

## Teaching with Protest Songs



### Music can be a powerful opening to students of all ages.

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*By Bob Peterson*

Songs, like poetry, are an important component of my teaching. The lyrical metaphors, rhythms, and stories in many songs motivate and educate students. It's amazing what my fifth graders will remember from a song, as compared to what they forget from my talking.

I introduce a new "song of the week" each Monday and the students receive a copy of the lyrics to keep in their three-ring binder that collects much of my alternative curriculum. We start each morning with the song, and usually within a day or two the children are singing along — regardless of musical genre. Sometimes I use a song to introduce a unit of study, other times at particular point in a lesson.

At a recent anti-war rally I heard a song that I thought would work well with my students. I searched the web and found a number of songs that could help teachers approach this subject. The growing quantity of such songs is a tribute to the many artists who are performing at numerous anti-war rallies around the world.

The lyrics of virtually any song can be found on the web with a bit of "googling." Finding a free (and legal) MP3 download of the actual song is a bit harder — but worth the effort. Don't be intimidated if you've never downloaded a song or burned a CD. Ask a friend or a teenager and you'll probably find someone who can help you. There are a couple of websites that have collections of anti-war music. One is the United Kingdom-based Peace Not War organization, which has published a two-disc CD, "Peace Not War." You can hear the songs and read the lyrics at [www.peace-not-war.org](http://www.peace-not-war.org). Another site is that of the Chicago-based Voices in the Wilderness, which has put out a CD called "Stoking the Fires of Resistance." Some of the songs and lyrics from that CD are available through [www.fbirecords.com/stokingthefires.htm#songs](http://www.fbirecords.com/stokingthefires.htm#songs).

Public libraries are another decent source for finding CDs — especially with online searchable catalogs — although generally those are for the older CDs. I prefer ultimately to have a copy of the songs I use on a CD, either one that I've purchased, downloaded, or copied.

The first song I used with my students about Iraq was "Not in My Name," by John McCutcheon, in which he sings "But in Hiroshima, New York, or in Baghdad, it's the innocent who die for the crime." One verse also criticizes capital punishment, but the chorus is the most powerful, a simple "Not in my name." As part of our discussion of the song, we read the Pledge of Resistance from the Not in Our Name website and looked at a full-page newspaper ad by the same group. The pledge is available in 19 different languages at [www.niom.org](http://www.niom.org).

Another song that specifically talks about the children of Iraq is "Wake Up," written by Sandra Baran and performed by Voices and Minna Bromberg. The powerful refrain "Wake up! The children are dying, the children of Iraq!" is lively and catches the energy of my students. The short song has key phrases that encourage further inquiry like, "The Gulf War did not end as reported. It still goes on

these many years."

I've used other songs that speak more generally about issues of global justice. An annotated listing of those songs is in the resource section of the book Bill Bigelow and I coedited, *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World*, and also available online at [www.rethinkingschools.org/publication/rg/rgresour.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/publication/rg/rgresour.shtml).

Below is a sampling of some of the songs I think are most useful in the classroom. Please e-mail additional suggestions so that we can periodically update this list, which is being simultaneously published on the Rethinking Schools' website.

**Ashcroft's Army**, by John McCutcheon — a funny, but tragic song about how civil rights in the U.S. are being eroded. Lyrics and free MP3 download is available at: [www.folkmusic.com/t\\_mp3.htm](http://www.folkmusic.com/t_mp3.htm).

**Bomb da World**, by Michael Franti and Spearhead, a rapper who records on his own Boo Boo Wax imprint. The chorus goes, "You can bomb the world to pieces, but you can't bomb it into peace."

**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.

**Jacob's Ladder (Not in My Name)**, by Chumbawamba (who played it at the January 18 protest in Washington, D.C.). Lyrics at [www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Basement/8448/index.html](http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Basement/8448/index.html). Free download at: [www.chumba.com](http://www.chumba.com).

**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.

**Not in My Name**, by John McCutcheon ("The Greatest Show Never Told" CD, Redhouse, 2002.) See description above.

**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.

**The Price of Oil**, by Billy Bragg. Free MP3 download is available at [www.billybragg.co.uk/multimedia/price\\_of\\_oil.mp3](http://www.billybragg.co.uk/multimedia/price_of_oil.mp3). A powerful song that traces the war on Iraq, U.S. support of Pinochet, and the rigged Florida election to the "price of oil." Includes mild profanity.

**Self-Evident**, by Ani DiFranco. A song/poem/rap that covers lots of territory with very powerful lyrics including: "we hold these truths to be self evident:/# 1 george w. bush is not president/# 2 america is not a true democracy/#3 the media is not fooling me. Available at [www.peace-not-war.org/Music/AniDiFranco/](http://www.peace-not-war.org/Music/AniDiFranco/).

**Wake Up**, written by Sandra Baran and performed by Voices and Minna Bromberg. ("Stoking the Fires of Resistance" CD). See description above.

**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."

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