

Rethinking Schools *Online*

Songs with a Global Conscience

Using Songs to Build International Understanding and Solidarity

The songs below are divided into the following categories:

[The Colonial Past](#)
[Current North/South Global Realities](#)
[Global Sweatshops](#)
[Food and Agriculture](#)
[Globalization on the Homefront](#)
[Culture, Power and Environment](#)
[Teaching and Organizing for Justice](#)

By Bob Peterson

Songs, like poetry, are powerful tools to build consciousness and solidarity on global issues. We begin everyday in my classroom with our "song of the week." Students receive the song lyrics and keep them in their three-ring binders. The songs generally relate to topics of study. I allow students to bring in songs as well, although they must know the lyrics and have a reason for sharing the song with classmates. By the end of the week, students may not have memorized the words to the "song of the week," but they are familiar enough with the lyrics and music so that the song becomes "theirs." Even with some of the songs that I would imagine the children think poorly of — say, some of the slower folk songs — by the end of the week the children demand to hear them a second or third time each morning.

When I introduce a song, I go over the geographical connections using a classroom map. I also explain any vocabulary words that might be difficult. Finally, and most importantly, I give the social context. Depending on whether I use the song at the beginning of a unit of study, or in the middle, the amount of "context setting" varies greatly. For example, I use Nancy Schimmel's "1492" as a way to introduce the Columbus controversy. We ultimately locate the geographical origin and learn something about the Native nations she mentions. The following is a listing of songs that teachers and activists might find useful as they teach for justice in an unjust world. This list is in no way comprehensive, and I would appreciate receiving any additional suggestions. (Visit www.rethinkingschools.org/rg for an updated list.)

The Colonial Past

Ballad of the Soldier's Wife

lyrics by Bertolt Brecht, music by Kurt Weill, sung P.J. Harvey
(September Songs: The Music of Kurt Weill CD, Sony Music, 1997.)
 A telling tale of the human toll of foreign wars.

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee

written by Buffy Sainte-Marie, sung by the Indigo Girls
(1200 Curfews CD, Epic Records Group, 1995.)
 A folk/rock song that critiques U.S. policy towards Native Americans.

Colonial Man

By Hugh Masekela

(*Colonial Man and Boy's Doin' It CDs*, Verve, 1998.)

A lively anti-colonial song that includes the understatement "Vasco Da Gama, he was no friend of mine."

Famine

By Sinead O'Connor

(*Universal Mother CD*, Chrysalis Records, 1994.)

An angry song that describes how the Irish potato famine was actually a result of British colonialism.

1492

By Nancy Schimmel

(*Rainbow Sign CD*, Rounder, 1992.)

A lively, pro-Native American song that asks the question, "Could anyone discover the place when someone was already here?" (Classroom use is described in *Rethinking Columbus*, 1998.)

The Great Nations of Europe

By Randy Newman

(*Badlove CD*, Dream Works SKG, 1999.)

A satirical look at the devastating impact of colonialism on the rest of the world.

My Country, 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying

By Buffy Sainte-Marie

(*The Best of Buffy Sainte-Marie CD*, Vanguard, 1987.)

An angry, powerful song which describes the colonization of Native Americans and the hypocrisy of the U.S. commitment to freedom.

Current North/South Global Realities

Beds are Burning

By Midnight Oil

(*Diesel and Dust CD*, Columbia, 1988.)

A powerful rocker, from the savvy political Australian band led by Peter Garret, about the theft of land from the aborigines.

Biko

By Peter Gabriel

(*Shaking the Tree: Sixteen Golden Greats CD*, Geffen Records, 1990.)

A stunning, mournful tribute to Steve Biko, leader of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa, and to the power of struggle against police brutality. "You can blow out a candle/But you can't blow out a fire. Once the flames begin to catch/The wind will blow it higher."

Bombs Over Baghdad

By John Trudell

(*AKA Graffiti Man CD*, Rykodisc, 1992.)

An angry anti-war poem/song, from a long-time Native American activist.

Bullet the Blue Sky

By U2

(*The Joshua Tree CD*, Islands Records, Ltd., 1987.)

A poetic indictment of bombing "mud huts as the children sleep," written during the U.S.-supported war against the people of El Salvador.

Call it Democracy

By Bruce Cockburn

(*World of Wonders CD*, Columbia, 1986.)

A powerful song that targets the International Monetary Fund, which Cockburn accuses of fostering

"insupportable debts." He sings of "hungry military profiteers" who turn "countries into labor camps." Teachers should be aware that there is one swear word in the song.

Equal Rights

By Peter Tosh

(Equal Rights; and Scrolls of the Prophet: The Best of Peter Tosh CD, Sterling Sound, 1999.)

A reggae song that says "everybody wants peace, but nobody wants justice."

If I Had a Rocket Launcher

By Bruce Cockburn

(Stealing Fire CD, Columbia, 1984.)

A personalized critique of Central American secret wars of the 1980s in which U.S. -made helicopters were used to massacre villagers in Guatemala. Includes some strong language.

Johannesburg

By Gil Scott-Heron

(The Best of Gil Scott-Heron CD, Arista Records, 1991.)

A lively song that describes the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

Masters of War

By Bob Dylan

(Freewheelin' Bob Dylan CD, Columbia, 1963.)

This song was written at the beginning of U.S. involvement in Vietnam but speaks to the broad issue of investment in instruments of death and destruction versus human needs.

Mothers of the Disappeared

By U2

(The Joshua Tree CD, Islands Records, Ltd., 1987.)

A sorrowful ballad about the sons and daughters "taken from us...." "In the wind we hear their laughter, in the rain we see their tears."

Redemption Song

By Bob Marley

(Uprising CD, Tuff Gong, 1980.)

An upbeat reggae song that references trans-Atlantic slavery and calls on listeners to "emancipate yourselves from mental slavery."

Santo Domingo

By Phil Ochs

(There But For Fortune CD, Elektra Asylum Records, 1989.)

A song protesting the 1965 U.S. military intervention of 23,000 Marines against a popular revolt which sought to restore democratically elected Juan Bosch to power after a U.S.-supported military coup a year and half earlier.

They Dance Alone (Cueca Solo)

By Sting

(Fields of Gold: Best of Sting CD, Gateway Mastering Studios, 1994.)

A moving song about the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina. Available in Spanish (Sting and Ruben Blades) on *Nada Como el Sol* CD, Gateway, 1988.)

200 Years

By G. Love and Special Sauce.

(Yeah, It's That Easy CD, Sony Music, 1997.)

A jazzy rap song that suggests "look how you're living First World, look what you did to Third World."

Universal Soldier

By Buffy Sainte-Marie

(The Best of Buffy Sainte-Marie CD, Vanguard, 1987.)

A classic anti-war song that raises the question of individual responsibility in times of war and social crisis.

War/No More Trouble

By Bob Marley and the Wailers

(Rebel Music CD, Tuff Gong, 1986.)

An anti-racist anthem that calls for a guarantee of human rights without regard to race.

We're the Cops of the World

By Phil Ochs

(There But For Fortune CD, Elektra Asylum Records, 1989.)

A Vietnam-war era song that criticizes how the U.S. military has secured the world for U.S. business — "the name for our profits is democracy."

Global Sweatshops

Bread and Roses

Written by James Oppenheim, sung by Judy Collins

(Forever: The Judy Collins Anthology CD, Elektra Entertainment, 1997.)

Inspired by the 1912 strike of mostly women textile mill workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts. It links issues of economic security and quality of life, and addresses the role of women in the struggle for justice.

Ode to the International Debt

By Sweet Honey in the Rock

(Live at Carnegie Hall with Sweet Honey in the Rock CD, Flying Fish, 1987.)

A short, pithy song that suggests much of the money going overseas from the United States was used to buy guns and death, and should not have to be repaid by the people of the world.

Why?

By Tracy Chapman

(Tracy Chapman CD, Elektra Entertainment, 1988.)

I use this song to begin the school year. It helps set a problem-posing atmosphere in my classroom for the entire school year. It raises issues of poverty and military spending, and alludes to the doublespeak of powerful groups who use words like peace and justice when the opposite is true.

Food and Agriculture

Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)

Written by Woody Guthrie, sung by Judy Collins

(Tribute to Woody Guthrie CD, Warner Brother Records, 1968.)

A moving song about the treatment of "illegal" workers in the fields of California.

Something in the Rain

By Tish Hinojosa

(Culture Swing CD, Rounder Records, 1992.)

A moving song about a boy's little sister, poisoned by the pesticides that farm workers are exposed to in the United States.

Globalization on the Homefront

Alien (Hold on to Your Dreams)

By Gil Scott-Heron

(1980 CD, Arista, 1980.)

A plaintive song about crossing the border, facing danger, and retaining hope. "Midnight near the border trying to cross the Rio Grande/Running with coyotes where the streets are paved with gold/You're diving underwater when you hear the helicopter/Knowing it's all been less than worthless if you run into patrols."

Career Opportunities

By The Clash

(Sandinista CD, Epic, 1980.)

A sharp, funny song about finding a job/career.

The Ghost of Tom Joad

By Bruce Springsteen

(The Ghost of Tom Joad CD, Columbia, 1995.)

A mournful ballad: "Welcome to the new world order/ Families sleepin' in their cars in the Southwest/No home no job no peace no rest."

Help Save the Youth of America

By Billy Bragg

(Talking to the Taxman about Poetry CD, Elektra Entertainment, 1986.)

A catchy plea to open the eyes of American youth to the problems of the world: "You can fight for democracy at home/And not in some foreign land."

Lives In The Balance

By Jackson Browne

(Lives in the Balance CD, Asylum, 1986.)

A powerful ballad about poverty in a Los Angeles barrio and sending young men to Vietnam.

My Hometown

By Bruce Springsteen

(Born in the USA CD, Columbia, 1984.)

A working-class ballad about the effects of globalization on an American city.

Mr. Wendell

By Arrested Development

(Eyes As Hard as a Million Tombstones CD, Chrysalis Records, 1993.)

A moving rap song that describes the life of a homeless person.

Wasteland of the Free

By Iris DeMent

(The Way I Should CD, Warner Brothers Records, 1996.)

A country and western song that cuts to the heart of the economic troubles facing North Americans: "We've got CEOs makin' 200 times the workers' pay/ But they'll fight like hell against raisin' the minimum wage/ And if you don't like it mister/ They'll ship your job to some Third World country 'cross the sea."

Culture, Power and Environment

Garbage!

Written by Bill Steele, sung by Pete Seeger

(Pete CD, Living Music, 1996.)

A wonderfully spirited song that looks at all aspects of the environmental crisis from an anti-corporate perspective. He sings about how the sea, the air and our minds are being filled with garbage. Kids love it.

It is One

By Jackson Browne

(*Looking East, Elektra Entertainment, 1996.*)

From space, the earth has no borders. It is one and should be protected by all.

Will the Wolf Survive?**By Los Lobos**

(Just Another Band from East LA CD, Slash, 1993.)

An environmental statement about wolves and the earth.

The World Turned Upside Down**By Leon Rosselson, sung by Billy Bragg**

(*Back to the Basics CD, Elektra, 1987.*)

The story of the 1649 revolt of the dispossessed in England who fought against the vested interest of the propertied. A vision of society that is cooperative and in harmony with the earth.

Lost in the Supermarket**By The Clash**

(*The Story of the Clash CD, Epic, 1988.*)

A bouncy punk song takes on the false promises of consumer culture ("I'm all lost in the supermarket/I can no longer shop happily/I came in here for that special offer/A guaranteed personality").

Mountains o' Things**By Tracy Chapman**

(*Tracy Chapman CD, Elektra Entertainment, 1988.*)

The song questions our need to consume so many things, and to find meaning in consumption.

Teaching and Organizing for Justice**If I Had a Hammer****Words by Lee Hays, music by Pete Seeger, sung by Peter, Paul, and Mary**

(*Peter, Paul, and Mary, Too CD, Warner Reprise Video, 1993.*)

Written in 1949 and recorded originally by the Weavers, this song responded to the Cold War and the McCarthyism that swept the United States during this time. It is hopeful and calls on people to spread justice throughout the world.

Imagine**By John Lennon**

(*Shaved Fish CD, Parlophone, 1975.*)

A beautiful song that pushes the envelope: "Imagine there's no countries." "Imagine no possessions." "Imagine no need for greed or hunger."

The Internationale**By Billy Bragg**

(*The Internationale CD, Elektra, no date.*)

A good update of the classic workers' anthem. All Bragg lyrics are at <http://www.billybragg.co.uk/songs.html>.

It Could Have Been Me**By Holly Near**

(*Journey CD, Redwood, 1983.*)

This inspirational song suggests that people must continue the struggle for social justice, referring to the student anti-war protesters who were killed at Kent State University by the Ohio National Guard in May of 1970, and also to the murder of Victor Jara during the 1973 CIA-supported coup in Chile.

Paz y Libertad

By José-Luis Orozco

(Rainbow Sign CD, Rounder, 1992.)

An easy bilingual ballad that calls for peace and freedom in the world. Great for young children as well as upper elementary.

Unite Children

The Children of Selma

(Rainbow Sign CD, Rounder, 1992.)

A spirited song that calls on children to unite against poverty, racism, sexism, and violence. Each year it is the favorite song of my fifth grade class.

United Minds

By Arrested Development

(Zingalamaduni CD, Chrysalis, 1994.)

An upbeat, hip-hop anthem about people coming together for justice. The playful, catchy lyrics touch on everything from drug dealing to foreign policy to diet.

Ella's Story

By Bernice Reagon

(Breaths CD, Flying Fish, 1983.)

Written by Reagon as a tribute to civil rights leader Ella Baker, this inspiring gospel song says that "We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest."

You've Got the Power

By Third World

(You've Got the Power CD, Columbia, 1982.)

A pretty, hopeful song with the lyric "people everywhere just want to be free."

Downloaded from the website for The New Teacher Book, published by Rethinking Schools, 2004.

For more information visit www.rethinkingschools.org/newteacher

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