

## Music as a tool for social protest: Case studies from black lives matter and EndSARS Movements

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### Abstract

Having reached its peak in 2020, the current wave of international protest movements has led to the failure of the well-established systems of inequality, among which the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in America and the EndSARS wave in Nigeria are the most significant ones. The essential element of the two movements was the use of music not only as a source of entertainment but as an effective tool to social protest, group identity and emotional strength. This article will delve into the complex meaning of music in these movements and rely on a comparative case study approach to examine how musicians, activists, and populations employed sound in the fight against state violence, to amplify voices of the marginalized, and create transnational solidarity. Kendrick Lamar Alright, Beyonce Formation, Childish Gambino, This Is America, etc.

In the BLM context were adopted as sounds to define rebellion and circulated in protest marches, social media, and with political rhetoric. In the meantime, the EndSARS movement was supported by the political creativity of such Nigerian musicians as Falz and Burna Boy, whose lyrics recorded the mood of outrage and contributed to shifting online protests to real action on the streets. The paper contextualizes such musical interventions against wider theoretical debate on cultural resistance, digital activism, aesthetics of protest.

It points out convergences and divergences in genre, audience and political reception and gives an insight into the use of music as transnational media of social criticism and as a means of democratization. In the end, one of the arguments the article makes is that protest music can still be a crucial organizing, memorializing, and imagination of justice in the 21 st century.

**Keywords:** Protest Music; Black Lives Matter; Endsars; Cultural Resistance; Digital Activism; Social Movements

### 1 Introduction

Music has, historically, been used as an effective tool of communication to define allegiance, establish unity and rally groups of people against political subjugation. Whether in the spirituals of African slaves, in anti-apartheid anthems in South Africa, or in protest songs of the American Civil Rights Movement, music has always served as a cultural form of protest. The modern world is experiencing hyper-connectivity, digital media today, so the ability of music to shape socio-political arguments has increased exponentially and music can cut through borders and mobilize a global response.

The year 2020 was characterized by a strong revival of resistance culture (worldwide), the most vivid examples of which were the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the USA and the EndSARS movement in Nigeria. Although the two movements developed based on different socio-political backgrounds, they remained similar due to the fight against

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state violence, institutional racism, and misuse of power. Music was also a key element in both instances, less as a backing track of protest but as a process of mobilizing action or organizing the community, the narration of social accounts, and recording of lived lives.

This paper discusses the role of music as the social protest tool in these two movements. It uses a comparative case study approach to explore the symbolic, practical functions of protest music, protest musicians who helped activate action, as well as how music fit into the overall movement tactics. With it, it will promote knowledge of how culture expression specifically through music can be used as a political resource and a place of resistance in the digital era.

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## **2 Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

Sometimes the convergence of music and political protest has entertained particular interest among scholars who have often focused their attention on the role of cultural expression as a mediator of collective action. Music as performative and communicative expression is playing an important part in aiding the expression of social grievances, the creation of collective identities and the organization of dissent. In this section, the theoretical sources and existing literature that serve as the basis of the current analysis of music within Black Lives Matter (BLM) and EndSARS movements has been outlined with the reference to theories of cultural studies, social movement theory, and digital media.

### **2.1 Music as Cultural Resistance**

Cultural resistances are presented and used as a main eye lens to the study on how music is used politically at times of protest. Hebdige (1979) and Hall (1996) are cultural theorists who have proposed that cultural products, like music, may include embodiments of subversion of dominant ideologies. Music, especially when produced by the marginalized groups of society, turns into a form of counter-narrative, which allows reconceptualizing power axes and making the voice of the oppressed heard.

This opposition usually comes in protest situations in the form of lyrics, performance style and symbolic mention. As a case in point, protest songs can involve historical trauma or modern-day injustice where the appeal to the emotions creates a bridge between the person and the group of people. This role can fit with Gramscian concepts of cultural hegemony, according to which the rule against the norms is performed not only by a direct contest but by acts of resistance symbolic in nature as well

### **2.2 The Role of Music in Social Movements**

Social movement theory further enriches the analysis by situating music within broader mobilization processes. Scholars such as Eyerman and Jamison (1998) have explored how music contributes to the identity, solidarity, and continuity of social movements. Their work on the “cognitive praxis” of music highlights its role in shaping ideologies and sustaining protest cultures over time.

Protest music often serves to unify disparate actors around shared grievances. Through call-and-response formats, live performances, and viral dissemination, music creates what Tilly (2004) terms “repertoires of contention” established forms of protest communication. These repertoires not only facilitate participation but also foster emotional investment and communal bonding.

In the context of contemporary movements, music has also functioned as a temporal and spatial anchor. Whether used in mass rallies, online campaigns, or spontaneous street protests, music orchestrates the rhythm of resistance and gives structure to moments of civil disobedience.

### **2.3 Digital Mediation and Participatory Culture**

Recent developments in digital media studies offer additional insight into the evolving nature of protest music in the age of the internet. Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture underscores how digital technologies allow ordinary citizens, not just artists to create, remix, and distribute protest content. Platforms such as YouTube, SoundCloud, and Instagram have decentralized the production and circulation of political music, broadening the scope of protest participation.

This participatory dynamic is particularly significant in movements like BLM and EndSARS, where digitally circulated music content has complemented on-the-ground activism. Protesters often co-create anthems, curate resistance playlists, and engage in musical expression as part of digital campaigns. These practices reflect what Bennett and

Segerberg (2012) describe as “connective action” forms of political engagement shaped by personalized, networked communication rather than centralized organizations.

## 2.4 Music, Memory, and Affective Politics

Music also plays a key role in shaping collective memory and emotional resonance in protest cultures. Drawing on affect theory, scholars such as Ahmed (2004) and Grossberg (1992) have examined how emotions are circulated and intensified through cultural forms. In protest music, affect operates through melody, rhythm, and lyrical content to evoke shared feelings of grief, anger, hope, and solidarity.

Furthermore, protest songs often serve as sonic memorials recording and transmitting the emotional core of specific events. This was evident in responses to incidents of police brutality, where songs were composed and disseminated in near real-time, embedding them within the historical archive of resistance. Such practices underscore the mnemonic function of music and its capacity to preserve political memory across generations.

## 2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Although research on protest songs is already extensive in the context of the West especially in regard to the U.S. civil rights movement and anti-war protests, the overall research is still relatively thin on more global approaches to protest sonic landscapes. Also, only little literature has been given to African protest music, particularly in the age of digital media, although its political significance has risen.

Due to studying BLM and EndSARS through the prism of music, the article is relevant to a more global and wider contemporary perspective on protest cultures. It also reminds the necessity of additional interdisciplinary studies between ethnomusicology and media studies, as well as political sociology.

Overall, the theoretical and intellectual frameworks presented in the given section provides a basis to analyze the presence of music in the Black Lives Matter and EndSARS movements. Whether using cultural resistance and anti-government movement movements, digital distribution, or affective politics, music has become a highly versatile instrument of societal protest. Such views do not only influence the case studies expositions of later but also place the music as the crucial place to comprehend the way the contemporary movements deploy their expressions of protest and how they imagine the social revolution.

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## 3 Music in the Black Lives Matter Movement (USA)

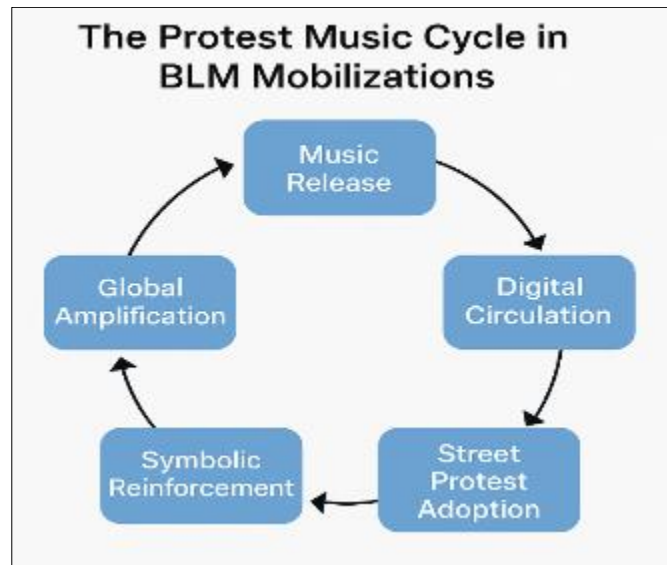
The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has emerged as one of the most influential civil rights campaigns of the 21st century, mobilizing millions across the globe in the fight against racial injustice, systemic oppression, and police brutality. Central to this movement is the use of music not merely as background noise or entertainment, but as a forceful vehicle for protest, identity formation, and collective memory. Rooted in a long tradition of African American resistance through song, BLM-era protest music reflects a fusion of hip-hop, RandB, spoken word, and gospel, rearticulating historical grievances within the context of contemporary digital activism.

### 3.1 Historical Continuities and Sonic Resistance

From the spirituals of enslaved Africans to the freedom songs of the Civil Rights Movement, Black protest music in the United States has long functioned as both a bomb and a battle cry. BLM artists consciously draw from this lineage. Songs like *We Shall Overcome* and *A Change Is Gonna Come* have reappeared at protests in sampled or reinterpreted forms, symbolizing an enduring cultural resistance. Contemporary musicians channel this historical continuity while also addressing modern forms of violence, surveillance, and racial profiling.

### 3.2 Protest Anthems and Lyrical Messaging

Several tracks have become anthems of the BLM movement, gaining prominence through both street protests and digital platforms. Kendrick Lamar's *Alright* (2015), with its refrain “We gon’ be alright,” became a sonic emblem of hope and resilience. The track was spontaneously chanted by protesters during marches, demonstrating music’s capacity to foster communal cohesion. Similarly, Childish Gambino's *This Is America* (2018) utilizes irony and layered symbolism to critique American gun culture, systemic racism, and entertainment commodification. These songs, while produced before the peak of 2020 protests, gained renewed relevance and circulation.



**Figure 1** The circular diagram shows the cycle: Music Release → Digital Circulation → Street Protest Adoption → Symbolic Reinforcement → Global Amplification

This diagram visually represents how protest songs travel from their point of origin (recording and release) through digital and street-level spaces, reinforcing movement ideologies.

### 3.3 Performance, Public Space, and Sonic Occupation

Public performances and protest gatherings have also served as vital spaces for musical resistance. At marches in cities like Minneapolis, New York, and Washington D.C., mobile sound systems, drum circles, and impromptu performances by local artists transformed urban spaces into sites of sonic occupation. Protesters used music not only to express dissent but to claim public space and assert visibility. Community chants like “Say Their Names” or rhythmic call-and-response phrases drew directly from musical tradition, echoing gospel and hip-hop cadences.

### 3.4 Digital Platforms and the Democratization of Protest Soundscapes

Digital media widened the sphere of a protest song; it enabled independent artists to avoid the authority of the conventional gates. SoundCloud, YouTube and Instagram emerged as the main broadcasting channels, upon which the songs, freestyles and protest remixes spread across. The background music of various TikTok videos that went viral was usually protest music and it not only plateaued the message but also the momentum. The thematic playlists #BLMSoundtrack and #ProtestMusic (hashtagged as such) were curated by hashtags and merged artistic creativity with political sense of urgency.

We can wrap it up by stating the following: music in the Black Lives Matter movement does not belong to peripheral aesthetic characteristics but to central strategy and emotional catalysts. Innovation and variations have been witnessed in both protestors and artists who have resorted to historical traditions in their empowerment methods (digital and performative). Among the world-known anthems and howls of the crowd, protest songs of the BLM movement remind us of the strengths that the sound provides when united, encouraging, and forcing the change. The story of the American experience demonstrates that cultural memory and technological amplification can make musical protestability culturally rearrange the consciousness of many people and cause mass action.

## 4 Music in the endsars Movement (Nigeria)

The EndSARS movement marked a watershed moment in Nigerian civil society, driven primarily by a decentralized youth movement demanding the dissolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit known for brutality, extortion, and extrajudicial killings. Amid the growing unrest, music emerged not only as a medium of emotional expression and solidarity but also as a strategic tool of mobilization, storytelling, and resistance. Drawing on the power of Afrobeats and politically conscious rap, Nigerian musicians both mainstream and underground played pivotal roles in amplifying protest messages, building collective identity, and documenting state violence. This section examines the relationship between music and protest during the EndSARS movement through key artistic contributions and performance-based activism.

#### 4.1 Historical and Cultural Context of Protest Music in Nigeria

Nigeria has a longstanding tradition of politically charged music, from Fela Kuti's Afrobeat critiques of military regimes to contemporary protest songs. The EndSARS protests revived this lineage, using music to contest not only immediate violence but broader issues of governance, youth disenfranchisement, and socioeconomic inequality. Artists drew inspiration from cultural memory and contemporary realities, blending sonic resistance with digital activism.

#### 4.2 Iconic Protest Songs and Their Political Messages

Several artists created or recontextualized songs that became rallying cries for protesters nationwide.

- **Falz – *This is Nigeria*:** Though released earlier, the song regained prominence as it portrayed systemic dysfunction, corruption, and police abuse. Its re-emergence signaled how existing protest music could be adapted to new crises.
- **Burna Boy – *20:10:20*:** Released in response to the Lekki Toll Gate shootings, the song memorializes victims and directly implicates the state. Its title references the date of the event, turning it into a sonic archive of injustice.
- **Davido, Tiwa Savage, and Others:** While not always releasing explicit protest songs, many artists used their platforms to amplify protest messages, donate to protest funds, and join street marches, integrating their celebrity influence into grassroots resistance.

#### 4.3 Music as a Tool of Protest Performance and Spatial Resistance

Protest sites across Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and other cities were transformed into performance spaces. DJs, drummers, spoken-word poets, and impromptu performers created a festive yet defiant atmosphere. Music served as an organizing tool keeping crowds engaged, enabling choreographed chants, and fostering community morale.

One of the most symbolic moments was the livestream of the Lekki Toll Gate protest on October 20, 2020, where DJ Switch broadcasted the military's violent crackdown in real-time. Her act combining music, truth-telling, and technological courage highlighted the intersection of sound, activism, and citizen journalism.

#### 4.4 Digital Circulation and Transnational Echoes

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok played vital roles in circulating protest music globally. Songs and clips from protest grounds went viral, reaching diasporic Nigerians and global allies. This digital dissemination helped generate international awareness, leading to solidarity protests in London, New York, Berlin, and Johannesburg. Through music, the EndSARS movement transcended national boundaries, amplifying calls for justice on a global scale.

#### 4.5 Visual Reference: The Sound of Dissent in Protest

The EndSARS movement reaffirmed the power of music as a vehicle for socio-political transformation. Artists became not just commentators but participants—using their lyrics, performances, and platforms to challenge state narratives, comfort the grieving, and mobilize collective action. Music humanized the struggle, preserved memory, and projected a united voice of a generation demanding justice. Within the broader canon of protest music globally, the Nigerian experience in 2020 demonstrates how sound, space, and solidarity converge to produce powerful forms of resistance.

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### 5 Comparative Analysis: Convergence and Divergence

The simultaneous rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the United States and the EndSARS movement in Nigeria during 2020 presents a fertile ground for comparative inquiry. Although rooted in different socio-political contexts, both movements leveraged music not merely as background or entertainment, but as a core instrument of resistance, solidarity, and identity formation. This section draws analytical parallels and distinctions between the two in order to illuminate the broader function of music within transnational protest cultures.

#### 5.1 Shared Themes of Resistance and Youth Mobilization

Both movements emerged in response to systemic state violence police brutality in particular and were propelled by youth-led digital activism. Music served as a unifying symbol of defiance and hope, embedding within protest spaces messages of resistance, historical memory, and moral urgency. In both cases, artists and ordinary citizens alike engaged in the production and dissemination of protest songs that articulated collective anger and aspirations. The recurrence of motifs such as justice, liberation, and martyrdom (e.g., George Floyd and the Lekki Toll Gate victims) reveals a convergence in how music was used to name and confront state-sanctioned violence.

## 5.2 The Role of Genre and Linguistic Specificity

Despite thematic similarities, the genres and cultural codes employed in each movement reflect distinct artistic and historical lineages. In the BLM protests, hip hop, soul, and spoken word traditions carried the protest messages, an evolution rooted in African-American musical resistance dating back to spirituals and blues. Conversely, the EndSARS movement drew heavily from Afrobeats and Nigerian hip hop, genres with deep ties to postcolonial critique and social commentary in West Africa.

Language also served as a key differentiator. While BLM protest songs were largely in English and embedded within a global media ecosystem, EndSARS songs often blended English with Yoruba, Pidgin, and other local dialects. This not only enhanced cultural resonance but also grounded the music in the linguistic identity of the protesting masses, asserting local specificity within a global movement.

## 5.3 Digital Circulation and Diaspora Engagement

Both movements leveraged digital platforms to amplify protest music, enabling real-time circulation across borders. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube played critical roles in disseminating protest performances and curated playlists. Notably, the digital spread of protest music enabled diasporic communities to engage meaningfully. For BLM, global protests were mirrored by solidarity marches in cities like London, Paris, and Johannesburg. Similarly, the Nigerian diaspora organized coordinated protests in cities such as Toronto, Berlin, and New York, with protest songs serving as sonic links across geographies.

While BLM artists often benefited from established global platforms and institutional support, many Nigerian protest artists operated independently or under informal activist networks. Nonetheless, both movements illustrate how digital audio-visual culture reconfigures the terrain of musical activism.

## 5.4 Risk, Repression, and Government Response

Another point of divergence lies in the level and form of state repression. In the U.S., protest musicians faced surveillance and, in some cases, threats of censorship. However, the Nigerian context witnessed more direct forms of intimidation, including asset freezes, arrests, and alleged military aggression, as exemplified by the controversial Lekki Toll Gate shooting. These varied conditions affected the content and circulation of protest music. Nigerian artists often had to navigate both state censorship and infrastructural limitations, thereby embedding greater urgency and risk in their artistic interventions.

In summary, the comparative lens reveals that while music operated as a unifying thread across BLM and EndSARS, its expressions, risks, and cultural codings were deeply shaped by localized histories and institutional contexts. What binds both cases is the function of music as a conduit for political emotion, a tool for mobilization, and a repository of collective memory. As global protest cultures continue to evolve, such comparative insights underscore the adaptive and resilient power of music as a medium of dissent across diverse socio-political terrains.

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## 6 Implications and Reflections

The role of music in contemporary protest movements extends beyond artistic expression; it functions as a vehicle for political resistance, a catalyst for collective identity, and a strategic instrument for visibility in digital and physical spaces. Analyzing the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and EndSARS movements reveals not only the mobilizing power of music but also its embeddedness in broader sociopolitical dynamics. This section reflects on the implications of these findings, considering music's transformative capacity and its limitations as a tool of social change.

### 6.1 Music as a Catalyst for Collective Identity

Music in both movements played a critical role in unifying protests across diverse geographic, linguistic, and class lines. Protest anthems such as Kendrick Lamar's *Alright* or Burna Boy's *Monsters You Made* helped articulate a shared struggle, reinforcing a collective identity rooted in resistance. The performative and participatory aspects of music whether through chanting, singing, or dancing fostered solidarity and emotional bonding among participants, particularly in moments of trauma or confrontation.

### 6.2 Cultural Memory and Documentation of Protest

Songs produced during both movements served as cultural archives, preserving the voices, experiences, and demands of marginalized groups. In the absence of reliable media coverage, particularly in Nigeria, music functioned as a counter-

narrative mechanism. Tracks like *20:10:20* by Burna Boy memorialized specific incidents, transforming personal grief into collective memory. Similarly, live streamed performances and protest remixes in the U.S. became digital artifacts of resistance, accessible across borders.

### 6.3 Symbolic Resistance vs. Structural Change

While music amplifies visibility and awareness, its ability to produce immediate structural transformation remains limited. Protest songs may capture the spirit of resistance, but without institutional responsiveness, they risk becoming symbolic gestures rather than drivers of systemic reform. This paradox is evident in the aftermath of both movements: while global discourse was shaped by musical and cultural expression, long-term policy responses have been slow or uneven.

### 6.4 Strategic Use of Digital Platforms

The convergence of music and digital platforms (e.g., Twitter, TikTok, YouTube) enabled real-time distribution of protest content, allowing artists and activists to bypass traditional gatekeepers. Hashtag activism, audio loops, and viral sound bites were deployed to maximize reach and provoke engagement. This convergence, however, also raised questions about surveillance, platform censorship, and the commodification of protest culture.

**Table 1** This table outlines the multifaceted role of music in contemporary protest movements, highlighting its function in identity formation, documentation, mobilization, global solidarity, and as a platform for dissent, drawing on examples from the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA and the EndSARS protests in Nigeria

| Function of Music    | Black Lives Matter (USA)                          | EndSARS (Nigeria)                             |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Identity Formation   | Hip-hop as expression of Black resistance         | Afrobeats as youth-led cultural identity      |
| Documentation        | Viral performances and protest anthems            | Songs memorializing events (e.g., 20:10:20)   |
| Mobilization         | Community chants and marches                      | Protest grounds with DJs and live music       |
| Global Solidarity    | Diaspora remixes and international collaborations | Cross-continental attention via social media  |
| Platform for Dissent | YouTube videos, protest playlists                 | Livestreams, open mics, and independent media |

### 6.5 Toward a Framework for Future Movements

The use of music in protest requires deeper interdisciplinary analysis, particularly at the intersection of cultural studies, political science, and digital ethnomusicology. Movements of the future may increasingly rely on artistic production as a core strategic element not just to protest, but to envision alternative futures. Music can thus be viewed not only as accompaniment to protest but as an active participant in shaping its trajectory.

In sum, the BLM and EndSARS movements illustrate the dynamic and context-specific ways in which music operates as both an expressive and strategic tool of resistance. From identity construction to digital activism, protest music reveals the interplay between art and politics in contemporary struggles for justice. However, to fully harness its transformative potential, music must be situated within broader frameworks of policy advocacy, community organizing, and institutional accountability.

## 7 Conclusion

The discussion of the Black Lives Matter and EndSARS movements demonstrates that music plays a key role in defining resistance speech, community organization, and protest movement durability. Music was not only used as a background or accompaniment to protest, in both examples it was used as a discourse of resistance as protestors were able to critique systemic violence, claim subjectivity and create solidarity.

Artists and activists used loaded anthems, improvised songs, and virtual performances as weaponized sound, re-framing sound as a political tool. These artistic manifestations went beyond local settings, accelerated the consciousness worldwide, and provided alternative stories in settings, wherein institutional structures became incompetent or alienating.

Nonetheless, this study also notes the Janus-like aspect of protest music: the aspect that such music can mobilize and commemorate protest may be balanced with the fact that protest music is neither a necessary ingredient to structural change nor does it necessarily bring about structural change. It is effective in that it fosters mobilization, the formation of alliances and declaration of cultural power but its effects are required to be strengthened by consistent organizing, policy advocacy and accountability.

Yielding interdisciplinary insights, this paper fills the gap of the literature available on the digital age protest culture. It creates the taste for more research into the role of music as a participatory technology of resistance as well as an emotional and aesthetic force that constructs the rhythms and rhetoric of social movements in the present.

During continued fights against racial inequity, police brutality, and authoritarian rule, the stories that encompass protest songs are testimonial and a demand of action. They remind us how in times of which we are in a state of crisis there is always a glimpse of creativity to be found and that music in its various forms is also one way through which truth, memory, and hope are to be found.

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