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The Rochester Institute of Technology

Department of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

The Power of Lyrical Protest:  
Examining the Rhetorical Function of Protest Songs in the 2000s

by

Mary Elizabeth Quirk Cort

*A Thesis* submitted

in Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Science Degree

in Communication & Media Technologies

December 12, 2013

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DEDICATION

For my parents, my daughters, Joelle and Catherine Cort,  
and my sister, Kathleen Quirk

Grateful acknowledgment for her help with primary research  
Jody Sidlauskas, M.L.S.

For the expertise of my thesis advisor  
Kelly Norris Martin, Ph.D.

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THE POWER OF LYRICAL PROTEST:  
EXAMINING THE RHEOTRICAL FUNCTION OF PROTEST SONGS IN THE 2000S

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Department: Communication

College: Liberal Arts

Degree: Master of Science in Communication & Media Technologies

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**Abstract**

Until the late 1960s, serious scholarship involving the impact of popular music as political expression was lacking. Studies in rhetorical criticism tended to focus upon speeches, essays, and historical documents. Yet in the 1970s, protest songs were given more attention by scholars. However, this trend was not continued into the 2000s. By analyzing the ideological themes within the lyrics, this thesis examined the rhetorical function of protest songs performed during the 2000s. Functions identified include: historicizing a truth, using music and lyrics as a buffer to challenge a power structure, empowering the listener to overcome adversity, communicating a message to solidify members of a social movement, and encouraging societal change.

*Keywords:* protest songs and rhetoric, protest songs and persuasion, protest songs of the 2000s, social activism and protest songs, rhetorical functions and protest songs, ideological criticism and protest songs

**The Power of Lyrical Protest:  
Examining the Rhetorical Function of Protest Songs in the 2000s**

The rhetorical functions of protest songs are important to study because they enable us to understand and learn from opposing ideologies that are expressed “en masse.” Studies have shown that, by themselves, many individuals do not have a strong voice, but they become stronger when joining a group of like-minded individuals (Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 1984). Reed (2005) has indicated that there are several functions of culture in [social] movements. He suggests that music in mass rallies can move a person out of the individual self to feel the strength of the group, empower an individual to feel his own strength, harmonize or smooth differences among diverse constituencies; inform internally, meaning to express or reinforce movement values, ideas, and tactics; inform externally, meaning to express movement values, ideas, and tactics to potential recruits, opponents, and undecided bystanders; transform and set a new emotional tone such as defusing anger or fear to calm or resolve a conflict. Lastly, members of a movement can critique movement ideology by challenging dominant ideas, values, and tactics of those in power by evoking emotions and meanings within the audience (Reed, 2005, pp. 299-300).

For this reason, taking a closer look at protest songs for their rhetorical merit is significant to document changes within a society and to uncover the use of finding creative solutions that address the problems within the culture. Foster (2006) stated that

popular music must be recognized as a powerful form of public discourse...from the numbers of sold-out concerts that occur from small independent venues to massive football stadiums is enough to warrant musical performances as a necessary site for

rhetorical criticism and public address. In short, of the places to gather to hear public rhetoric, music performance is significant. (p. 48)

### **Literature Review**

Much of the recent scholarship focusing on protest music with respect to its rhetorical value draws from several social disciplines. This review of the research available responds to the current body of rhetorical scholarship and may enlighten the reader to the “message of the music” and its impact on the audience.

For the purpose of this study, a protest song is a song that identifies a social problem and/or calls for action in response to a social or political problem. According to Stewart, Smith, and Denton (2001) protest songs serve six major persuasive functions:

1. informing audiences about the past, present, and future of social problems,
2. establishing or defending the self- identity or self-worth of those associated with the cause,
3. establishing legitimacy of the movement,
4. prescribing solutions and/or making demands regarding the social problem,
5. promoting cohesion and camaraderie among those involved in the movement, and
6. urging specific actions such as picketing, voting or removal of troops.

### **Music and Its Persuasive Function**

Scholars have discovered three persuasive components that distinguish music from other forms of communication. First, music is repetitive in nature. The persuasive elements of music are created through redundancy. Redundancy is the borrowing of a line from another well-known song (Booth, 1976). Second, music emphasizes the non-discursive because it operates on

a physiological mode which affects the human body: music literally touches our body intimately in a greater variety and succession of different ways than the spoken word, employing a broader range and a larger variety of different melodies, rhythms, chord progressions, and instrumentations than are possible with only the spoken word (Chesebro, 1985). Third, music is an experiential form of communication. As an artistic form, music involves a collection and pattern of personal experiences. Since music is connotative in nature, the listener can place his/her interpretation on the song. (Chesebro, 1985; King & Jensen, 1995).

Stewart, Smith, and Denton (1984) revealed that the persuasive potential of music has attracted attention for centuries, particularly when social agitators have composed and performed protest songs...but it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that researchers began to study *the persuasive nature and effects of protest music*. For the first time in American history, protest music became popular and commercially lucrative. (p. 137)

Perhaps it was due to the popularity of a protest song or a particular artist who emerged on top of the Billboard hits that attracted increased research interest in the late 60s, but protest songs have been part of the American culture since the Revolutionary War.

For example, the U.S. national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner” was set to the tune of a British drinking song, “The Anacreontic Song” and was first entitled “Defence of Fort McHenry.” Before the advent of recorded sound, songs were popularized by word of mouth, so the quickest way to get a topical message to the people was to attach new lyrics to well-known melodies (Lynskey, 2011, p.541). Ayerman and Jamison (1998) point out that some of the most effective songs gain power through their appropriation of tunes that are bearers of strong,

cultural traditions...and “music and song can maintain a movement even when it no longer has a visible presence in the form of organizations, leaders, and demonstrations, and can be a vital force in preparing the emergence of a new movement” (p. 71).

### **Research on Protest Songs Between 1970-1980**

In a formal study of protest rhetoric through song, the researchers found the following:

There was a significant attitude change after exposure to the combined media, even when the song or speech alone did not produce such change. This experiment, then, did show that songs can add to the attitude change resulting from a speech of social action.

(Kosokoff & Carmichael, 1970, p. 301)

The study involved 97 undergraduate students at the University of Oregon who were administered a pre-test and a post-test on three concepts. The researchers divided the students into four groups—one being the control group—and developed an experimental comparison between protest songs and speeches. Although two of the original hypotheses were not confirmed, the third was confirmed, as the “speech-song combination resulted in significant attitude change for all three concepts” (Kosokoff & Carmichael, 1970, pp. 300-301).

Another study done by Irvine and Kirkpatrick (1972), focused upon the importance of the ethical reputation of the source (artist) and his/her influence upon the audience by virtue of his/her previous reputation. Also discussed are various aspects of the impact of music, such as the element of rhythm [which is] “capable of producing a change, both physiological and psychological, in the listener and the artist” (DeGraff, 1924, pp. 18-20). Rhythm “is the element rendering all music rhetorical because it is vehicular in the process of developing amplificative meaning” (Irvine & Kirkpatrick, 1972, pp. 277-284). The authors posit that this reinforces an

existing attitude or value in a persuasive manner. As a result, the auditor [audience] contributes elements of interpretation to complete the event (Irvine & Kirkpatrick, 1972). This research is supported by the Aristotelian model with regard to the importance and impact of the audience who fill in their own interpretation of the message.

An example of this concept was illustrated in the song “Let It Be” sung by The Beatles, to show that within the sub-culture of the youth following them, the listener fills in either a positive or negative association made with this song—a song which has its roots in overtly religious, hymn-like melodic and chord structures, but nonetheless, is persuasive. Whether the reaction was positive or negative, the song became very popular and was readily adapted into the Peace Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

During the Civil Rights movement, a significant historical movement in the US that spanned from the late 1950s through the 1960s,

the use of freedom songs appears to be a natural or inevitable development [but] was the result of much conscious, deliberate organizing over many years. Music did not enter the movement spontaneously, immediately or automatically...in reaching older Black people especially, church music functioned brilliantly as a way of pouring new content into old forms. (Reed, 2005, pp. 14-15)

Reed points out that “music gave a sense of history to the movement to allow instant historicizing” (Reed, 2005, p.14) which means that old songs were altered or changed to create new songs that told stories of the evolving movement. Where old songs give a sense of roots, new songs allow the community to claim a specific place. This practice of “instant historicizing” is used often in many other types of social movements that followed later.

**Research Gathered From 1980 Through the 1990s**

It took a new generation of musicians and songwriters to invent unique ways of writing and playing protest songs that didn't copy the previous generation. In fact, many new artists emerged from the late 1980s and 1990s with a wide range of genres. They offered up their own version of strong social commentary and insight on world views.

In *Rocking Out: The Changing Sound of Protest Songs*, writer Catherine Galioto (2004) portrays an overview of the 90s with this observation:

The protest song was gobbled up and spit out in the 1990s, and turned into the decade's lyrics of choice for many anti-establishment punk bands. Completely different from anything Bob Dylan would play, the protest song was now pumped up with layers of guitars accompanied by screaming. It was during this time that "the non-stop activism of *Rage Against the Machine* also debuted...and rap from artists like *NWA* and *Public Enemy* focus on the faults of government with songs against making black men go to war. By 2000, the *Beastie Boys* released "In A World Gone Mad" along with *System of a Down*'s "Boom" and with a popular rap version of Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" from Fred Durst and Eve. (p. 6)

In the mid-80s through the 1990s, topical protest songs became popular, but were not necessarily created through grass-roots groups (such as songs directly connected to the Civil Rights movement or protest against the Vietnam War). Rather, research literature reveals that songs were delivered through purposefully planned music events that gathered a variety of commercially successful artists together (e.g., Willy Nelson, Sting, John Cougar Mellancamp, Paul McCartney, U2, REM, and others) to promote a specific agenda or cause such as economic

conditions (Farm Aid), famine relief in Ethiopia (Live Aid), or Saving the Rainforest (Greenpeace; Kranjnc, 2000).

The protest songs used were just one of several means of reaching the masses, perhaps due to the ease of accessing other forms of mass media, and the technological advancements made in the dissemination of music through videos and live coverage. The impact made in these cases was not as a result of any specific song itself, but rather came from the event itself in raising awareness of a cause and in attracting new supporters to it. This trend appears to have encouraged the “mega-musical” events since they had the ability “to reach large audiences through access to mass communications (1.5 billion people watched Live Aid in 1985, and 600 million watched the first Mandela Tribute in 1988)...and can also affect deeper learning and action among participants” (Krajnc, 2000, p. 24).

Eyerman and Jamison’s work, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (1998) is the most frequently cited research on the impact of protest music on social movements and the broader culture during this time period. They wrote:

The construction of meaning through music and song is, we claim, a central aspect of collective identity formation...and exemplify how collective structures of feeling are actually made and reorganized, in part, through song...[S]ongs and music give us access to both feelings and thoughts that are shared by larger collectivities and that make better claim, perhaps, for cultural representativity...[S]ongs are channels of communication for activists—within movements, but also between different movements, and indeed, between movement generations. (p. 161)

Charles Stewart (1999) challenged earlier work by Richard Gregg (1971) who theorized that “protest rhetoric is basically self-directed, not other-directed, and was fulfilling an ego-function” (p. 91). Stewart studied protest songs during two centuries of American history and discovered that “protestors seem unwilling or unable to escape their siege mentalities...and thus, messages of oppression and exploitation appear to lead self-directed movements to a rhetoric of self-pity, self-defense, and self-preservation” (1999, p. 93). But in his conclusion, he cautioned about making generalizations regarding the nature of rhetorical functions within social movements and made a strong argument about the importance of ego fulfillment, whether the protestors consider themselves “victims” or are “other-directed” protestors who take up a cause of others (Stewart, 1999).

### **The 2000s: The War on Terrorism, Reprisal and Protest**

As one scholar commented, “though ordinary people no longer congregate for presidential debates, they do for rock concerts. In fact, political pundits have been onto this trend for a while, cultivating rockers to aid in electoral campaigns and national conventions” (Foster, 2006, p. 33). She further writes, “rhetorical scholars have devoted significantly less scholarly attention to music than [to] other rhetorics of popular culture,” (p. 33) and asserts that most of the research on the rhetorical power of popular music was published in the 1970s (e.g., Irvine & Kirkpatrick, 1972; LeCoat, 1976; Mormhan & Scott, 1976). Given this lapse, there is a need for further research on the rhetorical merit of protest songs during the decade of the 2000s.

In *The Silent Soundtrack: Anti-war Music from Vietnam to Iraq* (2009), Brooks confirmed an assumption that scholarly research on the rhetorical significance of protest music is scarce. Brooks stated in her dissertation,

indeed, there is a considerable gap in social movement research that addresses protest music in any depth excluding the work of Eyerman and Jamison (1998); Flacks (1988); Garagalo (1992); Mattern (1998); Pratt (1994); and Roscigno and Danaher (2001). This is concerning given the fact that over the last twenty years, more emphasis has been placed on understanding how culture in general can affect social and protest movements. (p. 55)

Much of the research in this study of protest music in the 2000s has been taken from trade books, website articles, and dissertations that pertain to protest songs, some of which focus on the influence of the protest music, but do not use a rhetorical theory framework within their analysis. Many scholars include protest music in their research relative to the influence of music in social movements, but not focused directly on protest songs, such as Brooks (2002), Carter (1980), Eyerman and Jamison (1998), Pettijohn and Sacco (2009), Read (2005), Stewart and Smith (1984), and Tillman (1980).

Brooks (2009) addressed the challenges of studying anti-war music in the mass media due to the fragmentation of the media with the increase of Internet use in comparison with other broadcast media outlets. The focus of her research was on commercially released anti-war music in the U.S. mainstream media between two time periods: the Vietnam War (1963-1975) and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (2001-2007). She compiled a database of 2,940 anti-war songs during this period. Her key findings indicated that

(1) the number of anti-war songs released from the Afghanistan/Iraq era greatly outnumbered the songs released in the Vietnam era; (2) during the Afghanistan/Iraq era, independent labels released more anti-war music than did major labels; this was reversed

in the Vietnam period; (3) the anti-war songs of the Vietnam era still hold cultural significance as many of these songs were covered by artists of the Afghanistan/Iraq era; (4) folk and rock were the preferred genres used by anti-war musicians in both eras; (5) the number of anti-war songs that made the top singles chart (Billboard Hot 100) were higher in the Vietnam era than in the Afghanistan/ Iraq era, even though the number of anti-war songs included on best-selling albums (Billboard Hot 200) *was higher* during the Afghanistan/Iraq period than in the Vietnam period. (Brooks, 2009, p. 162)

A popular book on protest songs, *33 Revolutions Per Minute*, was written by a British music critic, Dorian Lynskey (2011). This history of protest songs from Billie Holiday to Green Day provides an organized collection of protest music taken from many sources and includes personal interviews with musicians. Lynskey's comprehensive listing covers many genres of music and is a main source used for the selection of song titles from the 2000s.

In *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*, T.V. Reed (2005) uses a global perspective to examine how social movements are connected to societal change. Protest music was mentioned in this study, but the author focused primarily on how social movements play crucial roles in making history, particularly in the United States. He cites research that encompasses protest movements, but it is not the main focus of his research.

*Billboard* writer Jim Bessman summarized the year 2001 in the music publishing business in his article "Patriotism and Publishing in an Abnormal Year." He writes:

Sept. 11 rendered everything else in 2001 trivial. The horrible events of that day tragically claimed the life of ASCAP licensing manager Jane Simpkin, who was on board

one of the hijacked planes. It also resulted in a predictable resurgence of patriotic songs and songwriting. (Bessman, 2002, p.47)

He later states that

the value of a song, then, never appeared greater than in 2001, nor did its power: after Sept. 11, the huge Clear Channel Communications chain of radio stations put out a list of 150 songs it deemed to be insensitive in the wake of the catastrophe, including, incredibly, such titles as Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" and John Lennon's "Imagine" (Bessman, 2002, p. 49).

Another perspective on the rise in patriotic songs:

Big events like 9/11 push performers to use their celebrity soapbox for anthems or political art, either to reach the heart or rally to action. But the best artists do more than just play back what people are experiencing or pay tribute to testimony. For many artists, 9/11 at least meant dropping typical America-bashing themes. (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 2002, p.8)

With the emergence of YouTube in 2005, and increased use of the Internet, a new venue offered the ease of accessibility in music that impacted the circulation of protest songs. Pettijohn and Sacco (2009) discovered through their analysis of popular Billboard songs, that "through a number of recent technological advances in popular media (online song download sites, portable MP3 players, iPods, etc.) individual's options for obtaining and listening to music have expanded greatly" (p. 297). Furthermore, recent psychological research suggests that individuals' particular music preferences are both a reflection of personalities (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003) and a representation of their attitudes, beliefs, and needs (North & Hargreaves, 1999, 2007).

In reviewing a compilation of top 100 song titles during the 2000s, one finds that there is a noticeable trend from the previous two decades (the 1980s and 1990s) that led to an increase in protest songs written and produced after 9/11 (September 2001). At the same time, there was also a rise in patriotic songs that reflected a sense of national fervor for the support of the policies of the Bush administration at that time. In examining this trend, the question arises: if patriotic songs became a strong national trend, wouldn't a rise in patriotic songs tend to hinder, rather than encourage, protest music or any similar forms of expression that were anti-patriotic? Why then, would protest music become increasingly popular again?

This study will consider these questions and also investigate the recurring ideological themes in protest songs and the rhetorical functions. It will also look at how the song form increases the effectiveness of a persuasive message.

### **Musical Artists Who Took a Stand in the 2000s**

As America turned the corner into the 2000s, there was a definite resurgence and increase in the number of protest songs written, recorded, and distributed (Brooks, 2009). Brooks' research reported that hip hop/rap was the "growing protest genre of today's youth" (Chang, 2005; Clay, 2006; Kalyan, 2006; Pinn, 1999; Rose, 1994). Sernoe (2006) "found that rap/hip hop was the music industry's top selling genre after mainstream pop and R&B (rhythm & blues;)" (Brooks, 2009). Many new artists were able to capitalize upon the improvements in technology and were able to record independently from traditional media sources, as well as sell and distribute music freely for scores of willing and receptive listeners. With equal and easy access to YouTube and the availability of self-recording software and video creation, visual communication accompanied aural and live performances. The new audience had become the

children of the 60s protesters or others who responded to this decade of uncertainty with their own music and lyrics in creative and unabashedly straightforward messages. Earlier protest music fell short of authentically representing the diversity and complexity of the social and political issues facing their generation. The protest song was a traditional protest concept re-packaged and presented in a timely, relevant, and powerful medium.

**Steve Earle (country, folk) - Song: “Rich Man’s War”**

“He’s just another poor boy, off to fight a rich man’s war.”

Steve Earle is a one-man act who has a pocket full of opinions and a variety of ways to express them. His career has spanned decades of being a non-conformist, and he is someone who is not easily categorized. From his views of attacking the health care system “Amerika v. 6.0 The Best We Can Do” to the empathetic lines in “John Walker’s Blues,” Earle is an unconventional country singer who may be classified as “country” but he is not your typical Country Music Award winner. He said “just remember that no matter what you hear, it’s never, ever unpatriotic or un-American to question any fucking thing in a democracy” (Lynskey, 2011, p. 508). According to Morgan (2008),

What can be established, beyond a doubt, is that Steve Earle is making country music fans, producers, artists, and everyone who hears his music think about topics and characters being sung about, and in the case of “John Walker’s Blues” forces its listeners to take a good hard look at what their personal, moral, and political beliefs and ideologies towards the situations that are being presented to them. (p.68)

**Ani DiFranco (folk rock, alternative rock) - Song: “Which Side Are You On?”**

Ani DiFranco’s name doesn’t usually appear in mainstream articles written about protest artists or songs, but she is certainly a strong and unique artist who won’t be ignored. She defied typecasting or any traditional recording “label” by creating her own record company, Righteous Babe Records, at the age of 18. This decision gave her the freedom to write, record, and perform her music without any constraints. She was offered several opportunities to record for major record labels but turned them down. From her career start in the early 1990s, DiFranco has written, performed, and produced all of her own material, and has used the proceeds from her company to support other legendary protest singers such as Pete Seeger, Chuck D (of Public Enemy), Utah Phillips, Billy Bragg, Ramblin’ Jack Eliot, Arlo Guthrie, Bruce Springsteen, and many others. Her career rise was fueled by “personal contact and word of mouth rather than mainstream media” (<http://www.allmusic.com/artist/anidefranco-mn0000046794credits>). She won a Grammy Award (2004) for the category of Best Recording Package and was nominated several times for a Grammy Award for Best Female Rock Vocal Performance, but never won. DiFranco also received the Woody Guthrie Award for being a voice of positive social change in 2009.

Her primary instrument is acoustic guitar and she delivers rapid-fire lyrics in a staccato-like style, accompanied by unusual rhythmic timing, word play, and the use of alternate tunings. Her lyrics are highly personal and resonate strongly with contemporary audiences and her messages contain many universal themes. A prolific poet, she has written “conversation-like” songs covering a multitude of topics. The song chosen here is one that she adapted from an earlier protest song and truly made it her own original and unique version. The only similarity in

her version of the protest song to the original song is the title and the chorus. “Which Side Are You On?” was originally written in 1931, by Florence Reece, the wife of a union leader who was among 11,000 miners protesting a wage cut in Harlan County, Kentucky. DiFranco weaves in her own additional protest themes and here she addresses anti-war sentiments:

*“We voted for an end to war*

*New direction*

*We ain’t gonna stop now*

*Until our job is done”*

DiFranco, like Earle, raises questions about America’s identity with the situation:

*“America, who are we?*

*Now our innocence is gone”*

She further clarifies that this concern isn’t just a feminist issue that women that should worry about it—this is everyone’s concern:

*“Feminism ain’t about women*

*No, that’s not who it is for*

*It’s about a shifting consciousness*

*That’ll bring an end to war.”*

### **Rage Against the Machine (funk/rock/fusion) - Song: “Killing in the Name”**

Although the time frame for this band’s original work began in the 1990s, their spunk, rebelliousness, and hard driven lyrics had the critics referring to this group as “adolescent petulance.” For this study, their politically astute writing charged with the snap of pop music

made this band a clear choice to represent the 2000s. Rage Against the Machine (RATM) were savvy enough to sign with a major label (Sony Records) when they realized that

our words had to be backed up by our actions because we're dealing with this huge, monstrous pop culture that has a tendency to suck everything that is culturally resistant into it in order to commodify it, pacify it and make it non-threatening. (Lynskey, 2011, p. 494)

Drummer Brad Wilk said "we were always a band that was on the edge of not being a band anymore. Some people say that's what gives you fire, and I sort of agree with that, but I tend to believe that it was also just a real fucking pain in the ass" (Lynskey, 2011, p. 492).

According to Weissman (2010):

Like the MC5, Rage Against the Machine is almost entirely devoted to social protest. De la Rocha and guitarist Tom Morello are strong political activists, and have been involved in numerous protest demonstrations. Morello was jailed during a protest against clothing manufacturer Guess, and the band ...demonstrated at the 2008 Republican convention and the 2000 Democratic convention. (p. 291)

RATM made a conscious decision to question the current trends of the pop music world and took many stands to declare their political opinions, fully realizing that this could lead to controversy and commercial failure. They were fully cognizant that there were other bands that were being used as "commodification of dissent." For example, protest songs from the sixties were now being used to sell running shoes (Lynskey, 2011, p. 494).

RATM developed a strong, persistent rhythm and sound and combined it with a simple line lyric that the audience could easily grasp and remember. Band member Morello stated,

“when we wrote that song, and Zack wrote those lyrics, we had no idea that eight years from now a field somewhere halfway around the world would be chanting those lyrics” (“Fight the Power,” *Juice*, 2000, p.1).

**Green Day (punk rock) - Song: “American Idiot”**

Billie Joe Armstrong, front man for the punk group Green Day, penned the title song, “American Idiot” as an immediate reaction to a Lynyrd Skynyrd song that he had heard on the radio about being “proud to be a redneck.” Armstrong said “Oh my God, the country is unraveling. And it was shocking. I never thought I’d see a war brought to you on TV, twenty-four hours a day, and it became like entertainment” (Lynskey, 2011, p. 523). Green Day’s album *American Idiot* was released in September 2004 just weeks before the presidential election and sold 13 million copies by December 2005. The album itself was in response to the quandary that many Americans faced as they watched the daily war news from Iraq on television. In a sense, Armstrong built a platform of anti-television propaganda as an expression of a reaction to what was becoming a daily diet of media overplay. According to interviews with Armstrong, the intention for the collection of songs on *American Idiot* was to be a politically charged rock opera.

**Public Enemy (hip hop/rap) - Song: “Son of a Bush”**

Public Enemy (PE) is one of the most influential hip hop groups that has stood the test of time—performing over twenty years and counting. The founding members were influenced by parents who grew up in the 1960s and were clearly aware of resistance and struggle—living with the after-effects of the Civil Rights movement. Chuck D stated in an interview that they wanted their legacy to be considered as “founding fathers of hip hop” or as “The Rolling Stones of the Rap World” (T. Smiley interview, YouTube). As recent inductees into the Rock and Roll Hall of

Fame, these “Rebels Without a Pause” have certainly been recognized for their influence on hip hop as they continue to share the message with creative and intelligent lyrics.

Public Enemy gained immediate exposure as a political hip hop group when they were asked to write the soundtrack for Spike Lee’s movie “Do the Right Thing.” Their song, “Fight the Power,” was a memorable hit. However, during that time, they were caught in the spotlight of controversy, not only for their upfront and controversial lyrics, but for some interview statements made by Chuck D that caused them to be labeled “anti-Semitic” and “Afro-Fascist race-baiters” (Lynskey, 2011).

“Fight the Power” was originally influenced by an Isley Brothers tune and it placed Public Enemy in the position to define “the powers that be” by describing a common thread of struggle among all black people. “We’ve become the voice of the voiceless...we incorporate the people’s struggle” said band member, Professor Griff. Rap music delves into “the spoken and the unspoken” since the audience understands “the frequency of our music” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4-vzddnli8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4-vzddnli8)). Public Enemy attributes much of its success to the fact that they didn’t rely solely on the U.S. music industry for distribution or publicity. They chose to tour extensively into 60 countries where they found acceptance and connection with an international Black Diaspora and they used it.

### **Methodology**

Ideological criticism was chosen as the method to examine the protest music of the 2000s in order to select a representative sample of songs, because protest songs are a particularly powerful example of a counter culture resistance ideology. Rhetorical criticism allows the critic to review a situation or particular rhetorical device, such as a speech, song, or public message to

determine its symbolic meanings and functions created by the rhetor. By focusing on ideological criticism, “the critic can look beyond the surface structure of the song to discover beliefs, values and assumptions it suggests” (Foss, 2009, p. 309). According to Foss (2009), the primary goal of ideological criticism is to make the ideology visible. Sellnow and Sellnow (2001) observed that musicians are more than reporters documenting an event—they present an illusion of life, amplifying a particular perspective of a situation.

By first analyzing (a) virtual experience and (b) virtual time as each is presented in the lyrics and music, it becomes possible to examine (c) how they interact via patterns of congruity or incongruity. It is these patterns that essentially shape the music’s rhetorical form.” (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001, p. 399)

For this thesis analysis, the selection process focused on a particular time frame in the United States (2000-2012) when the political and social climate encouraged an increase in protest songs written as a result of the political and social pressures that occurred after 9/11. The effects of the 9/11 attacks raised a consciousness in the American public to view the government and their ensuing decision in a new light: patriots versus protesters. Many song artists began to respond to the actions of the Bush administration; some examples include the decision to invade Iraq, the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, and the ongoing economic upheavals on Wall Street. Protest song lists were initially compiled from the literature review with an interest in discovering broader themes of protest ideology. Later, there was a more focused selection of the artists and individual songs based on the following criteria: (a) songs that were written and released in the US by American artists during the 2000s, (b) review of the biographies of each artist or group, (c) genre of songs performed, (d) songs with compelling lyrics, and (e) originality

of the song in style and composition. The initial selection of 100 song titles was sorted and pared down to five songs to allow for a closer examination of the lyrics and music of each artist. The final selection was based on the artist or group who were considered most representative of resistance ideology and who possessed authenticity in their use of provocative lyrics. The artist(s) had attained some recognizable career success based on sales earnings as evidenced by being listed on the Billboard Top 100. The selected artist(s) had shown longevity within the music industry, and it was noted that there has been continued repetition of resistance themes in the artist's music and career. In fact, all of the musicians chosen for this study are still actively writing, producing, and performing music today.

### **Themes**

After the songs were selected, the lyrics were read several times (after listening to them performed with the music), then they were broken down into segments of phrases to arrive at common themes reflected in the words and phrasing of the songs. Three strong themes resulted from this analysis: (a) economic power, (b) anti-war/pro-peace, and (c) defiance/distrust of authority.

### **Economic Power**

Economic power is defined as the power obtained by a governing body to create profit in order to attain or maintain power. The effects of the powerful versus the powerless are often felt directly by those who are part of the profit-making entity (troops/taxpayers). For example, the decision to declare war on Iraq resulted in large profits made by the manufacturers of arms supplies and workers employed in the construction and oil industry. The economic benefits were not necessarily passed down to those individuals who fought in the war or to the families and

survivors in Iraq who suffered from the consequences of the war. It is helpful to review the situation of the US at the time these songs were composed and recorded:

In “Our Mission and Our Moment: George W. Bush and September 11<sup>th</sup>,” Murphy describes the post-9/11 situation in America:

On January 20, 2001, President George W. Bush inherited a peaceful and prosperous nation. In less than a year, he found himself mired in war and recession. Nearly three thousand Americans died in the bloodiest terrorist attacks to occur on U.S.

soil...Meanwhile, the nation slid into recession even as Bush pronounced the oath. So far, better than two million jobs have disappeared and one million workers have dropped out of the labor force. For the first time in six years, wage increases fell below the inflation rate for most Americans. The stock market lost nearly \$5 trillion in value during the president’s first two years in office, the largest real and percentage loss suffered by any president in that period, including Herbert Hoover. (Murphy, 2003, p. 607)

The instability of the stock market combined with unemployment, lack of domestic job opportunities, and rising inflation left many Americans worried and uncertain about their economic future. The discussion of this theme begins with songwriter and activist, Ani DiFranco, who took the song title, “Which Side Are You On” from an earlier protest song and completely re-wrote the lyrics to reflect the events occurring in 2012. She adds her commentary on the current economic situation with a reference to Reaganomics:

*“The curse of reaganomics*

*Has finally taken its toll*

*Lord knows the free market, is anything but free*

*It costs dearly to the planet, and the likes of you and me*

*I don't need those money lenders, suckin' on my tit*

*A little socialism, don't scare me one bit!"*

By posing a question, DiFranco observes a nation that is divided both politically and economically. She asks the listener to consider the cost to the “planet” and then to consider the cost to each person (including herself), “*the likes of you and me.*” Think about it, she says, how free are we? Next, she points directly to the “money lenders” by inferring that they are taking from her personal resources-- “*suckin' on my tit*”-- and that a socialist state might offer a better alternative.

The next song, “Rich Man’s War” by Steve Earle, puts the money theme right into the title and engages the listener through his narrative storyline. The “Rich Man’s War,” specifically the Iraq War, brings to light many questions about the Bush administration’s increasing interest in the Middle East oil reserves as much as the media reports about protecting the cause of freedom and ensuring safety from terrorist attacks. Steve Earle describes the economic choices of those who signed up for the service, and describes a scenario through his story about a young man who decides to go into the Army:

*“Jimmy joined the army ‘cause he had no place to go*

*There ain't nobody hirin' here since all the jobs went down to Mexico*

*Reckoned that he'd learn himself a trade, maybe see the world*

*Move to the city someday and marry a black haired girl”*

Earle then sings of the reality once Jimmy is in the Army:

*“Somebody, somewhere had another plan*

*Now he's got a rifle in his hand*

*Rollin' into Baghdad wonderin' how he got this far*

*Ah, just another poor boy off to fight a rich man's war"*

As narrator, Earle relates this situation to his audience through the viewpoint of his character, Jimmy, when "*somebody, somewhere*" changed his plan and sent him off to war. Instead of economic stability and the job training that he expected to find, Jimmy ends up fighting in a war he didn't plan on fighting and is very far away from his dream of finding a good trade and a black-haired girl.

### **Anti-War Songs in 2000**

In prior decades, most notably the 1960s, anti-war songs often took opposition to the dominant ideology of the pro-war establishment. Likewise in the 2000s, the anti-war songs challenged and refuted the pro-war policy of the Bush administration as well as the government's longstanding involvement in Afghanistan. Shortly after the events of 9/11, the psyche of America had changed drastically when, for the first time in history, America had been caught by surprise and national security was shaken. One scholar noted that George W. Bush, along with his chief political aide, Karl Rove, saw in this situation a creation of "a sense of national unity" as a "huge political opportunity and ...he took full advantage of [this] offered by the 9/11 attacks by becoming the one voice of the nation" (Murphy, 2003, p. 622). However, not everyone in the country was in agreement with the voice of the Bush administration or with the U.S. Congress who backed this decision. Specifically, many of those new voices were younger, less influenced by the media, disenfranchised from Republican influenced policies, and there were many other naysayers among the 49% of the population in the US who had not voted for Bush.

The song, “Killing in the Name Of” seems an appropriate title to introduce the opposition to war as created by Rage Against the Machine (RATM). Although this song was written and released several years prior to 9/11, the lyrics and message are powerful and appropriate for the time period since this song continued to be performed throughout the decade of 2000s. “Killing in the Name Of” became a number one song in the UK by gaining the most downloadable hits in a specific time period and RATM has always been recognized as strong political and social activists who promote protest ideology. Many of the lyrics in the song are repeated several times, adding emphasis and strength to the forceful delivery of the performers who are accompanied by heavy bass lines and strong drum rhythms.

The song begins with:

*“Some of those that wear forces*

*Are the same that burn crosses”* (repeated 3 times)

“Some of those that wear forces” are compared to “those who burn crosses,” symbolizing a reference to the methods of the Ku Klux Klan who used fear, murder, and intimidation to wield their power and to maintain control over a minority group.

*“Killing in the name of!*

*Killing in the name of!*

*And now you do what they told ya”* (repeated 12 times)

The repetition of this phrase is vague enough to allow the audience to come to their own interpretation of who is doing the killing, yet it causes the listener to reflect upon the rationale used to justify war and to describe those who serve and obey the command to “do what they told

ya”)? The lyrics are strong and declarative—this is not a question but rather a direct call to the audience to shake them into awareness about the subject.

*“Those who died  
Are justified  
For wearing the badge  
They’re the chosen whites”*

Here, another reference is made to racial suppression and the use of forceful means to justify death and combative actions. The message is not condoning this, but rather, is pointing to the symbolism of wearing a badge and being “*chosen whites*” to carry out the actions. The song ends with an emphatic phrase: “*fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me.*” Here is defiance, loud and clear, with a refusal to go along with any kind of command or intimidation.

In 2004, Green Day produced the song “American Idiot” as a reaction to the daily influx of national news coverage about the war in Iraq, as well as to challenge the situation of Americans siding with the pro-war policy. Armstrong reacted by writing this song as a defiant response to a Lynyrd Skynyrd song he heard on the radio about being “proud to be a redneck”:

*“Don’t wanna be an American idiot  
Don’t want a nation under the new media  
...I’m not a part of the redneck agenda...”*

Part of this “redneck agenda” was supporting the war efforts in Iraq—and there was a proliferation of patriotic songs being aired and broadcast quite frequently during this timeframe after the initial wave of deployment of U.S. troops into Iraq. Green Day countered:

*“Television dreams of tomorrow*

*We're not the ones who're meant to follow*

*For that's enough to argue*

*Don't want to be an American idiot*

*One nation controlled by the media*

*Information age of hysteria*

*It's going out to idiot America"*

The lyrics indicate a national reaction to the hysteria and response to an “age of paranoia” and the after-effects of the continual blasting of information from the media to support this ideology.

As a different approach from the earlier lyrics sung by Green Day, Ani DiFranco brings in another theme in her song “Which Side Are You On” which points to the government and decisions made:

*“We voted out corruption and big corporations*

*We voted for an end to war, new direction*

*We ain't gonna stop now, until our job is done*

*...show 'em which side are you on now?*

*Which side are you on?”*

In the next line, DiFranco refers to a shared history in America:

*“Are we living in the shadow of slavery?*

*Or are we moving on?*

*Are you part of the solution?*

*Or are you part of the con?”*

Through her lyrics, DiFranco provokes response to questions and yet, she doesn't offer specific answers or solutions to them. This is for the listener to decide and this approach lends itself to an informed audience.

Much like DiFranco, Steve Earle doesn't tell the listener what to decide, but his anti-war sentiments are shown through the narrative of individual characters. In the song "Rich Man's War" both men are caught up in life-changing events as soldiers fighting a war and must live with the consequences of entering into it.

### **Distrust of Authority/Defiance**

This theme is woven through many of the songs and is categorized as distrust of the authority—whether it is political, economic, or social. Defiance and distrust can overlap in the attitude of non-conformity to the dominant or ruling ideology or "the authority" whether it is in military or civic power. Sometimes it's just against what the songwriter considers "the Establishment." Two of the music groups, Rage Against the Machine and Public Enemy also imply racial tension and distrust of "white" power in their lyrics.

"Son of a Bush" by Public Enemy makes reference to the aftermath of the Bush Administration's response to the victims of Hurricane Katrina (many who were African-American and died without prompt assistance) in these lines:

*"Sorry ain't no better way of puttin' it, no you cannot freestyle this*

*'Cause yo ass still ain't free if I fight for y'all and they get me*

*Come on*

*How many of y'all is comin' to get me? None*

*'Cause it's easier to forget me*

*Ain't that a bush, son of a bush, is here all up in your zone"*

Here, the distrust is spelled out clearly:

*"I told y'all when the first bush was tappin' my telephone*

*Spy vs spy, can't truss 'em as you salute to the illuminati"*

Rage Against the Machine equates those who are in authority with "the same that burn crosses" and those that wear the badge are "the chosen whites (who) justify those that died." There is a twist of the word lyrics in this phrasing that reinforces the first line and serves to emphasize this message.

Ani DiFranco tackles a similar issue, but rather than distrust, she suggests that perhaps there's a chance to challenge the corporations and government. She writes that "we voted out corruption and big corporations" yet she acknowledges that "they stole a few elections" and "now there are some folks in Washington who care what's on our minds." She poses this question to the audience:

*"Come on--come all voters*

*Let's all vote next time*

*Show 'em which side are you on now?*

*Which side are you on?"*

She ends with:

*"Are you part of the solution*

*Or are you part of the con?*

*Which side are you on now*

*Which side are you on?"*

DiFranco draws a line between “sides” and poses questions to the audience about trust in the election process, or in choosing a solution or a con. By doing so, does DiFranco persuade the audience to think about trusting those in authority or does this draw attention to truths they were not previously aware of?

Through the theme selection process, there were a number of other interwoven themes and sub-themes that reflected an opposing voice to the dominant ideology. Some of these other sub-themes included slavery, racial injustice, feminist power, and hope for better solutions. Some artists chose to risk some career success by taking a strong stance on political issues, yet other than in the case of Steve Earle, whose career was quite cyclical and perhaps not due to his political leanings, the other song artists continued to thrive. Many of them built up a solid and loyal fan base and not surprisingly, their fans were their biggest supporters of the protest ideology of the songs. They voiced this support through the purchase of multiple downloads of songs and personal distribution of the music outside of the traditional production channels of the music industry. In the case of the career path forged by DiFranco, she chose to start her own record company rather than be subjected to the rules or restrictions placed by music corporations, choosing to turn down several lucrative record deals. Her career as a solo artist has been firmly built through word-of-mouth support and independent distribution channels. Protest ideology is firmly entrenched in DiFranco’s music, and in all of the artists chosen for this study. If for some reason a fan is not aware of the nature of the songs or protest ideology, the music and lyrics are easily accessible through YouTube and the Internet, and full disclosure is available if one is not sure about the kind of music they play.

## Discussion

### Protest Ideology and Its Impact on Culture

This thesis examines the ideological themes of protest music from the 2000s and investigates the rhetorical function of music. As the form itself (song) constitutes the rhetorical nature of the message, the extent to which song form influences the rhetorical function is also examined. This led to these research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What are the recurring ideological themes in protest songs and what is the rhetorical function in protest music?

*Research Question 2:* How does the textual artifact as presented in song form increase the effectiveness of a persuasive message?

Following up on the work done previously by Irvine and Kirkpatrick (1972), Reed (2005), and Stewart, Smith, and Denton (1999), and with respect to their research on rhetorical exchanges in social movements and protest ideological studies, five rhetorical functions of protest songs were identified in this study. Reed discussed the primary functions of culture in movements, which includes music, and he identified several overlapping and applicable rhetorical functions that related to protest songs. Through the process of breaking down the lyrics line by line, this study found that there were several common themes and sub-themes. Once these themes were categorized, a closer examination revealed several rhetorical functions that are described as follows:

### Historicizing a Truth

Many of the songs selected for this analysis include examples of historicizing a truth whereby the lyrics and music merge the past with the present to create an awareness of a cause or

controversy. This historicizing aspect of a song is a particularly strong element of protest music because it serves to relate a shared history by social activists and movement leaders in order to evoke a sense of common heritage among the participants (or audience). The participants are encouraged by a sense of continuity from the past that carries the message into the present. Many protest songs from the 60s that were associated with the Civil Rights Movement have this component in their songs. This common link was evident in some lyrics written by contemporary protest songwriters. Rather than recycle old songs to be used for the purpose at hand, the artists' creative ability merged the words into a topic of interest which in turn made the song relevant to the time period of the listener.

In the world of hip hop and rap music that began as a political form of musical expression in the black community, the song "Son of a Bush" written by Chuck D of Public Enemy shows a good example of historicizing. The theme of distrusting authority is woven throughout this song and he begins the song with a reminder to the audience of how this power was handed down from father to son. The key political figure, George W. Bush, Jr. (acting president) is referred to as the "Son of a Bush" which connected him to his father's legacy, George Bush, Sr., who paved the political way for his son's presidency. The lyrics of the song imply that the senior Bush's influence continues with the current administration. Public Enemy begins the song with a clever rhyming scheme:

*"Have you forgotten, I been through the first term of rotten,*

*The father, the son and the holy bush-it"*

Throughout the song, there are references to decisions made by the Bush Administration and the attitude is obvious about what type of power has transpired from father to son:

*“He’s the son of a bad man, son of a bad man”*

Accompanied by a heavy rap beat, the pronunciation of the lyrics strengthens the message and invites the listener to utter the words repeatedly in a rhythmic cadence along with the music.

In another type of contemporary format, songwriter Billie Joe Armstrong of Green Day displayed his awareness of what was happening in the world directly after 9/11 as he was “trying to make sense out of a big mess and trying to find something to believe in” (Lynskey, 2010, p. 523). He combines his personal struggle with his political convictions as the lyrics represent a rallying cry for the youth of his generation in “American Idiot” as he sings:

*“Welcome to a new kind of tension, all across the alien nation  
where everything isn’t meant to be okay...”*

Armstrong’s sentiments are expressed throughout the album in many other songs that were released at the same time, such as “Wake Me Up When September Ends,” “Jesus of Suburbia,” and “Boulevard of Broken Dreams.”

With her unique style of playing and articulation, Ani DiFranco raises awareness of history and its place in the present through her use of succinct phrases that encompass a mix of varying social and political statements. In the song “Which Side Are You On?” she sings:

*“They stole a few elections, still we the people won  
We voted out corruption and big corporations  
We voted for an end to war, new direction...”*

Whether the audience agrees with her statements or not, the listeners know what side *she’s* on and they have a choice. DiFranco’s interpretation of what transpired in the past election is that a new administration has come into power and there’s hope for a new direction. As she

continues further into the song, the theme of economic power is still in the hands of a few and there is a price to pay for it:

*“Lord knows the free market is anything but free*

*It costs dearly to the planet and the likes of you and me”*

Evoking a style and spirit of Woody Guthrie, Steve Earle’s approach to historicizing is folksy and narrative. He relates to his audience through telling a story in which two people, Jimmy (the American soldier) and Ali (an Iraqi son) are the main characters.

*“Jimmy joined the army ‘cause he had no place to go*

*Ali was the second son of a second son*

*Grew up in Gaza throwin’ bottles and rocks when the tanks would come”*

Both men are fighting on opposite sides of the Iraq War, yet they are each carrying on a tradition as both become “just another poor boy off to fight a rich man’s war.” The theme of anti-war combines with the theme of economic power with the effects of going off to war. This describes a scenario that was common to many Americans of a certain age who were feeling the effects of a souring economy and who chose to join the military service rather than face the consequences of unemployment:

*Bobby had an eagle and a flag tattooed on his arm*

*Red white and blue to the bone when he landed in Kandahar*

*Left behind a pretty young wife and a baby girl*

*A stack of overdue bills and went off to save the world...*

*Meanwhile back at home, finance company took his car”*

These lyrical lines illustrate the creative ways in which artists bridge the gap between the past and the present.

### **Using Music and Lyrics as a Buffer to Challenge a Power Structure**

Earlier researchers, Eyerman and Jamison (1998) and Denisoff (1970), indicate the influence of propaganda songs that are used to invoke support for movement ideology as well as to recruit new members of a social movement. The use of music and songs as a buffer between opposing ideologies is, in general, its ability to communicate profound and complex meanings without direct opposition to a dominant party. The elements that make up a song, such as rhythm, harmony, syncopation, and style, are able to convey meaning without words, and, as Sellow and Sellnow (2001) have found, create a kind of symbolic communication that is interpreted on a deeper level by the listener.

Some of the artists chosen for this study were very direct—not only in their particular musical sound—but in their lyrics. Groups like Rage Against The Machine, Public Enemy, Pearl Jam, and Bright Eyes, among others, are bands that clearly define their territory with specific rants against mainstream ideology and politics. The theme of distrust of authority and defiance is interwoven with their specific type of sound as well as in the delivery of the words that accompany it.

Although they originally released their song “Killing in the Name Of” in the early 90s, Rage Against the Machine was included on the list of “lyrically questionable” songs in a memo issued by Clear Channel, Inc. directly after 9/11. Clear Channel was one of the four corporate radio monopolies that ruled the airwaves at that time. Although it’s difficult to know how the decision makers defined “questionable lyrics” many of the songs that were removed from air

play referred to death, destruction, or were deemed unpatriotic. In the case of Rage Against The Machine, they repeat these lines many times:

*“Those who died are justified*

*for wearing the badge*

*they’re the chosen whites*

*You justify that those that died*

*by wearing the badge*

*they’re the chosen whites”*

The reference here is to some form of authority, for example, law enforcement officers or anyone who wears a badge. The use of “chosen whites” is implicit in the references to racial discrimination. In spite of this song being removed from airplay, Rage Against The Machine went on to build a very successful career and often performed several free concerts, supporting numerous social causes worldwide, some of which were highly publicized and well attended in the US and the UK.

Other artists chosen for this study, such as Steve Earle, Ani DiFranco, and Green Day, took a less forceful approach, relaying their anti-war messages through narrative style and parody that describes social concerns targeted to a specific audience. In this sense, the use of songs as a buffer between opposing viewpoints offers not only the artist but the audience a more diplomatic and indirect way of expressing oppositional opinions without confrontation.

It’s been said that history repeats itself and, indeed, this quote applies aptly to the protest songs that were chosen. Through the process of reviewing the lyrics line by line, not only were there common themes, but also sub-themes such as racial discrimination, unemployment, and

issues with being disenfranchised. For example, two artists interpreted the same event in their own style. In this example, they both mention the events pertaining to the response of the Bush administration to the victims affected by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. In the song “Son of a Bush” Public Enemy puts it this way:

*“Sorry ain’t no better way of puttin’ it, no you cannot freestyle this*

*‘Cause yo ass still ain’t free if I fight for y’all and they get me*

*Come on*

*How many of y’all is comin’ to get me?*

*None*

*‘Cause its easier to forget me”*

At the time of this song release, there was a lot of media scrutiny about the government’s response (national and state) to the rescue efforts made for the victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana. Many who were trapped by the flooding were African Americans who lived in the inner city. Due to the disorganized and inefficient response to the hurricane, many who lost their lives were economically poor African Americans.

DiFranco makes a reference to the same situation by naming the location of Hurricane Katrina in Orleans Parish (New Orleans) with all of its racially complex history that she refers to as the “shadow of slavery”:

*“They say in Orleans parish*

*There are no neutrals there*

*There’s just too much misery*

*There’s too much despair...*

*...are we living in the shadow of slavery*

*Or are we moving on?"*

Using concrete examples of current events in their lyrics is an effective way of bringing attention to the listener and acting as a buffer between those in the dominant ideology and those who are not necessarily in positions of strength or authority. Through the use of song, it's also a less hostile way of dealing with controversial issues.

### **Empowering the Listener to Overcome Adversity**

When difficult circumstances prevail, people often look to their leaders to help them make sense of the situation. This was certainly evident after the events of 9/11. In his essay that examined George W. Bush's response to the public events after 9/11, Murphy claims that Bush did "a remarkable job of defining the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> [and used it] to his advantage...and his rhetoric is a key factor in his success" (Murphy, 2003, p. 608). So too, song artists who are able to tune in to an event or respond to a specific injustice that causes an individual's struggle by interpreting this difficulty through song, may help make sense of it or offer empathy to the audience. This focus may empower the listener to overcome the adversity or to deal with it in a better way. Perhaps this is why music is such an integral part of life rituals that give tribute to the loss of life or to those who perform heroic deeds during a crisis. For centuries, leaders have used songs to encourage the morale of their followers; politicians have utilized theme songs to rally political support; musical entertainers have helped to calm a boisterous crowd or to give comfort to grieving family members.

In his work on aesthetic symbolism, Langer (1953, 1957) contends that

human beings have the innate need to symbolize in order to comprehend various aspects

of life... music presents itself not as a symbol in the ordinary sense, but is felt as a quality rather than recognized as a function. Hence, music becomes a highly articulated symbol that can express the forms of vital experience which language is peculiarly unfit to convey. In short, music sounds the way feelings feel. (Langer, 1953, 1957; Sellnow & Sellnow, 2001)

In other words, musicians use techniques of song composition (lyrical rhythm, melody, and harmony) to offer a musical way of expressing emotion that sounds the way feelings feel. In their study on “The Language of Lyrics,” Pettijohn and Sacco (2009) found that

although the language of lyrics is an important component of songs...when words are associated with music, they provide greater organization in the mind and have been found to have a greater impact on the mood of listeners than music alone. (Pettijohn & Sacco, 2009, p. 304)

Through the combination of music and lyrics, a song can validate and impact a listener’s feelings or mood.

Green Day chose to create their punk rock sound (and choice of language) so that their fans could easily identify with their ire. The fanbase consisted primarily of teenagers who were coming of age in the mid-2000s, and many, like Armstrong, were seeing the same television news coverage and hearing songs on the radio whose rhetoric supported military retaliation against Iraq. Through the use of identifying the propaganda and paranoia that was “*all across the alien nation*” Green Day tells the listener “*now everybody do the propaganda and sing along to the age of paranoia*” while in effect, meaning the exact opposite. In other words, their fans

had a choice and (the band) knew things are “*not okay*” but “*we’re not the ones who’re meant to follow.*”

Apparently, many fans were in agreement with Green Day’s viewpoint. In 2004, the album *American Idiot* was backed by the success of its first single, “American Idiot” and reached number one on the Billboard 100 charts and in 2005, won the Grammy for Best Rock Album ([http:// www.mtv.com/ontv/vma/2005/](http://www.mtv.com/ontv/vma/2005/)). “American Idiot” is now being performed on Broadway as a punk rock opera in which their message continues to be relevant to a new generation of fans.

Ani DiFranco often appeals to special interests such as those concerning women’s issues, gay and lesbian rights, social justice, and environmental issues, among others. She sings:

*“So let the way of women guide democracy, from plunder and pollution,  
let mother earth be free”*

She implores her fans to find their own solutions to the world’s problems but doesn’t necessarily use a preachy tone or suggest specific ways in which to do so. Through her writing, she acknowledges that there may be a problem but there may also be a solution and this could be a form of empowering others to overcome their particular struggles. By asking a question to the audience, “*are you part of the solution or are you part of the con,*” DiFranco implies that each person has the ability to face the issues, to figure out a solution, or to be led by others to do something about it.

There are anecdotal stories about the healing power of music to meliorate adversity, however, this is most apparent in the emotional reactions from audiences to the musicians who voluntarily support others by assisting in raising awareness to the problem. For example,

fundraising for a specific cause (Farm Aid, post-9/11) illustrates a type of social empowerment when people are given economic and emotional support through music.

### **Communicating a Message to Solidify Members**

History has shown that the original organizers of the Civil Rights Movement used songs to motivate and inspire their people in order to re-wire society through social change. Movement leaders sought to minimize the fear and apprehension of participants while providing a cohesive objective to like-minded individuals that promoted passive resistance and non-violence as a response to the dominant powers of government. Songs were used to unite them and were able to forge a common goal of solidarity in this pursuit of civil rights (Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 1984).

Decades later, in the early years of this band's formation, Public Enemy set out to "represent that the black man can be just as intelligent as he is strong" according to Chuck D (Lynskey, 2005, p. 432 ) while they ushered in a new sound of hip hop/rap music to produce albums of critical acclaim. Their album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, was the first hip hop album to be voted album of the year in *The Village Voice's* Pazz & Jop critic's poll, and they have continued to infuse pro-Black political messages with cultural awareness. They were nominated five straight years for a Grammy award for Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group (<http://www.rockonthenet.com/>) and continue to thrive in spite of the controversial subject matter—racially sensitive tensions that continue to exist. They have been successful in reaching a global audience far beyond the Afrocentric themes. Their opinion is direct, and not always antagonistic, as illustrated in this line:

*"Don't look at me*

*I ain't callin' for no assassination*

*I'm just sayin'*

*sayin' who voted for this asshole of a nation"*

Many other individual artists and musical groups came together to perform for causes that encourage a sense of unity, harmony, and solidarity among people, especially those who have suffered from some type of loss—(Hurricane Katrina, Farm Aid), economic downturns (Occupy Wall Street), or casualties of war (Iraq, Afghanistan). This function is closely related to encouraging social and political change which will be discussed later in this section.

Through her lyrics, DiFranco encourages individual action and decision making, such as making the effort to vote:

*"Come one-come all voters*

*Let's all vote next time*

*Show'em, which side are you on now?*

*Which side are you on?"*

She also urges political leaders to take some action:

*"C'mon mr. president*

*C'mon congress make the law*

*Which side are you on now? Which side are you on?"*

In this manner, she speaks to both sides of the political spectrum and makes the appeal for some specific action.

### **Encouraging Societal Change**

The March on Washington in 1963, arguably the largest single demonstration for civil rights in American history, illustrates the integrative nature of speech combined with secular protest songs to encourage social change. The lineup of musicians for that event included popular singers and performers of that era, such as Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Mahalia Jackson, and Peter, Paul, and Mary, who injected a feeling of solidarity and support for Martin Luther King's non-violent protest movement. The event was extremely successful with an attendance of 250,000 protestors and, more significantly, it ended peacefully (Vail, 2006). During the time leading up to the decade of the 2000s, the rise of large scale mega-music events organized as fund-raising or consciousness-raising benefits took music and its audience to a whole new level. Social activism through musical performance reached a milestone with the Live Aid concert held in 1985 (broadcast simultaneously from London, England and Philadelphia, USA) to reach a record audience of 1.5 billion people worldwide. They raised \$67 million for Ethiopian famine relieve and increased global awareness of poverty in Africa (Krajnc, 2000). Following this success, music organizers tapped into this strategy to offer other large-scale entertainment events connected to specific social or political causes. From release of the album *Rainbow Warriors* by Greenpeace in 1989 to raise awareness for the environment, to support for farmers through Farm Aid (1985-2013), to fund raising efforts for the victims impacted by the events of 9/11 (September 2001) and Hurricane Katrina (August 2005) combining music with social activism continues, and this trend shows no sign of diminishing.

Green Day calls out to their listeners and wants to wake up a nation “*under the new media*” by challenging the audience not to become “*one nation controlled by the media,*” then explains that the messages from the media are the “*information age of hysteria...going out to idiot America.*” This song brings attention to the listener by a warning not to be taken in by this “*subliminal mind fuck America.*” By pointing it out, the band encourages reflection upon what the country is about, which in turn, may lead to social change. Through the repetitive chorus that repeats the message, the song form itself strengthens the message.

DiFranco uses stylistic changes with musical variety in her unusual rhyming patterns accompanied by complex chord changes. Her voice itself often makes interesting inflections that emphasize a certain passage that she may want to highlight:

*“Too many stories written out in black and white*

*C’mon people of privilege, it’s time to join the fight*

*Are we living in the shadow of slavery, or are we moving on?”*

The message is a serious one, yet the tone of her voice, along with the cadence of the phrasing, creates a message that comes across as pleasing, easy to follow, and may encourage reflection by the listener, or it may become a call to social action.

### **How Song Form Increases the Effectiveness of a Persuasive Message**

A song, by its very structure and form, is inherently rhetorical. Songs used in popular culture can be easily shared, sold, and packaged where ideological messages are in conflict and, as such, prove to be good examples of cultural artifacts to study. In discussing the ideological method of analyzing artifacts, Foss claims that “audiences are often less resistant to ideological messages in such artifacts (in this case, protest songs) because they do not expect to see them

there, and such artifacts thus are often more productive and interesting to analyze” (Foss, 2009, p. 214).

In an interview with songwriter, musician, and social activist, Peter Yarrow (of the 60s group Peter, Paul, and Mary) who was asked why music transcends normal cognitive processes and has such a powerful role in conveying a message, he said,

Music goes beyond the intellect. Maybe you didn't hear the song, but you know from what I'm feeling that there is sadness and hope...all those things. It's a language unto itself. And you put 'em together—it slips right through the cracks and under your ribs and it gets right to your heart. (Brooks, 2009, p. 179)

Yarrow was involved with organizing the music on a national level (MOBE) to end the war in Vietnam. This included overseeing the gathering of a wide array of activists and performers who had differing approaches to the anti-war cause and many who played different genres of music. Yarrow said “so there were many kinds—a cast of characters...all kinds of music saying ‘look, all these expressions of commitment to say we must not have this war’” (Brooks, 2009, p.183). He further explained that it wasn't so much as anti-war “but pro-peace... and the distinction is important because there's lots of angry music that simply targets in a way that can demean and rally people in a spirit that's not focused, not loving” (Brooks, 2009, p. 183).

This brings attention to *how* the message is framed within a song that makes it accessible and inclusive to the listener without portraying elements of negativity, preachiness, or chastisement. In this regard, song form—in contrast to hearing a speech or reading an essay—has the ability to create an emotional tone that doesn't require literacy to elicit a meaningful and persuasive message. Many cultures (i.e., oral cultures that do not use written language) rely on

memory and poetic devices such as repetition and redundancy to remember the message of a song or story. Music can play upon this repetition and encourage movement and dancing which also serve as a catharsis from the external world. James Lull describes three levels on which music communicates: “physical (dancing), emotional (feeling the music) and cognitive (processing information),” (King & Jensen, 1995; Lull, 1983). Scholars have further described music’s ability to be persuasive because it is first, repetitive in nature and contains redundancies that are often used when an artist borrows musical elements from past works. Second, music operates on a physiological mode that affects the human body in more ways than the spoken word. By employing the use of melody, rhythm, chord progressions, and instrumentation, music can appeal to a broader range of feelings and sensations. Third, as an artistic form, music involves a collection of personal experiences so that the listener can place his/her own interpretation on the song (King & Jensen, 1995).

A good example of the use of repetition occurs in the song “Killing in the Name Of” whereby Rage Against the Machine repeat the same phrases over and over again in a mantra-like chant. This also occurs with Public Enemy’s style, which encourages the physicality of movement in their rap and hip hop rhythms which add strength and emphasis to their message. And yet the opposite of this redundant effect is experienced when listening to Steve Earle’s guitar style—through his instrumentation and solo voice he is able to evoke more of a relaxed and understated tone that encourages the listener to pay close attention while he unfolds the story.

### **Conclusion**

The primary focus of research for this thesis was to discover ideological themes and rhetorical functions within protest songs of the 2000s. Investigating the persuasive power of the message in song form was a secondary consideration.

The process of selecting specific songs and music artists to study more closely helped to define and reveal major themes and sub-themes within the lyrics. This research is significant because it provides some insight as to the effectiveness of protest songs as rhetorical artifacts that convey a message. Each artist expresses an idea, not only through the song lyrics that are written but also in the way in which his or her unique musical style or genre is performed. The song form allows the artist to interpret and convey differing viewpoints to the audience. Closer examination of protest ideology is significant to study because it documents changes in society and allows for differing viewpoints that are not necessarily in alignment with the dominant ideology. Protest songs are a creative and significant way of expressing a message that is not filtered or repressed by mainstream media outlets. Since popular music is a powerful form of public discourse it warrants closer examination by scholars to appreciate the value that it brings to society. Research has shown that music has the ability to be persuasive on many levels and in its highest form, may move an audience or inspire a social movement because it has affected the listener on a visceral level. As Chuck D said: “if you’re going to deal with that volume and quantity of words, you’d better fill those words up with something. The most difficult thing about a song is not in its expansion, but in its condensing” ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4-vzddnli8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4-vzddnli8)).

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**Appendix**

**Song Lyrics**

**“Which Side Are You On?” Ani DiFranco**

Songwriter: Ani DiFranco

They stole a few elections,  
Still we the people won  
We voted out corruption and  
Big corporations

We voted for an end to war  
New direction  
We ain't gonna stop now  
Until our job is done

Come on all good workers  
This year is our time  
Now there some folks in washington  
Who cares what's on our minds

Come one-come all voters  
Lets all vote next time  
Show 'em which side are you on now  
Which side are you on

Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on  
Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on

Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on  
Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on

30 years of diggin'  
Got us in this hole  
The curse of reaganomics  
Has finally taken it's toll  
Lord knows the free market  
Is anything but free

It costs dearly to the planet  
And the likes of you and me

I don't need those money lenders  
Suckin' on my tit  
A little socialism  
Don't scare me one bit!

We could do a whole lot worse  
Than europe or canada  
C'mon mr. president  
C'mon congress make the law

Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on  
Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on

They say in orleans parish  
There are no neutrals there  
There's just too much misery  
There's too much despair

America who are we  
Now our innocence is gone  
Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on

Too many stories written  
Out in black and white  
C'mon people of privilege  
It's time to join the fight

Are we living in the shadow of slavery  
Or are we moving on  
Tell me which side are you on now  
Which side are you on

Which side are you on boys  
Which side are you on  
Which side are you on boys  
Which side are you on  
Which side are you on boys  
Which side are you on

Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on

My mother was a feminist  
She taught me to see  
That the road to ruin is paved  
With patriarchy

So, let the way of the women  
Guide democracy  
From plunder and pollution  
Let mother earth be free

Feminism ain't about women  
No, that's not who it is for  
It's about a shifting consciousness  
That'll bring an end to war

So listen up you fathers  
Listen up you sons  
Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on

Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on  
Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on

So are we just consumers  
Or are we citizens  
Are we gonna make more garbage  
Or are we gonna make amends

Are you part of the solution  
Or are you part of the con?  
Which side are you on now  
Which side are you on?

**“Rich Man’s War”**

**Steve Earle**

Songwriter: Steven Earle

Jimmy joined the army ‘cause he had no place to go  
There ain’t nobody hirin’  
‘round here since all the jobs went  
down to Mexico  
Reckoned that he’d learn himself a trade maybe see the world  
Move to the city someday and marry a black haired girl  
Somebody somewhere had another plan  
Now he’s got a rifle in his hand  
Rollin’ into Baghdad wonderin’ how he got this far  
Just another poor boy off to fight a rich man’s war

Bobby had an eagle and a flag tattooed on his arm  
Red white and blue to the bone when he landed in Kandahar  
Left behind a pretty young wife and a baby girl  
A stack of overdue bills and went off to save the world  
Been a year now and he’s still there  
Chasin’ ghosts in the thin dry air  
Meanwhile back at home the finance company took his car  
Just another poor boy off to fight a rich man’s war

When will we ever learn  
When will we ever see  
We stand up and take our turn  
And keep tellin’ ourselves we’re free

Ali was the second son of a second son  
Grew up in Gaza throwing bottles and rocks when the tanks would come  
Ain’t nothin’ else to do around here just a game children play  
Somethin’ ‘bout livin’ in fear all your life makes you hard that way

He answered when he got the call  
Wrapped himself in death and praised Allah  
A fat man in a new Mercedes drove him to the door  
Just another poor boy off to fight a rich man’s war

**"Son Of A Bush"**

**Public Enemy**

Songwriter: Carlton Ridenhour (Chuck D)

Oh no  
Struck by greased lightning  
F'ed by the same last name, you know what?  
China ain't never givin back that gottdamn plane  
Must got this ol nation trained  
On some kennel ration  
Refrain  
The same train  
Fulla cocaine  
Froze the brain  
Have you forgotten  
I been thru the first term of rotten  
The father, the son  
And the holy bush-it we all in  
Don't look at me  
I ain't callin for no assassination  
I'm just sayin/ sayin who voted for this asshole of the nation

Deja bush  
Crushed by the head rush  
15 years back  
When I wrote the first bum rush  
Saw you salute  
To the then  
Vice prez  
Who did what raygun said  
And then became prez  
Himself went for delf  
Knee deep in his damn self  
Stuck in a 3 headed bucket  
Of trilateral bush-it  
Sorry ain't no better way of puttin it  
No you cannot freestyle this  
Cause yo ass still ain't free  
If I fight for yall  
And they get me  
How many of yall  
Is comin to get me?  
None  
Cause its easier to forget me

Ain't that a bush  
Son of a bush is here  
All up in your zone  
You ain't never heard so much soul to the bone  
I told y'all when the first bush was tappin my phone  
Spy vs spy  
Cant truss em  
As you salute to the illuminati  
Take your ass to your 1 millionth party

He's the son of a baaad  
He's the son of a bad man

Now here's the pitch  
High and inside  
Certified genocide

Ain't that a bush repeat ain't that a bush

Out of nowhere  
Headed to the hothouse?  
Killed 135 at the last count...texas bounce

Cats in the cage  
Got a ghost of a chance  
Of comin back  
From your whack ass killin machine

Son of a bush ain't that a son of a bush

Cats doin bids  
For doin the same bush shit that you did  
Serial killer kid uh serial killer kid

He's the son of a baaad  
He's the son of a bad man

Coke it's the real thing  
Used to make you swing  
Used to be your thing  
Daddy had you under his wing

Bringin kilos to fill up silos

You probably sniffed piles  
Got inmates in texas scrubbin tiles

That shit is wild

C I A child

The father

That shit is wild

C I A child

He's the son of a bad

He's the son of a bad man

He's the son of a bad man

Son of a bad man

**“Killing In the Name Of”**

**Rage Against the Machine**

Songwriters: De La Rocha/Commerford/Morrello/Wilk

Killing in the name of!

Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses

Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses

Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses

Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses

Huh!

Killing in the name of!

Killing in the name of

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya

But now you do what they told ya

Well now you do what they told ya

Those who died are justified, for wearing the badge, they're the chosen whites

You justify those that died by wearing the badge, they're the chosen whites

Those who died are justified, for wearing the badge, they're the chosen whites

You justify those that died by wearing the badge, they're the chosen whites

Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses

Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses

Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses

Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses

Ughh!

Killing in the name of!

Killing in the name of

And now you do what they told ya

And now you do what they told ya



**"American Idiot"**

**Green Day**

Songwriter: Billie Joe Armstrong

Don't wanna be an American idiot.  
Don't want a nation under the new media  
And can you hear the sound of hysteria?  
The subliminal mind fuck America.

Welcome to a new kind of tension.  
All across the alien nation.  
Where everything isn't meant to be okay.  
Television dreams of tomorrow.  
We're not the ones who're meant to follow.  
For that's enough to argue.

Well maybe I'm the faggot America.  
I'm not a part of a redneck agenda.  
Now everybody do the propaganda.  
And sing along to the age of paranoia.

Welcome to a new kind of tension.  
All across the alien nation.  
Where everything isn't meant to be okay.  
Television dreams of tomorrow.  
We're not the ones who're meant to follow.  
For that's enough to argue.

Don't want to be an American idiot.  
One nation controlled by the media.  
Information age of hysteria.  
It's calling out to idiot America.

Welcome to a new kind of tension.  
All across the alien nation.  
Where everything isn't meant to be okay.  
Television dreams of tomorrow.  
We're not the ones who're meant to follow.  
For that's enough to argue.