



Songs with a Global Conscience

Using songs to build international understanding and solidarity.

By Bob Peterson

Songs, like poetry, are powerful tools to build consciousness and solidarity. Every week we have a new "Song of the Week," and we begin every day by playing the song. I distribute the song's lyrics to the students, who keep them in their three-ring binders. The songs generally relate to topics we are studying. I allow students to bring in songs as well, although they must know the lyrics and have a positive reason for sharing the song with their classmates.

When I introduce a song, I use our classroom map to go over the geographical connections. I also explain any difficult words. 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.

Following is a list of songs that teachers and organizers might find useful as they teach for justice in an unjust world.

THE COLONIAL PAST

Ballad of the Soldier's Wife, lyrics by Bertolt Brecht, music by Kurt Weill, sung by PJ 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, Hugh Masakela. (*Colonial Man and Boy's Doin' It* CD, Verve, 1998). A lively anti-colonial song that includes the understatement "Vasco Da Gama, he was no friend of mine."

Famine, 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, 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?" (Use is described in the publication, *Rethinking Columbus*).

The Great Nations of Europe, 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, 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.

CONTEMPORARY NORTH / SOUTH REALITIES

Beds are Burning, Midnight Oil. (*Diesel and Dust* CD, Columbia, 1988) A powerful rocker from savvy political Australian band led by Peter Garret. About the theft of land from the Aborigines.

Bikko, Peter Gabriel. (*Shaking the Tree: Sixteen Golden Greats* CD, Geffen Records, 1990). A powerful, mournful tribute to the leader of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa and 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, John Trudell (*AKA Graffiti Man* CD, Rykodisc, 1992). Trudell, a longtime American Indian Movement activist blends poetry, anti-war insight, and rock 'n' roll.

Equal Rights, Peter Tosh (*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, Bruce Cockburn (*Stealing Fire* CD, Columbia, 1984) - A personalized critique of Central American secret wars of the 1980s in which US made helicopters were used to massacre villagers in Guatemala. (Includes son-of-b phrase.)

Johannesburg, 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.

Santo Domingo, Phil Ochs. (*There But For Fortune* CD, Elektra Asylum Records, no date.) A protest song against the 1965 U.S. military intervention of 23,000 Marines against a popular revolt which sought to restore the democratically elected Juan Bosch back into power after a U.S. supported military coup a year and half earlier.

Masters of War, Bob Dylan. (*Real Live* CD, Columbia, 1985.) This song was written at the beginning of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam but speaks to the broad issue of investment in instruments of death and destruction versus human needs.

Redemption Song, 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."

They Dance Alone (Cueca Solo), 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).

Universal Soldier, Buffy Saint Marie. (*The Best of Buffy Sainte-Marie* CD, Vanguard, 1987). A classic anti-war song that raises the question of individual responsibility at times of war and social crisis.

War/No More Trouble, 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, Phil Ochs. (*There But For Fortune* CD, Elektra Asylum Records, no date). A Vietnam-war era song that criticizes how the US military has secured the world for U.S. business - "the name for our profits is democracy."

GLOBAL SWEATSHOPS

Are My Hands Clean? Bernice Johnson Reagon (*Live at Carnegie Hall with Sweet Honey in the Rock* CD, Flying Fish, 1987.) A song that traces the origin of a shirt through various sweatshops and countries. (See discription of its use on p. 13).

Why? Tracy Chapman (*Tracy Chapman* CD, Elektra Entertainment, 1988.) The song raises questions about social 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. (See discription of

its use on p. 12).

Ode to the International Debt, 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 U.S. was used to buy guns and death, and should not have to be repaid by the people of the world.

GLOBALIZATION ON THE HOME FRONT

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 raises the issue of not only economic security but quality of life, as well as the role of women in the struggle for justice.

Call it Democracy, Bruce Cockburn. (*World of Wonders* CD, Columbia, 1986.) A general critique of American power structure including the IMF, military-industrial complex, (Includes f-word one time.)

Career Opportunities, The Clash. (*Sandinista* CD, Epic, 1980.) A sharp, funny song about finding a job/career.

Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos), written by Woody Guthrie, sung by Judy Collins. (*Tribute to Woody Guthrie* CD, Warner Brother Records, no date.) A moving song about the treatment of "illegal" workers in the fields of California.

The Ghost of Tom Joad, 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, 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, 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, Bruce Springsteen. (*Born in the USA* CD, Columbia, 1984.) A working class ballad about the effects of globalization on an American city.

Mr. Wendell, 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.

Something in the Rain, Tish Hinojosa. (*Culture Swing* CD, Rounder Records, 1992.) A moving song about a boy's little sister who is poisoned by the pesticides that farm workers experience in the United States.

Wasteland of the Free, Iris DeMent. (*The Way I Should* CD, Warner Brother Records, 1996.) A country and western song that cuts to the heart of the economic troubles facing this country: "We've got CEO's 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 AND ENVIRONMENT

Garbage! 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.) The earth 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.) Story of the 1649 revolt of 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.

TEACHING AND ORGANIZING FOR JUSTICE

If I Had a Hammer, written by Pete Seeger, sung by Peter, Paul, and Mary. (*Peter, Paul, and Mary, Too* CD, Warner Reprise Video, 1993.) A classic anti-(Vietnam) war song that is hopeful and calls on people to spread justice throughout the world.

Imagine, John Lennon. (*Shaved Fish* CD, Parlophone, 1975.) A beautiful song that pushes the envelope: "Imagine a world without religion." "Imagine no private property."

The Internationale, Billy Bragg. (*The Internationale* CD, Elektra, no date.) A good update of the classic worker's anthem. All Bragg lyrics are at <http://www.billybragg.co.uk/songs.html>.

It Could Have Been Me by Holly Near. (*Journey* CD, Redwood, no date.) 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 on May 4, 1970, and also to the murder of Victor Jara during the U.S. CIA-supported coup in Chile in 1973.

Paz y Libertad, 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 for upper elementary.

United Minds by Arrested Development: (*Zingalamaduni* CD, Chrysalis, 1994). An upbeat, hip hop anthem about people coming together for justice.

Ella's Story, Bernice Reagon. (*Breaths* CD, Flying Fish, no date.) 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, No date.) A melodious, hopeful song with the lyric "people everywhere just want to be free."

Bob Peterson (repmilw@aol.com) teaches at La Escuela Fratney and is an editor of Rethinking Schools. This is excerpted from a longer listing that will be included in the forthcoming book, Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World, edited by Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson. Readers are encouraged to contact the author with additional suggestions.

Winter 2000 / 2001