

## **The Use of Song in Social Movements: Where Are Songs for the Environment?**

Lance Mills  
Department of Environmental Studies  
University of North Carolina Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Dolores Eggers

### **Abstract**

Human activity is degrading the environment and changing the global climate in ways that are harming all living species. Transitioning from existing patterns of consumption, waste, pollution, and resource extraction to sustainable and less damaging methods is essential to preserving quality of life on planet Earth. One way to begin this process is finding tools that provide a common language or symbolism to which people can relate. The most basic and universally relatable language is music. Published research shows that listening to and creating music together impacts human experience in ways other cooperative activities do not. Other social and political movements, like those that supported economic, racial, gender, or marriage equality, often relied on songs that inspired and united those advocating for change. The first portion of this research examines and analyzes how music is effective in creating and promoting social cohesion, and how music has been used in past social and political movements. The paper attempts to answer two essential questions. First, how is music used as a unique tool for building community and expressing group beliefs? Second, regarding protest songs in particular, what role did they play in the movements, and what were the perceived intentions of the songwriters? This portion will also examine some specific examples of protest songs. The second portion of this project includes the creation of original songs that address pressing environmental issues. Songs may cover the following topics and, in some cases, more than one topic: climate change and its effects on global agriculture and economics, environmental justice, environmental ethics, human behavior and ethical decision-making, pollution and other impacts on ecosystems, natural resource extraction policies, habitat destruction and harm to species (human and non-human), promoting environmental awareness, and developing support for improvements in environmental policies.

**Keywords: protest songs, social and political movements, environment**

### **1. Introduction**

Music is more than “organized sound.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, many believe that music is an intrinsic part of human evolutionary history<sup>2</sup>. Music is ubiquitous in all human cultures, and some, including Charles Darwin, believe that it likely predates language<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the manner in which the human brain perceives and experiences music involves multiple areas of brain function. Because humans experience music so universally and viscerally, songs lend themselves to the role of being “a vehicle for social bonding and societal cohesion.”<sup>4</sup> It is widely believed that music has historically been an essential part of human culture<sup>5</sup>. Songs are part of ritual, and they preserve cultural history. Both religious and secular brands of music reiterate societal beliefs and traditions. Mothers sing to their babies, and children often learn through simple rhymes and melodies, sometimes even composing playful songs of their own. Folk songs preserve stories and cultural identities. Countries have national anthems that evoke imagery of the shared experience of the citizens of those nations. In many cultures, music and dance are inseparable and are ritually observed as a significant

aspect of everyday life<sup>6</sup>. Shared music creates and sustains community, and builds both interpersonal and societal connections. A recent study found that singing together promotes social bonding between participants more quickly and deeply than performing other forms of art together<sup>7</sup>. Songs also follow the contours of evolving beliefs and expanding knowledge, and can therefore allow music to describe, explain and, perhaps, even predict or determine the changing course of human events. Based upon the historical use of song for protest, and the effectiveness of music as a means of fostering social cohesion and cooperation, songs for the environment can be an effective means of emphasizing the importance of changing from current policies to those that will be sustainable.

## 2. History of Protest Songs

Within the history of the United States, songs of protest were initially aimed at addressing social or political issues. One of the earliest political songs is “John Brown’s Body,” a folk song written in support of Captain John Brown. In 1859, Brown attempted to raid an armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in hopes of starting a slave rebellion. Celebrated as a patriot and hero, he was revered by Henry David Thoreau, who advocated for Brown in hopes of achieving Brown’s acquittal<sup>8</sup>. Modern listeners would recognize the tune of “John Brown’s Body” as “Glory, Glory, Halleluiah.” Primarily, predating this event, the sound of slave hymns was pervasive throughout the southern U.S. Those songs described the struggle of daily life and the promise of an eternal reward for the endurance of hardship and suffering<sup>9</sup>.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, songs were created to match increasing interest in the plight of the common worker. The writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels inspired a greater focus on the labor class, and on the broader economic effects of a rapidly expanding capitalist market. Songwriters like Joe Hill, a labor organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World, used the then-popular style of sacred hymns to write songs about workers’ issues<sup>10</sup>. Hill once wrote, “A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over.”<sup>11</sup> Other songwriters, most notably Woody Guthrie, became champions of the working class, the ‘salt of the earth’ men and women who toiled in difficult and often dangerous jobs. Songs like, “This Land is Your Land” became anthemic in pleading for the ideal of equality and opportunity for all people, although some of its more pointed lyrics (with references to the plight of the poor and advocacy of public land ownership) were often omitted<sup>12</sup>. The imagery of Guthrie’s songs often celebrated the rustic beauty of nature, but also suggested that nature’s wildness could be tamed. Ironically, Guthrie also wrote several songs about the Columbia River in Washington State, under contract from the Bonneville Power Administration, which was promoting hydroelectric dam construction along the Columbia and its tributaries<sup>13</sup>. Although his songs did celebrate an important sense of place and a reverence for the natural beauty of the American West, he likely did not realize that the concomitant praise of technology, growth, and support of job opportunities was inevitably going to cause a great deal of environmental harm<sup>14</sup>. At the time, the use of natural resources was seen primarily as a means of expanding economic opportunity, and the long-term consequences of such exploitation were largely disregarded (if they were considered at all) in light of the short-term benefits.

The 1960s are the decade most strongly associated with protest music, given that the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War were the focus of that era. Music did not create those causes, but rather provided a soundtrack and a communal medium for those who protested injustice and violence. Songs not only communicated the frustrations of the protesters, but also created a unified message with which they could express their opposition. Marches, sit-ins, and other protests used songs to display the collaborative and committed nature of objection to war and racism. Musicians like Neil Young, Country Joe MacDonald, Phil Ochs, Joan Baez, Sam Cooke, Marvin Gaye, and, most notably, Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger expressed the thoughts and feelings of young people interested in cultural evolution<sup>15</sup>. The songs composed for and about these contentious issues were often written as solo performances but some were intended to be sung by the crowd; sing-along songs express the solidarity of protesters and their commitment to the issues at hand.

Two kinds of songs exist that are associated with social protests and political movements. Some songs would be sung together by those involved in protest during the action, whether marching, assembling, or sitting in. Songs like “We Shall Overcome” and “Which Side Are You On?” are synonymous with the marches for civil rights in the 1960s<sup>16,17</sup>. Other songs were less likely to be sung during protest actions, but reflected the concerns, desires, and hopes of the protesters. Notably, “Strange Fruit,” recorded by artists such as Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, used the chilling imagery of lynching to advocate an end to racially motivated violence against blacks<sup>18</sup>. Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” was representative of the desire for social and political transformation<sup>19</sup>. The imagery of wind as an inevitable force of change is a very powerful metaphor.

Songwriters have also created other songs that were perhaps less protestation than observation or speculation about how some human behaviors were harmful to humans and non-humans, and how those behaviors might evolve.

Examples of this type of message include “Big Yellow Taxi,” by Joni Mitchell, which questions the wisdom of preserving trees only to put them on display and then require people to pay “a dollar and a half just to see ‘em.”<sup>20</sup> Sam Cooke’s “A Change Is Gonna Come,” Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Goin’ On? (The Ecology),” and John Lennon’s “Imagine” are all examples of songs that were broadly embraced by audiences who valued both the criticism and the hope that these songs proffered<sup>21</sup>. Each song conveys an interesting perspective on the current state of social structures and the possibility of how they might be better reflective of a more compassionate and wise set of ideals. More recently, “Mountains of Things”, by Tracy Chapman, offers a condemnation of materialism, conspicuous consumption, and greed, all of which strain both the sustainability of extracting natural resources and the capacity of the environment to absorb waste and pollution<sup>22</sup>. Macklemore’s single “Same Love” not only argues for support of marriage equality, some of the proceeds from sales of the song were donated to a non-profit organization working for passage of a bill to legalize same-sex marriage in Washington State (which was passed)<sup>23</sup>.

### 3. The Role of Environment in Song

The relationship between humans and the natural world has been widely explored in every form of art, including music. However, not until the understanding of the harmful impacts of human activity on the environment arose in the modern era was the relationship viewed as more than one-sided and unidirectional. Either humans controlled nature, bending it to their collective will and subjugating its riches for their needs, or nature flouted those efforts. Conversely, nature has often been portrayed in a more amicable light, a place of beauty and peacefulness, and a welcome refuge from the harshness of urban life. Early portrayals of nature in song seem to fall into one category or another. Humans tend to stay outside of nature, with its creeping and insidious hazards, or transform that wild habitat into something more “civilized.” Of course, once that transformation occurs, humans often feel a longing for a place that no longer exists.

Many blues and country songs refer to nature broadly in terms of rural versus urban experience. Specifically, musicians and songwriters who hailed from a rural background tended to identify strongly with the rural setting, as the sense of place helps to create that identity. Both before and after the Second World War, many Southerners moved north to find jobs. Even a perfunctory scan of the blues, country, or bluegrass music catalogues from this time period reveals numerous songs about missing home, family, the trees, the singing birds, and the stars at night. Of course, one can also find songs about floods, drought, other extreme weather events, infestations of pests and other crop failures<sup>24</sup>. Author David Ingram divides these songs into the categories of pastoral and anti-pastoral<sup>25</sup>. The pastoral songs paint country life in a nostalgic light, with the rural experience viewed as an uncomplicated and peaceful escape from the bustling strife of the steel and concrete world of the city. The anti-pastoral tends to emphasize the difficulty of the rural experience, focusing on poverty, being at the uncompromising whim of nature’s unpredictability, and the backbreaking work and insecurity of farming as a vocation.

#### 3.1. The Role Of The Artist In Conveying The Message

In both descriptions of nature, another thread of commonality appears, the notion that the simplicity of rural life implies a degree of authenticity. The implication is that county folks are uncomplicated, free of guile and agenda; they are genuine and can be trusted. Hank Williams sums up this perspective quite capably in saying, “You have to plough a lot of ground and look at the back side of a mule for a lot of years to sing a country song.”<sup>26</sup> Two prototypical images became pervasive in the world of country and western music: the hillbilly farmer and the cowboy. Each is seen as sincere, unvarnished, and honest, and this idealized version of the common man became a widely exploited symbol in country music. Even hillbilly string orchestras that historically performed in tuxedos soon transitioned to dressing in work shirts and bib overalls<sup>27</sup>. The image of the cowboy was also widely adopted in country music, with fancy boots, ten-gallon hats, and rhinestones becoming *de rigueur*<sup>28</sup>.

Despite the evident appeal of this brand of “reality,” it becomes difficult to overlook the irony that this image was socially constructed, and designed with the intention of selling records and concert tickets<sup>29</sup>. Cultivating a trustworthy image by using a rustic symbolism was an entirely modern and predominantly urban strategy. This is not to argue that the connections musicians and their songs have with nature are only ever fabricated and disingenuous. It is to say, however, that no matter how “down home” the trappings of country or blues music, produced music is still a commodity and an industry. Musicians and songwriters must remain cautious of projecting a desirable version of their backgrounds and intentions while overlooking the reality that they are ultimately trying to sell a product. The music industry would not generate billions of dollars of revenue each year if most people were swapping home grown

tomatoes for MP3s.

Nevertheless, authenticity remains an important element of songs that advocate change. Authenticity is requisite because no one will respond favorably to songwriters or singers if they do not engender trust. Trustworthiness is important, because a song does not have to be a true story but it certainly must seem to tell the truth. The songs that resonate with listeners are worded thoughtfully, their passion tempered with humility and reason. Being genuine is essential, because people do not want to feel that they are being deceived by false information or tricked into relinquishing control over their lives.

### 3.2. Focusing On The Environment

Prior to the 1960s, little heed was paid to environmental issues specifically, because it was not until then that the environment itself became a focus of public concern. For example, many songs have been written and recorded in sympathy with the extremely harsh experiences of coal miners, with little regard, until much later, of the negative and permanent ecological impacts of coal mining. Rachel Carson's seminal 1961 book, "Silent Spring" was an eye-opener for many people, including Pete Seeger, whose songs shifted focus from social issues to explicitly environmental topics. In 1966, Seeger released an album called "God Bless the Grass," and many of the songs were written about environmental issues. Songs like "The People Are Scratching" point out the rippling interconnections between human decisions and their effect on both the natural world and the human experience therein, and "My Dirty Stream" bemoans the deplorable pollution of the Hudson River<sup>30</sup>. Songs like these were among the very first that took environmental perspectives as their focus, recognizing the consequences of anthropogenic impact on the quality of ecosystem and human health. John Prine describes the coal mining industry's destruction of the southern Appalachian Mountains in "Paradise," noting the irony of framing such devastation as "the progress of man" while emphasizing the significance of being connected to the natural world<sup>31</sup>.

## 4. Analysis of Song Composition

### 4.1 Message Of Songs

A significant aspect of writing protest songs pertains to what perspective the writer adopts regarding the intended audience. Some of the folk songs of the 1960s relied on "finger pointing," meaning that they tended to accuse a specific person, industry, or policy of blame or wrongdoing. A telling example of this is Dylan's 1963 song, "Masters of War," a scathing critique of the military industrial complex, in which he sings, "Even Jesus would never forgive what you do."<sup>32</sup> Certainly, some industries, politicians, business executives, and other public figures are directly responsible for harm to the environment. In those cases, pointing out negligence or malice is warranted. But Dylan and others began to move away from the finger pointing songs, because they saw the inherent conflict in attacking and accusing<sup>33,34</sup>. Folk singer Carolyn Cruso comments that, "people will tend to assume that a singer-songwriter is accusing others while exempting him- or herself."<sup>35</sup> The other troubling aspect of such a song is that, while it does indeed illuminate the problematic issue and hold it up for criticism, if it only does that, it does not suggest a better alternative or solution. Lennon's "Imagine" at least asks the listener to picture a "what if" situation, rather than simply pointing out that war, inequality, and hunger are undesirable. A different way for a song to address a worrisome environmental issue could be putting forth a vision of hope, a version of how things could be transformed and improved. The analogy of driving is useful to illustrate the different approaches, particularly considering the difference between the brakes and the steering wheel. Pointing out the problem is not unlike hitting the brakes; if the goal is to stop something unwanted, use the brakes. A vision of hope is more like a steering wheel; if a change is wanted, the steering wheel can change the direction of the car and guide it toward a better destination. Brakes may stop the vehicle temporarily, but only by focusing on turning the wheel can a different destination be reached<sup>36</sup>. Martyn W. Lewis states that the challenge of environmentalism "must be more than to criticize society and imagine a blissful alternative. On the contrary, the movement must devise realistic plans and concrete strategies for avoiding ecological collapse and for reconstructing an ecologically sustainable economic order."<sup>37</sup> Well-written songs can do more than complain about what is wrong in the world or wish for some imagined utopia. A good song can be a road map to a better future, not just another fuzzy picture of what that world might look like.

One method for guiding transformation is writing songs that incorporate suggestions for implementing policies that both protect the environment and promote sustainable, prosperous lives. Helping to create and raise awareness of environmental issues and their causes is important to justify the need for moving away from outdated, destructive

models of thinking. Business as usual is the root cause of the current global ecological crisis. Renewable energy, for example, reduces reliance on harmful fossil fuels and creates jobs. Green and closed-loop manufacturing would significantly reduce waste and need for landfills by making products either totally recyclable or completely biodegradable, meaning more efficient and profitable production<sup>38</sup>. Improving land-use policies can help prevent erosion, protect pollinator habitat, preserve species diversity, and increase food production. The relation of music to the future is ‘seismographic’ in that it “reflects cracks under the social surface, expresses wishes for change, [and] bids us to hope.”<sup>39</sup> Such topics may not be as idyllic as the typical pastoral, but they more realistically address the way that rethinking current processes can lead to a sustainable world.

## 4.2. Musical Nature Of Songs

For a song to be effective, it must first be enjoyable to hear. A song could be very eloquent in its lyricism, but if the listener is turned off by its musicality, then the song has failed. Conversely, a song could be very pleasing to the ears but miss the opportunity to get the listener’s attention. Managing the “balancing act” of delivering a likeable song while also conveying a message that engages and captivates the listener is a considerable challenge<sup>40</sup>.

Several features of music need due attention for a song to accomplish the goal of connecting with and moving its audience. First, there exist several fundamental facts about the way that the human brain experiences music that are factors in a song’s ability to engage the listener. The brain anticipates, for example, the rhythm and meter of a song, an idea called entrainment<sup>41</sup>. In short, when people dance, tap their feet, or clap their hands, they are not reacting to the beat of the music but actually predicting it. A song that engages this entrainment is said to have “groove,” and groove is what gets people moving and, hopefully, listening<sup>42</sup>. Similarly, the tempo of the song has a effect on how the brain is drawn in. If the song is too slow, too fast, or just not well fit to the lyrics, the brain (along with its owner) becomes dissatisfied.

Secondly, the melody of the song is part of what appeals to the listener’s ear or fails to do so. The brain is programmed to anticipate where the melody is going to go and where it is going to wind up<sup>43</sup>. Most of the time the listener wants that expectation to be fulfilled, although going to or landing on an unexpected note can sometimes be very enjoyable. A songwriter must be wary of composing something with too many unfulfilled expectations, because if the song comes across as too jarring or discordant, few will continue to pay attention or desire to hear it again. However, the unexpected parts of a song may be what make it catchy or “sticky,” in terms of being both euphonious and memorable<sup>44</sup>. Major and minor chords and scales also give coloration to a song. Minor keys tend to add an air of being sad, somber or serious, while major chords seem more lighthearted or even jubilant. Mixing the two can be done to great effect, as long as the song does not come across as not knowing whether it is in a good mood or a lousy one.

Melody and rhythm can be very effective at creating and inspiring an emotional response in the listener. Because some of the areas in the brain affected by music are also the seats of emotion, music can be very powerful in its influence<sup>45</sup>. Songs can be uplifting and inspiring, communicate joy, sorrow, or anger, and express both personal and communal sentiment when shared. Moreover, the words to a song often appeal to the listener due to the ways in which they either challenge or fulfill expectations. Often, using common and familiar language is most effective; the audience may care about the health of a local stream but be quite lost if the term “aquatic macroinvertebrates” is included in the lyrics. Words ought to be selected for their ability to create a reaction in the listener, and put together in lines and phrases that clearly and effectively convey the message of the song. Good lyrics should inspire the listener, and good environmental songs should inspire action and create change.

## 5. Original Songs for the Environment

### 5.1. Example: An Environmental Song About Climate Change And Agriculture

As a musician and songwriter for the past thirty years, I have created several songs that illustrate an effective approach to music for the environment. The following song is an example of the type of message that is meant to raise awareness and augment understanding of the far-reaching effects of climate change. The subject of the song is a poor farmer whose crops are failing because of the inhospitable conditions caused by climate change.

## The Hungry Farmer

### Verse 1

There's years when it's either dust or mud  
There's days when it's either tears or blood  
If it ain't one thing, it's all of them  
And a poor man ain't got a thing to lose  
But a strong back and a tired hand  
And a short life with nothing much to choose

### Chorus

Cussin' at the sky won't do a thing  
Swear upon the soil beneath his feet  
Betrayal of the season for the crops it doesn't bring  
He feeds his children sorrow when there's nothing left to eat

### Verse 2

Don't know when to water or to weed  
Gamble on the harvest or the seed  
Nothing left to tend, and nothing more  
What he planted dying on the vine  
Quiet desperation, all there is to know  
And everything he owns is on the line

### Bridge

The weather isn't what it used to be  
All too often, just what he doesn't need  
If he's in trouble now, how much worse when it gets warmer?  
The change is plain for anyone to see  
Just ask the hungry farmer

### Repeat Chorus

## 5.2. An Explanation Of The Song

“The Hungry Farmer” is intended to illustrate the effects of climate change on agriculture. Extreme weather events, temperature variations, drought, and flooding have always been a hazard for farmers, but those catastrophic situations are becoming more frequent and intense much more rapidly than earlier predicted. The majority of the world's poorest people are farmers or agricultural workers<sup>46</sup>. Climate scientists predict that global agricultural production may drop, with an increasing likelihood of major food shocks by midcentury, which is especially worrisome in light of the fact that global human population is expected to exceed nine billion by that time<sup>47</sup>. Poor crop production can create food insecurity even in wealthier nations. And, sadly, no famine has ever been caused by a food shortage. In every recorded famine in history, food was being exported away from those starving to those who could afford to pay for it<sup>48</sup>. This aspect of the song also touches upon the subject of environmental justice; environmental degradation, pollution, and waste disproportionately affect the poorest communities, no matter in which country they reside. Climate change will certainly affect most strongly those who have few resources, resilience, or ability to adapt (i.e. the poorest). Agriculture already consumes a sizable portion of natural resources, particularly water and arable land<sup>49</sup>. As soils become nutrient-deficient, salinized from improper irrigation, or eroded, more forested areas will be cleared, only to eventually become unusable. Ironically, clearing trees results in less carbon sequestration, and more greenhouse gases (GHGs) released to the atmosphere, which further exacerbates climate change. The plight of the farmer in this song is entwined with the activities of humans everywhere, whether the farmer lives in North America, Southeast Asia, or sub-Saharan Africa.

The lyrics are meant to inspire sympathy for the farmer, particularly in light of the fact that much of his fate is not within his control, but subject to the whim of a worsening climate. The farmer and his family are not suffering as a consequence of their choices nearly as much as the choices of others around the world whose consumption of fossil fuels, burning and clear cutting of forests, and resource intensive meat-based diets increase GHGs and pollution. Their

feast is his famine. The word “change” is used in the bridge of the song to denote climate change, but also with the implication of a gradual but inevitable decline in the farmer’s ability to survive. The song is not intended to be too heavy-handed as an accusation or guilt trip. This poor man’s story is told as a reminder of the very real suffering many will endure as a result of climate change. The author’s hope is that more suffering will be prevented if audiences become aware of the far-reaching repercussions of their daily choices and strive to make more conscientious ones. Rather than blaming or shaming the listener, the intention is to encourage the listener to help the farmer.

### 5.3. Example: An Environmental Song About Protecting Pollinators And Wildlife Habitats

This song is meant to be light-hearted and fun, although its topic is serious. Pollinators are an essential factor in providing a sizable portion of the human food supply, and maintaining life on Earth. Their recent decline is extremely troublesome.

#### Ecology of Love

##### Verse 1

Bees makin’ honey in the center of the hive  
Bees makin’ love in the middle of the night  
Plant a little garden, give them room to thrive  
‘Cuz the flowers get it on when they wiggle and jive

##### Verse 2

When the birds get to singing ‘cuz the Spring’s arrived  
And the firefly’s flashin’ with one thought in mind  
When the peep frogs peepin’ they can go all night  
A’rockin’ and a’rollin’ in the circle of life

##### Verse 3

Messin’ up nature is a no-win fight  
‘Cuz the critters love to be where the wild’s alright  
We need a lot more trees and more stars at night  
The ecology of love is a beautiful sight

### 5.4. An Explanation Of The Song

“Ecology of Love” is imagined as a song to be sung with a large group of people in the call and response style. At first, the words seem playful and at least somewhat suggestive, but deeper meaning is intended. Bees and other pollinators are an irreplaceable link in the web of life. Many species, including humans, will endure serious suffering and loss or become extinct if the ecological services that pollinators provide go unmet due to declines in their health and numbers. Every species shares one beautiful commonality, regardless of all the myriad differences in the diverse living world. Every plant, animal, fungus, and single-celled organism has a biological mission to pass on its unique genetic makeup. A song about procreation might as well be fun to sing. This song also mentions other factors in the success or failure of species to thrive. When human activity interferes with natural systems, when habitats are fragmented, damaged or destroyed, the effects can be both immediate and irreversible. Advocating for more trees addresses both the need for forests and the habitat they create for other species, but also the fact that their ability to sequester carbon is more increasingly important. Wishing for more stars at night is a plea to reduce light pollution, an ecological problem in itself and a symptom of a general disregard for the consequences of human behaviors. The expression, “Nature bats last,” is relevant to the claim that opposing natural forces is a “no-win fight.” If humans do not alter their behaviors and choices, the repercussions will certainly cause harm to almost all inhabitants of the planet. But, even if the human race is foolish enough to wipe itself out, that does not mean the end of life on Earth. Life, even when confronted by the most difficult situations, has a tendency to persist. That notion may be a useful one to keep in mind as humans learn to contend with the choices already made and the choices yet to come.

## 6. Discussion

The point of using songs for protest is to move the message, to inspire people to work together, and to help us feel interconnected. The reason to use song as a medium is that singing makes the argument in an artistic and expressive way. The message is too important to be merely stated; the words have to be sung in order to convey their relevance and impress the immediate need of heeding them, acting on them. More importantly, conveying the message in a way that allows the experience to be shared among people, whether they listen together or sing together, is a means of connection that builds strength and community. The context of the message should be the telling of an important story or an invitation to join in and act together. Finger pointing will not work for two reasons; an accusation only puts the accused on the defensive and it implies that the accuser bears no blame for the problem and, therefore, no responsibility to address it. The message must be one that inspires collective action for the common good.

Protecting the environment and fighting climate change require a reinvention of economic systems, the use of natural resources, and energy production. Convincing citizens to change their consumption habits is a formidable task. In the U.S., the high standard of living (meaning high consumption of resources and energy and high production of waste and pollution) is considered “the American way of life.” A song may sound downright un-American if it asks, much less insists, that this lifestyle be categorically transformed to become sustainable. Sustainability means asking people to do with less, to give up luxuries, and forgo their comfort and convenience. Such an appeal must be closely linked with the idea that protecting the environment and the well being of future generations is, in fact, extremely patriotic and can lead to a better lifestyle. Artists and organizations can use songs that take this approach to emphasize the message, explain the need for change, and describe the benefits of that change.

The people who believe that the ecosystem can simply absorb all the waste and pollution, that there is some “away” where everything can be disposed, who do not acknowledge that the climate is changing, and who do not believe the economy can thrive if the environment is protected are either uninformed, misinformed, or refusing to face facts. Unfortunately, if they are bluntly told that they are wrong, they will probably become angry and unapproachable. They will likely fall back on the same arguments that have always been used to defend resource exploitation, industry, and capitalist systems that do not take into account the externalities of their function. Songs should not try to convince someone that their stance on these issues is the wrong one. Rather, they need to ask questions that get people to think about the issues, to consider that there are better explanations and more useful perspectives. Moreover, songs should create greater possibilities for achieving an understanding of the relationship between how nature is currently harmed by human activity and how that degradation in turn harms all species, including humans. The use of song in social and political movements can be an effective means of conveying the importance of transforming human interaction with the natural world. That relationship can and must be changed to one that is harmonious and supports all life on Earth.

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