



# Smithsonian Folkways

## **Protest Songs: A Musical Introduction**

### **A Smithsonian Folkways Lesson**

Designed by: Amy R. Kenny  
Selinsgrove Area Middle School  
Selinsgrove, PA

#### **Summary:**

Through singing and listening to famous protest songs students will learn to discuss the musical significance as well as the social and historical context of these songs.

#### **Suggested Grade Levels:** 6-8

**Country:** United States

**Region:** North America

**Culture Group:** American

**Genre:** Protest songs

**Instruments:** Voice, guitar

**Language:** English

**Co-Curricular Areas:** History, Social Studies, Civics

**National Standards:** 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9

**Prerequisites:** For Lesson Segment 2, intermediate ability on a band instrument

#### **Objectives:**

- Listen to various examples of famous protest songs to describe musical characteristics and evaluate performances
- Discuss the role of protest songs in a social and historical context
- Sing “This Land Is Your Land”
- Play the bass line to the chorus of “This Land Is Your Land”
- Learn the melody by ear on their instrument
- Notate the melody of the chorus
- Improvise melodic or rhythmic variations
- Create alternate lyrics to the chorus

#### **Materials:**

- “Classic Protest Songs” from Smithsonian Folkways (SFW CD 40197)  
<http://www.folkways.si.edu/classic-protest-songs-from-folkways/african-american-music-folk-struggle-protest/album/smithsonian>
- Video: Freedom Singers perform “We Are Soldiers in the Army”  
[www.folkways.si.edu/rss/itunesU/videos/rss.xml](http://www.folkways.si.edu/rss/itunesU/videos/rss.xml)

## **Lesson Segments:**

- 1. An Introduction to the History of Protest Songs** (National Standards 6, 7, 9)
- 2. Musical Performance of “This Land is Your Land”** (National Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5)

### **1. An Introduction to the History of Protest Songs**

- Listen to recordings of familiar protest songs:
  - “This Land is Your Land” (track 7)
  - “Turn, Turn, Turn” (track 8)
  - “We Shall Overcome” (track 22)
- Watch video of Freedom Singers (civil rights)
  - Music was essential to the African-American struggle for civil rights and equality. "We Are Soldiers in the Army" demonstrates how the Black American traditional song repertoire and older styles of singing were used to inspire and organize the Civil Rights Movement. The singers here remind us that the days of open discrimination and bigotry are not far behind us, and that "it's people's hearts we're trying to change now." The a cappella quartet features legendary civil rights activists and singers Rutha Harris, Charles Neblett, Bettie Mae Fikes, and Cordell Reagon.
- Ask students to describe and evaluate what they heard in musical terms
- Discuss history of protest songs in general, as well as the specific background of the songs listened to; look at liner notes for ideas

**Assessment:** Divide students into small groups. Assign each group a different question to discuss. After an allotted time each small group will present to the class.

Sample discussion questions:

- Protest songs have been around as long as humans have had conflict. Why are songs often used for protest?
- Protest songs in America date back to the American colonists objecting to British rule. What are other conflicts in American history that have inspired protest songs?
- What are some current political events or social situations that might inspire a protest song? In today's songs, what types of music are protest songs often heard?

### **2. Musical Performance of “This Land is Your Land”**

- Listen to “This Land Is Your Land;” discuss background of the song/composer (access liner notes)
- Distribute lyric sheets; sing the song with focus on the chorus
- Teach the tonic chord tones (I, IV, V) and have students play on their instruments

- d. Ask one group of students to make tone changes by ear (using their three choices of notes) while the rest of the class sings the chorus; switch groups
- e. Choose from any of the following activities
  - i. Teach the students to play the melody by ear on their instruments
  - ii. Have the students notate the melody of the chorus
  - iii. Ask for volunteers to improvise melodic or rhythmic changes to the chorus
  - iv. Show video of Pete Seeger performing "English is Crazy"
- f. Divide students into small groups and have them create new lyrics to the chorus

**Assessment:** Students will be divided into groups to perform accurately on their instrument the melody and/or the bass line. Other students may be selected to improvise a chorus. If any group has created new lyrics they may share with the class. Members of the class may be given an opportunity to reflect on the performances.

**Additional Resources:** The Folkways Collection (1 hour podcast from Smithsonian Folkways)

- Program 8: Woody Guthrie
  - An original folk hero, Woody Guthrie transformed the folk ballad into a vehicle for social protest. Guthrie wrote literally hundreds of songs, many of them now revered classics, including the unofficial anthem "This Land Is Your Land." He was also a major influence on music superstars such as Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan. Moses Asch, who recorded much of Guthrie's material, thought of Woody as nothing less than a full-blown genius. Program eight is devoted to a portrait of this giant in American folk music.  
[http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/audio/podcasts/folkways\\_ckua/o08.mp3](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/audio/podcasts/folkways_ckua/o08.mp3)
- Program 12: Pete Seeger
  - Born of a renowned musical family, Pete Seeger's name is synonymous with the post-War American folk music revival. A contemporary of and collaborator with Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger casts his own long shadow over the folk music genre. This program overviews Seeger's life and music, including his work with Guthrie, and features recent interviews with Seeger and those who have known him well.  
[http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/audio/podcasts/folkways\\_ckua/o12.mp3](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/audio/podcasts/folkways_ckua/o12.mp3)
- Program 14: Music and the Winds of Change: The Civil Rights Movement
  - The second of three programs on music as an instrument of social activism, this episode pays particular attention to material in the Folkways collection which documents and reflects the civil rights struggle, especially through the ten year period between 1955 and 1965. The program draws on such Folkways albums as "Voices of the Civil Rights Movement (Black American Freedom Songs, 1960-1966) and an audio-verite recording of

the 1963 civil rights march on Washington entitled "We Shall Overcome." Original interviews with Bernice Johnson Reagon of the SNCC Freedom Singers and one-time Black Panther activist Angela Davis blend with archival interviews from Smithsonian Folkways to recapture the spirit of the struggle and to provide contemporary context to its meaning.

[http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/audio/podcasts/folkways\\_ckua/014.mp3](http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/audio/podcasts/folkways_ckua/014.mp3)