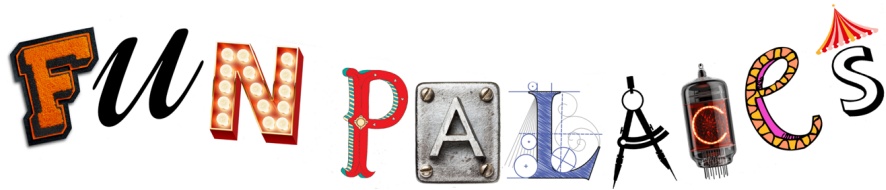
Voices are powerful things, especially when they join together in unison, which makes protest songs a brilliant idea for a Creative Riot. You may want to come together with your friends and neighbours in your local community to sing together publicly about the things that matter to you. Or you may want to rehearse some songs to perform as part of a bigger protest. This is a blog from Hannah Levane, who is a West End performer in musicals – here she tells us about how she used her skills in unexpected ways. You might be a musical theatre buff too – or you might have different skills you can use in unexpected ways to creatively riot. You don’t have to be a professional to sing together- and you don’t need to sing hits from the musicals either! Perhaps 90s pop is your thing, or folk, or hip hip.

Here are her top tips, and her story.

Hannah’s Top Tips for Protest Singing:

- **You don’t have to be a professional singer to join in with protest songs.**
- **Make sure that the person whose story it is has the microphone – if the story is not yours to tell, pass the mic, join the song with backing vocals but don’t try to write it or take the spotlight. Also – ensure all songs used are culturally sensitive and appropriate for the vocalists – use songs from other cultures with extreme care and inclusivity.**
- **Join a local choir – while many choirs don’t affiliate with any political leanings or social messaging, it can be a great way to meet like minded people and you can always suggest or start your own group.**
- **Immerse yourself in protest songs of the past, learn from music history, feel empowered, get writing, jamming, make your own music!**
- **Take active part in the change you want to make – reach out to organisations and groups that align with your desire for change, volunteer or ask for information about their outreach opportunities. Take the idea of a ‘song for change’ type choir to them – they may be able to support the set up of a new group.**

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- **Keep your eyes on national and local legislation changes about protests and gathering in public spaces – stay safe!**

The Night We Sang Our Resistance

Our voices, that's where our power lies. That's what we're told and often the saddest part about getting older is getting hit with the realisation that for many in power its extremely easy to turn down the volume. Even when we're screaming, even when we're hoarse and exhausted with the effort of shouting into the void, little seems to change. But when change is needed change is needed. We the resistors, the ones who speak when others can't, the ones who see the stories that need to be told and the ones who write new narratives that path the way to the futures we hope to live – we are the ones who need to make the change.

In a time when the governments capacity to inflict restrictions on the way we protest and sanctions for those to chose to forge ahead I remember a time when I was part of something. A time we used song to make people hear us in a new way. We are now 15 years on from the biggest protest in history. The Iraq war lit a fire of resistance and a desperate rally call for change makers. All of a sudden, my London was bubbling with rage – this was not supposed to be happening again. The world we saw reflected back to us was not the one we were promised and so I felt my youth receive a harsh jolt of reality as I started to learn about the systems at play and ultimately, learn about my own accountability as a citizen of the world. It was my turn, my turn to really turn up and stand up for what I believed.

At the time, I was just starting my professional career as an actress, performing on London's West End my dreams were coming true – elsewhere the world was on fire and nothing was ever the same again. My only solace was that I felt my anger was shared and by so many. People were rising, there was something so incredible about the sheer scale of the outrage. A deep insistent rage that demanded to be expressed.

So, as in times before, people took to the streets to be heard. Many of the protests that blocked the famous streets did so with the rhythm of millions of feet, waving banners that cracked and whistled in the wind, beating drums, chants and through it all, cutting through the din came music. The music of a generation who knew these tunes, only too well. Anti-war folk songs, from Dylan to protest songs in all languages, reflecting so many cultures. Anthems of war and conflict from times gone by that were ever

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relevant. The evergreen sound of resistant is always music. Those of us who were not from the generation who could remember the anti-war movements of the 60's and 70's felt turned, instead, to a catalogue of musical theatre songs that at first glance, you may not think of as anti-war. The non-threatening nature of musical theatre can even work to get fence sitters and centralists to lend their voice to the cause of the resistance. It can work wonders.

So, while others marched some of us gathered by candlelight for a unlicensed concert in Parliament square. Our faces cold yet plastered with make-up from various shows and our hearts on fire. We were a small unintimidating group that only grew with each verse.

No rehearsal necessary, we knew the words and so would our audience. So we sang songs to rally us – *Make Them Hear You* (from *Ragtime*) *Bui Doi* (*Miss Saigon*) *Do You Hear the People Sing* and *Red and Black* (From *Les Misérables*) *Flesh Failures* (*Hair*) *Easy to be Hard* (*Hair*). We sang songs of hope and unity too – *No One is Alone* (*Into the Woods*) *Wheels of a Dream* (*Ragtime*) *One Day More* (*Les Misérables*) *Beautiful City* (*Godspell*) *Let the Sunshine In* (*Hair*). We sang and we sang and others joined in. Many knew the words and got swept up with the tune, but they were reminded of the real context and meaning behind so many of these songs. So while we stood – a humble choir lit not by stage lights but by candles held in shivering but unwavering hands the voices of those who joined us soon out resonated beyond our own. No one came to move us on, we were not shhhd or silenced that night. I walked home warmer that night, warmed by the feeling that something in the air had shifted. And while hindsight knows that this particular fight was in vein, I'll never forget the power I felt in my voice that night. It's just as powerful now no matter how tired it is. So when you're tired of your story – try singing, sing with a group so you can carry your tune together, melodies soothe but they can cut into the fabric of a culture in ways that will last long after your tired feet can no longer march and long after our voices have been taken away into the wind.

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