

Joni Mitchell and Buffy Sainte-Marie: Feminism, Folk, and Freedom of the 1960s

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Abstract

This paper explores how women in history have used folk music as a platform to support feminist ideals and rights. Feminist folk music is as diverse as the women who perform it, but for the sake of concision this paper introduces women's appropriation of folk styles in the context of Balkan wedding music, and then focuses on feminist messages in American folk music in the mid-1960s to early 1970s with artists Buffy Sainte-Marie and Joni Mitchell. This paper draws upon scholarly sources to analyze songs by Sainte-Marie and Mitchell, demonstrating the effectiveness of the folk genre as a social rights platform. Folk music relies more on the voice than on instruments, and by heightening the vocals it allows for the focus to be on the lyrics and the meaning of the song, reaching out and connecting people across cultural lines. This research also focuses on the messages these two women wanted to speak and how each used variations within the same genre to do so. Sainte-Marie performed songs not only about women's rights, but also the rights of Indigenous People who have suffered injustices under colonists. Mitchell sang of power imbalances in relationships both platonic and romantic. Through comparing and contrasting these two women's music, this paper describes their relation to the folk genre and the significant impact they had on society in their own time to now.

Keywords: folk music, social rights, feminism

1. Introduction

Although women have been singing and performing music for just as long as men have, they have been greatly underrepresented in most musical contexts. Even though there can be importance and beauty in the silences, it is still essential that all voices have a chance to be heard. It has been a long and difficult road, but women's voices have slowly fought their way to recognition and acceptance in many genres of music. This paper explores one such context in which women's voices have been heard, that of folk music genres.

Folk is a kind of music that is as diverse as the women who perform it. One of the beautiful things about folk music is the wide variety of styles which it can encompass. People throughout history have tried to define what folk music specifically is, but the best definition is from folk singer Pete Seeger, who simply said, "if folks sing them, they're folksongs."¹ What is considered to be the genre of "folk" music in North America started to become popular in the early 1960s. At a time when many people were looking for ways to protest events happening in American society and throughout the world, the period gave many singers the fuel they needed to create emotion-filled songs that broadly resonated with many people. Many musicians expressed protests against U.S. involvement in Vietnam, advocated for equal rights for African-Americans in the U.S., and supported the youth and hippy movements or feminist ideals. They continued the "alliance between political activism and folk.... [and] communicated a personalized reflection on issues of contemporary concern, such as the war in Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, and the threat of nuclear war, and by the mid-1960s folk resonated more with the student peace movement than the underprivileged rural poor."² Folk

music was a way that artists could find the freedom to express their ideologies without being connected to a political party.

These aspects made folk music quickly popular in the 1960s, and it steadily grew as a way to demonstrate frustration and act as protest music to many of the events happening that the public or that individual singers were upset with and thought needed to be changed. Folk music focused more on the message the song was trying to portray and less on flawless execution of notes. Therefore, “the audience for folk became accustomed to voices which lacked polish, and where off-key singing, drawls, twangs, falsettos, and an untrained personalized delivery signaled authenticity.”³ Folk was music by the people for the people. It was less production based and instrument heavy, but made the working class feel like it was attainable and closer to their realities than other styles.

This paper explores three examples of women’s appropriation of folk music styles to protest the oppression of women in a male-dominated society and to advocate for women’s rights. It first presents the example of Balkan women’s wedding song as lament, then shifts to folk music styles of the 1960s and 1970s in North America in examining songs of Buffy Sainte-Marie and Joni Mitchell. Sainte-Marie particularly used her music to bring light to the oppression and sufferings of Indigenous People living in Canada and the U.S., while Mitchell spoke out about personal experiences and struggles while advocating for women’s rights.

2. Balkan Women’s Wedding Song as Lament

Musicologist Patricia Shehan describes music and culture of the Balkan peoples in this way: “the powerful folk song tradition of the Balkans offers an understanding of women’s roles in preserving cultural values, attitudes, and musical and artistic practices of a region.”⁴ Even in its early stages, folk music was already representing women’s voices in its use and practices. These women used folk music to articulate the reality of their existence and to preserve their culture and their identity.

Many of these songs were used in everyday life. The Balkan people had a male-dominated culture, and the women were expected to be the housekeepers and child raisers. Because of this, the women’s hands were almost always occupied doing dishes, knitting, cleaning, etc., and therefore learning instruments was less important. Instead, many of the folk songs from their tradition were sung a cappella, with the voice as the main medium for musical creation.⁵ Men would sometimes sing, but typically only during festivals when heroic songs about war and conquest were appropriate.

The Balkan culture had different purposes for different types of songs, including work, festival, and communal. Within each of these different categories, however, each song often told the tale of the woman singing it, and could be improvised and modified to fit each person’s experiences. This reflects a precedent in many folk styles, as that individualistic and emotional aspect to folk songs was heightened in times of protest.

Balkan women used this music to demonstrate their frustration with their positions in life. The biggest majority of women’s folk songs from Balkan culture surround wedding songs, as a woman was considered more desirable if she had a lovely singing voice. During the adolescent years, girls would learn many different songs they could sing for their wedding, in the hopes of being more pleasing to future spouses. Women were not allowed to choose their husband, and this oppression led to dissent among the women of the Balkan culture. Because of this, many of their wedding songs are of grief and sorrow instead of joy and happiness: “So close is the resemblance of wedding songs to funeral laments in Greece that many songs can be sung at both death rites and weddings.”⁶ Their lament also reflected the emotional pain of the breaking of the mother-daughter bond, and many of these laments included the mother as a character in the song.⁷ One example of this type of wedding lament is the Greek lament entitled “Down by the River”. The lyrics are:

Down by the river/ by the dense rose bushes/ There three partridges are singing/ But one partridge isn’t singing/ “My little partridge why aren’t you singing?”/ Why should I sing? What should I say? / I abandoned my mother without any solace/ Don’t cry, my sweet mother/ Don’t have a heavy heart/ Our fate has written that we must be parted/ Go home, mother, farewell”⁸

These women may have been forced to sing wedding songs, but that did not stop them from portraying their own feelings and their own voice within their songs. Folk music was a way to demonstrate their voices as women, their identity as a group, and their relationships to each other.

3. Buffy Sainte-Marie and Rights of Indigenous People

The music of Buffy Sainte-Marie offers a personal example of employing folk music styles to advocate for women's rights, now in the context of advocating for rights of Indigenous People in Canada and the U.S. Sainte-Marie was born in Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1941 and is of Cree heritage. She was abandoned as a child and then raised in New England by adoptive parents, who helped spark her love of music.⁹ She had no formal training in music until she went to college, and even then she continued to play mainly by ear instead of learning to read music. By the age of 24, she was touring across the United States and Canada, making quite a name for herself and her music.

While Sainte-Marie sang about a variety of topics, she had a particular focus on songs about the oppression and struggles of Indigenous People in America. Sainte-Marie's music recognized the strife through which Indigenous People have persevered, and also the fact that their voices have been largely ignored. The majority people groups in the United States have often seen themselves as ever-growing and forward moving; however, the nation has not always brought everyone with them as they charged ahead. The "white male empowerment" that has often accompanied such forward movement greatly impacted not only women but also Indigenous People, and Sainte-Marie wanted to bring that to light and use her position to show people the injustice that was occurring. Scholar Sheila Whitely mentions how in Sainte-Marie's songs she "demonstrated an ability to project a diversity of images, to write unconventional love lyrics and songs which confronted social and political issues, nationalism and its impact on the American Indian."¹⁰ Sainte-Marie felt strongly about these injustices and turned to music as a way to bring them to light.

This use of music to demonstrate the needs and voices of Indigenous People is also a beautiful representation of the importance of music to their cultures. In many indigenous cultures, music was integrated into every aspect of daily life, and was vital to the culture. It was used for healing, for celebration, for knowledge, and for community, and folk music specifically stems from many of these indigenous songs. Musicologist Kimberli Lee studied many indigenous cultures and describes how Sainte-Marie

blend[s] traditional indigenous instrumentation with modern electronic and digital technologies... illustrat[ing] that as the forms and styles of Native music evolves, songs still carry the realities, hopes, dreams, and experiences of Native people.¹¹

Sainte-Marie also had many songs that protested war movements, as was common for folk music in North America in the 1960s. Songs like "Universal Soldier" and "Power in the Blood" became antiwar protest anthems surrounding the Vietnam War.¹² However, the powerful message of these songs was not well received by everyone, and Sainte-Marie's music was eventually blacklisted by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Sensing that her music career was possibly nearing its end, Sainte-Marie decided to continue her activism for the oppressed by working to provide education to Native students both in the U.S and Canada. She set up many foundations and organizations to provide the funding needed to put Indigenous People through schooling in order to get the help they needed to succeed in life. Sainte-Marie realized "how music can be powerful as an educational tool to promote understanding within and between various cultures."¹³ Sainte-Marie herself had earned a Ph.D. in Fine Arts from the University of Massachusetts and understood the importance of education, especially for underprivileged people.

Because of this understanding of music as an educational tool, many of her songs spoke out on issues about which people were often ignorant. In 1966, Sainte-Marie released an album called *Little Wheel Spin and Spin* and with it released the most controversial song of her musical career, "My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying." This song centered on the long list of crimes the U.S government committed against Indigenous People. She released it at a time of already growing dissent and protests for political movements and antiwar policies, and it shocked many people with how brutally blunt it was in calling out the government for their actions against Indigenous People.

Sainte-Marie started the song with an aggressive line:

Now that your big eyes have finally opened/
Now that you're wondering how must they feel/... You've asked
for my comment I simply will render/
My country 'tis of thy people you're dying. (*Little Wheel Spin and Spin*, 1966)

This opening stanza itself set up the premise of the song, expressing the anger and frustration she felt towards the white-focused atrocities of the U.S government, and the lack of representation of Indigenous People that followed thereafter.

After this opening stanza, the songs shifted to start outlining more specific injustices in an attempt to open people's eyes to what was really going on:

You force us to send our toddlers away/ To your schools where they're taught to despise their traditions/ You forbid them their languages, then further say/ That American history really began/ When Columbus set sail out of Europe, then stress/ That the nation of leeches that conquered this land/ Are the biggest and bravest and boldest and best/ And yet where in your history books is the tale/ Of the genocide basic to this country's birth. (*Little Wheel Spin and Spin*, 1966)

This verse also called out Canada's residential school system that required Indigenous children to attend, even though the goal of these schools was assimilation and cultural eradication.¹⁴ It also shifted to Indigenous students living in America and dealing with the absence of their history and culture in school curricula. The lyrics continued on to mention how the government tried to make up for everything by giving out gifts and blankets, but ended up only spreading more disease and taking more lives in the process.

While harmonically the song does not grow in intensity, the quality of Sainte-Marie's vocal tone and the lyrics themselves do. Sainte-Marie became even more sarcastic and provocative with her words as she sang:

The white nation fattens while others grow lean/ Oh the tricked and evicted they know what I mean/ My country 'tis of thy people you're dying/ The past it just crumbled, the future just threatens/ Our life blood shut up in your chemical tanks/ And now here you come, bill of sale in your hands/ And surprise in your eyes that we're lacking in thanks/ For the blessings of civilization you've brought us. (*Little Wheel Spin and Spin*, 1966)

"My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying" was a poetic attack on colonization and lament at its cost.¹⁵ Sainte-Marie became more aggressive in her imagery as she drove home the point that people are ignorant in their actions and believe they are doing good things, and can get upset and offended when they do not get the praise they thought they deserved.

In the very last stanza, the listener is left with the chilling and aggressive line, "choke on your blue white and scarlet hypocrisy" (*Little Wheel Spin and Spin*, 1966), followed by the imagery of a mockingbird stealing the nest of another bird and then repeating the same phrase over and over again, unable to truly see that the Indigenous peoples' poverty was the white person's profit.

The song was fairly simple musically. Sainte-Marie sang solo with only her guitar as accompaniment, but this again allowed for the focus to be on the lyrics and the powerful message they were carrying. As is common with folk music, the lyrics and meaning of the song were emotional and personal; void of all pretense and façade it focused on the brutal reality of life and the emotionally intense experiences Indigenous People had gone through. One of the main ways that Sainte-Marie drove this home is in the very title: a riff on My Country 'Tis of Thee. The lack of grand instrumentation was characteristic of folk as the genre, and it emphasized the importance of the message more so than the complex musicality a musician could create with instruments. It was raw and emotional in its protest.

Also, while she was not quite advocating for women's voices in her song, the support of Indigenous People, another oppressed group, was just as important to study in history. Sainte-Marie used this song very openly to advocate for their rights and bring to light the true history of what had happened. She also had a unique style and twang in her voice throughout the song that pulls from the vibrato, throatier sounds of many indigenous songs that explored a range of emotions in frustration, heartbreak, and rage.¹⁶ Sainte-Marie blended common folk elements of the 1960s with styles of her heritage to connect with the common listener, while still representing the people group that she was fighting for. "My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying" changed a historically patriotic phrase into a bold statement of the violence that had occurred against Indigenous People in North America.

4. Joni Mitchell and Women's Rights

Another influential folk singer of the 1960s was Joni Mitchell. She was born in 1943 in Canada, and her musical career started not long thereafter in Calgary, where she sang traditional folk songs in bars and coffee houses. She enrolled in art school, but got pregnant at 21. When the father of her child left her for California, she fled to Toronto in shame, and decided to give the child up for adoption. In Toronto that year (1964), she attended the Mariposa Music Festival and became inspired to start writing her own music. The next year she met and married Chuck Mitchell and moved to

Detroit. However, the marriage was short lived and ended two years later.¹⁷ Mitchell then bounced from New York to Los Angeles, where she recorded her first album in 1968. At this point, as she was living in California, she became more promiscuous in her love life. Many of her songs were inspired by these affairs, including “Willy” and “Our House,” and in her book *Women and Popular Music*, Sheila Whitely writes: “[Mitchell’s] lovers are characterized in transience.... She chooses men who will not stop her from her prime purpose which is to explore the planet and life.”¹⁸ Mitchell wanted to explore music that was “genderless, raceless music”¹⁹ and reaches all corners of life, not just white feminism. She wanted to make a statement of freedom to *all* people through her music.

Mitchell believed that the best way to make that kind of music was to include a personal touch of real life events she had experienced. She had her own unique style and had been described as “the most innovative woman songwriter to emerge in the late 1960s, with her penchant for minor-mode melodies and texts with multilayered images, grew stylistically over three decades from folk to rock to jazz to jazz fusion.”²⁰ Her music had a very creative style that demonstrated her emotional and personal side that came out in a compelling way. As is often a trend in folk music, many of her songs were less formal in structure and allowed her inner thoughts and emotions be demonstrated not only in lyrics but also in performance, so that her listeners could connect with and understand her on a more personal level. The songs Mitchell sang are beautiful creations and stories of confession and original experience. Marilyn Papayanis, through the words of Vic Garbarini, told of her talent to spin out narrative truth, saying:

She’s an ace storyteller, right out of the Homeric tradition, not so much describing or analyzing a situation as conjuring up visionary landscapes of cinematic power that take the listener vicariously through the event, like stepping into one of Don Juan’s shamanistic visions. You emerge from the other side with the feeling that you’ve lived the event yourself and learned whatever lessons it inherently had to offer.²¹

Mitchell’s songs and musicianship were so powerful because of these compelling narratives that spoke not to a select elite, but to the common as a whole in an attempt to help people find understanding and connection.

Another part of the beauty of her musical style was her ability to seamlessly shift from one genre to another, changing styles to fit her current characteristics and ideas about music. While some people considered this an instability in character, Mitchell felt it fit the idea that people are constantly changing and that growth and transformation of one’s self and one’s styles was a reflection of artistic expression and the realities of life. Mitchell once said in an interview:

They’re going to crucify you for staying the same. And if you change, they’re going to crucify you for changing. But staying the same is boring. And changing is interesting. So.... I’d rather be crucified for changing.²²

Mitchell did not care what others thought of her, and did a great job of representing women with that same boldness. Every woman is unique and different in her own way, and she was frustrated about the standards women had to conform to. Mitchell wanted to demonstrate that a person could change and still be successful, that it was okay to break down the norms of society and live life how one wanted. She changed music styles as she changed in life, and wanted to be very real about how that worked and could be completely acceptable.

During the time in her life when she was mainly a folk musician, Mitchell wrote the song “All I Want,” which quickly became one her most influential songs. The album *Blue*, as a whole, focused on the stereotype of love with regard to women, and how sexist society can be in its standards for women. “All I Want” is technically a love song, but not in the conventional sense of the phrase. Instead of singing about two lovers finding each other or how much they love each other, the song focused on finding freedom and female agency and being proud of female desires.

“All I Want” begins with the line, “I am on a lonely road and I’m traveling” (*Blue*, 1971), which Mitchell used not only as a nod to the fact that she was a woman making her way in a man’s style of music, but also as a representation of looking for a love that is liberating and not stifling in characteristics.²³ This song painted the picture of traveling on a quest and “... the ‘I’ pronoun and the active female subject dominate this song and are themselves synonymous with the quest, which, as we learn in the last stanza, is ‘the key to set me free’ from jealousy and greed.”²⁴ From the start, Mitchell made known the struggle and loneliness of searching for freedom on this road.

The song continued on and grew in its confidence for women, as Mitchell sang about wanting to be strong, to laugh, to belong to the living, and to get up and jive. While these seem like simple wants, they were meant to inspire women everywhere who may feel oppressed in their relationships and afraid to want to be strong and happy within those relationships. She tied this stanza together with a verse stating “‘I want to wreck my stockings in some juke box dive’ [which] suggests a desire to thumb one’s nose at propriety.”²⁵ Despite the weight of the oppression of this relationship, Mitchell connected lyrics in the song to active verbs that encouraged rising up and fighting against that sorrow. Her songs were not meant to be songs of pity, but songs of action that inspired change in the feminist movement.

The next stanza then switched to looking at the relationship between the man and woman specifically, as Mitchell repeated the phrase, “all I really really want our love to do is bring out the best in me and in you too” (*Blue*, 1971). She demonstrated many women’s frustration with not feeling loved or that their significant other is helping them to be the best they can be. She continued on to eventually ask:

Life is our cause/ When I think of your kisses my mind seesaws/ Do you see - do you see - do you see how
you hurt me baby/ So I hurt you too/ Then we both get so blue. (*Blue*, 1971)

Mitchell used this line to demonstrate the frustration that can come from a relationship that is very one sided, and how important it can be to try to be the bigger person. She sang out her grief of being hurt by someone ignorant to their effect, and then talked about how if she tried to hurt him back the only thing it would do is cause them both pain. Mitchell was reflecting her own, private vulnerability and pain in a musical, public way to help bring about freedom and connection to others experiencing something similar.²⁶ In a time full of anger and protest, this simple line was a huge reminder of the importance of finding other ways to solve problems than just fighting back.

Mitchell ended the song by returning to the original phrase, “I’m on a lonely road and I’m traveling” (*Blue*, 1971). But now instead of singing for all women and what they want, she began to sing almost as if *to* women, stating how she wanted to “set you free” (*Blue*, 1971). Mitchell used her voice at the end to show her listeners that she cared and wanted to set them free: from greed, jealousy, oppression, and any unfair love they may be experiencing.

The beauty of this song is also found in the simplistic style of the accompaniment. Like Buffy Sainte-Marie, Joni Mitchell performed this song solo, playing only the Appalachian Dulcimer for accompaniment. The sound of the instrument gives a country twang that compliments her slightly husky voice. The simple notes from the dulcimer also allowed for the focus to be on her voice and the meaning behind her words, as was traditional in the folk genre. The song had moments of instrumental solo, where Mitchell created harmonic color and melodic contouring to aid in the word-painting of the emotions embedded in the song.²⁷ However, strategic silences and quiet accompaniment helped the majority of the song focus on the message of finding freedom within relationships and finding empowerment in yourself. Mitchell was especially great as a folk singer because she had no qualms about being real and emotional in her music, truly speaking out about things she believed in and opening herself up so that other women could connect with her music and find the help they needed to keep fighting for their rights.

5. Conclusion

Folk music is music for the common person, the broken, the hurting, the lost. It is music that is not afraid to be vulnerable and raw, drawing on personal emotion and experiences to craft beautiful melodies that speak to the soul. It is a genre that is constantly shifting, but that needs to be consistently focused on reaching out to voices unheard and speaking for those suffering. Because folk music relies more on the voice than other instrumentation, it allows for the focus to be on the lyrics and the meaning of the song, reaching out and spanning cultures to connect those who have suffered.

While folk started as traditional songs for the everyday life, it has expanded so immensely into different subgenres, each with their own style and characteristics woven into the music. The genres may be different, but the ultimate meaning of folk music has stayed the same: to give a voice to those who do not have one. The civil rights movements in the 1960s were crucial in helping folk music and protest songs gain popularity with those messages.²⁸ The personal emotion and messages stirred longings of freedom in social rights fronts in a way that helped push the movement along. Music is a powerful tool to be used for the benefit of the world at large, and Sainte-Marie and Mitchell recognized the power their voices had to create something good.

Buffy Sainte-Marie performed folk music as a way to make known the injustices being committed against Indigenous People of America and Canada. Joni Mitchell sung about the woes of being a woman and fighting the standards society has put around women, particularly with concerns of their place in a relationship. These women were incredibly influential in the 1960s, and their songs contain messages that span across time and push for values that this society should still be fighting to achieve. Oppression is still seen in the world today, and the call of these women to fight those injustices needs to be heard. Sainte-Marie and Mitchell both created music based upon experiences of oppression in their lives and topics close to their heart, because when boiled down to its core, that is the essence of folk music.

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