

# 11 Anthems of Black Pride and Protest

## Spirituals to ballads, funk to hip hop

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For centuries, Black Americans have used music as a powerful tool. In the antebellum South, enslaved people sang spirituals to covertly plan their escape to freedom. Poems were put to music and performed to celebrate the eradication of slavery, and ballads and hip hop have been leveraged to protest violence and discrimination against Black Americans. Below are 11 songs through history that have given voice to African American progress, protest and pride.

### 1. 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' — Unknown



J. Wesley Jones, choral director, leads 600 Black singers through a rehearsal in Chicago, August 1935. The group was rehearsing for the upcoming Chicagoland Music Festival where they would sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" at Soldier Field. Chicago Tribune Historical Photo/Getty Images

Throughout the antebellum South, spirituals became a vital form of folksong among enslaved people. Some were also used as a **form of coded communication** to plan escape from slavery. As abolitionist Harriet Tubman guided Black people to freedom along the Underground Railroad, she sang certain spirituals to signal it was time for escape. Among Tubman's favorites was **reportedly** "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

*"Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home"*

The melody was a signal that the time to escape had arrived. The “sweet chariot” represented the Underground Railroad, swinging low—to the South—to carry them to the North. The song, which is still commonly sung in Black churches, was performed at Tubman’s funeral in 1913.

## 2. ‘Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing’ — John & James Johnson, 1900

“Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” was originally written as a poem by educator James Weldon Johnson, with accompanying music created by his brother, John Rosamond Johnson. The lyrics were recited by 500 schoolchildren on February 12, 1900, in Jacksonville, Florida to celebrate President Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. While composing, James Johnson struggled to write lyrics that spoke to the traumatic yet triumphant lives of his ancestors.

*“Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;”*

The poem was eventually used in graduations, churches and celebrations. James Johnson later became a leader within the NAACP—an organization that adopted the poem as its official song. “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” became popularly known as the “Black National Anthem,” and is still sung at significant Black functions to this day.

## 2. ‘Strange Fruit’ — Billie Holiday, 1939



Billie Holiday, Universal History  
Archive/Getty Images

The haunting song popularized by Billie Holiday was written in 1937 by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish high school teacher and civil rights activist from the Bronx. Similar to “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” “Strange Fruit” was originally written as a poem. Meeropol was driven to write the lyrics after seeing a photo of two Black men who had been lynched in Indiana. The eerie, mournful lyrics never call out lynching explicitly, but use a painful metaphor to describe the horrible terror that ravaged Black communities in the South.

*“Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees”*

Once Meeropol put the words to music, the song made its way around New York City. When blues singer Billie Holiday heard the lyrics, the vivid depiction of death reminded her of her father, who died from a lung disorder after being denied treatment at a hospital because of his race.

“It reminds me of how Pop died,” Holiday said of the song in her autobiography. “But I have to keep singing it, not only because people ask for it, but because 20 years after Pop died, the things that killed him are still happening in the South.”

### 3. ‘A Change Is Gonna Come’ — Sam Cooke, 1963



Sam Cooke, 1960. Charlie Gillett Collection/Redfern/Getty Images

Two key moments inspired Sam Cooke to write his monumental hit “A Change Is Gonna Come”: Bob Dylan’s release of an anthem and a racist rejection at a Louisiana hotel. When Cooke first heard Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” in 1963, he was both impressed and irked that a white artist had written a song reflecting the shifting tides in the country while he hadn’t.

It didn’t take long for Cooke to find inspiration to write an anthem of his own. Later in the same year, Cooke arrived at a Holiday Inn in Shreveport, Louisiana, where he had made reservations for himself and his wife. However, he was informed that there were no vacancies after arriving. Upset, Cooke and his wife left the hotel to find new lodging. He was then arrested at the next hotel for honking his horn and disturbing guests at the Holiday Inn.

A few months later, he wrote and recorded “A Change Is Gonna Come” in early 1964. He was only able to perform the song once on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, as he was killed at an L.A. motel later that year. Cooke’s song lived on, however, and became an anthem in the fight for civil rights.

*“And I go to the movies, and I go downtown,  
Somebody keep telling me, don't hang around  
It's been a long, a long time coming  
But I know a change is gonna come, oh, yes, it will”*

## 5. 'Mississippi Goddam' — Nina Simone, 1964



Nina Simone, 1969. Jack Robinson/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Frustration and anger drove Nina Simone to write “Mississippi Goddam” shortly after the murder of [Medgar Evers](#) in 1963 and the deaths of four Black girls in the [Birmingham church bombing](#).

As Simone reached what felt like a boiling point, [she considered taking up arms](#), but instead wrote “Mississippi Goddam” in just an hour. She used the lyrics, underscored by a show tune-like piano, to call out the fury that she and Black Americans felt in response to countless racially motivated murders across the country.

*“Alabama's gotten me so upset,  
Tennessee made me lose my rest,  
And everybody knows about Mississippi goddam!”*

The song was originally released as part of the album *Nina Simone in Concert* in 1964. She performed the anthem at Carnegie Hall, springing the controversial lyrics on a majority-white audience. While there were many who objected to, and even banned the song after its release, it became popular during the civil rights movement and was played by activists at demonstrations for years.

## 6. 'Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud' — James Brown, 1968



James Brown, 1968. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

James Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" was released at a time when Black Americans were feeling particularly raw and enraged, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968. Four months after his murder, Brown released the song that boldly celebrated Black culture. In the call-and-response number, Brown declares:

*"Say it loud! I'm black and I'm proud!  
Say it louder! I'm black and I'm proud!"*

In the early to mid-60s, "negro" was the preferred term for African Americans, while "Black" was sometimes taken as an insult. But Brown's song helped remove the stigma around the term "Black" and it became preferred by the end of the 1960s. While most anthems of the civil rights movement spoke to the challenges that Black Americans faced in the form of white supremacy and racism, "Say It Loud" instilled a sense of pride and power within the community.

#### 7. 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' — Gil Scott-Heron, 1971



Gil Scott Heron, 1970.

Echoes/Redferns/Getty Images

Gil Scott-Heron was among the first children integrated into grade school in Tennessee, before he became a revolutionary writer and civil rights activist. In 1970, he released his debut album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*. The album featured Scott-Heron narrating his poetry over drums in the background—an early precursor to what would eventually become hip-hop. The album's first track, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," described the uprising of Black Americans taking to the streets, with white Americans having no choice but to acknowledge the movement in spite of distractions like television. The song would go on to be used synonymously with Black Power and protest.

*"'Green Acres,' 'Beverly Hillbillies,' and 'Hooterville Junction'  
Will no longer be so damn relevant  
And women will not care if Dick finally got down with Jane  
On 'Search for Tomorrow'  
Because black people will be in the street looking for a brighter day  
The revolution will not be televised"*

## 8. 'What's Going On?' — Marvin Gaye, 1971



Marvin Gaye, 1980. Doug McKenzie/Getty Images

Marvin Gaye was Motown's golden child when he released the song "What's Going On?" in 1971. He had made a name for himself with his sensual and apolitical songs like "How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You)" and "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" in the 1960s.

That all changed when Ronnie "Obie" Benson of the soul group, Four Tops, introduced Gaye to the song that he wrote in response to police violence against Vietnam War protesters. The song resonated strongly with Gaye, whose cousin had been killed in the war and whose brother had recently returned from serving in the war.

"What's Going On?" was a different type of protest song. Gaye didn't abandon his signature smooth tone, and he called for peaceful protests and an end to war and violence on a national level. Although the song wasn't as radical as some of the anthems released by other artists, Motown executive Berry Gordy was still hesitant to release it. After months of waiting, Gaye eventually gave an ultimatum—either they release the record or he would never record with Motown again. Gordy reluctantly released the song, which became a commercial success—and gave voice to protests against injustices.

*"Picket lines and picket signs,  
Don't punish me with brutality,  
Talk to me, so you can see,  
Oh, what's going on"*

## 9. 'Happy Birthday' — Stevie Wonder, 1980



Stevie Wonder  
photographed with a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr.  
NBCU Photo Bank/Getty Images

The life—and death—of Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired countless protests and demonstrations across the country. Yet the federal government was hesitant to designate a holiday to acknowledge the role that King had played in the nation's progress. Just days after King's death in 1968, Congressman John Conyers **proposed** making his slain friend's birthday into a national holiday, but he received little support from his colleagues. In response, Stevie Wonder made it his mission to advocate for a Martin Luther King, Jr. federal holiday with his song "Happy Birthday," released in 1980.

*"And we all know everything,  
That he stood for time will bring,  
For in peace, our hearts will sing,  
Thanks to Martin Luther King,  
Happy birthday to you"*

The song wasn't a hit when it first released, but Wonder performed it at concerts and events, advocating for the celebration of the civil rights icon. Although several states made King's birthday a local holiday, some members of Congress still opposed making it federal. Wonder testified to Congress in 1983 in hopes of swaying the majority and continued his crusade as citizens across the country protested in solidarity. King's birthday was **finally approved** as a federal holiday in 1983, and all 50 states made it a state government holiday by 2000. Wonder's version of "Happy Birthday" is still traditionally sung at Black birthday celebrations and as a tribute to King.

## 10. 'F\*\*\* tha Police' — N.W.A., 1988



Rappers MC Ren and Eazy-E. from N.W.A. performs during the "Straight Outta Compton" tour at Kemper Arena in Kansas City, Missouri in 1989. Raymond Boyd/Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

In the 1980s, the voice of the Black community moved from R&B and soul to newly-emerging hip-hop. N.W.A. was among the most controversial and commanding rap groups of the time. Their song "F\*\*\* tha Police" was released as part of their debut album *Straight Outta Compton*. The pioneers of "gangsta rap" introduced themselves to the world with lyrics that reflected the violent and harsh conditions that they experienced as residents of Compton, California. "F\*\*\* tha Police" specifically called out racial profiling and police brutality.

*"F\*\*\* the police comin' straight from the underground,  
A young n\*\*\*a got it bad 'cause I'm brown,  
And not the other color so police think,  
They have the authority to kill a minority"*

Accounts of what inspired the song vary among the group's members. Dr. Dre—whose history of traffic arrests made him hesitant to record the song—claimed it came about after he and Eazy-E were shooting paintball pellets while waiting for a bus, and the police pinned them down with guns drawn. Ice Cube stated it was written in response to the Los Angeles Police Department's police chief declaring a war on gangs. The statement, as interpreted by Ice Cube, was a declaration against any person who looked like a "gang member."

There was strong pushback against the song, which many claimed encouraged violence against the police. The album cover was the first to carry a "Parental Advisory" label warning, "These Songs Contain Explicit Lyrics: Parental Guidance Suggested." And the FBI's Milt Ahlerich sent a letter to Priority Records, which distributed N.W.A.'s album, to state that the song "encourages violence against, and disrespect for, law enforcement officers."

N.W.A. claimed they weren't condoning violence in the song, but were describing it. In fact, frustration with the police boiled over in Los Angeles in 1992 following the brutal beating of Rodney King by police. When asked about the relevance of the song in 2015, Ice



Cube [told Rolling Stone](#), “It’s our legacy here in America with the police department and any kind of authority figures that have to deal with us on a day-to-day basis. There’s usually abuse and violence connected to that interaction, so when ‘F\*\*\* tha Police’ was made in 1989, it was 400 years in the making.”

#### 11. ‘Fight the Power’ — Public Enemy, 1989



(L-R) Rapper Flavor Flav, director Spike Lee and Chuck D of the rap group 'Public Enemy' film a video for their song 'Fight The Power' directed by Spike Lee in New York, 1989. Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

In addition to music, films in the late 1980s and 1990s spoke to the Black experience like never before. Movies like *Boyz n the Hood* and *Menace II Society* offered a lens into underprivileged Black communities in the country. And Spike Lee’s quintessential 1989 film, *Do the Right Thing*, depicted racial tensions reaching a boiling point during a hot Brooklyn summer. Lee enlisted Public Enemy to write a song for the movie and originally [suggested](#) they remake “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” Instead, the group crafted a theme song that pulled from the work of other Black artists:

*“Got to give us what we want,  
Gotta give us what we need,  
Our freedom of speech is freedom of death,  
We got to fight the powers that be,  
Lemme hear you say,  
Fight the power!”*

The title “Fight the Power” was inspired by a 1975 song of the same name by the Isley Brothers. Public Enemy’s Chuck D wrote the lyrics, drawing influences from James Brown and Bob Marley, while simultaneously calling out white American celebrities like Elvis Presley and John Wayne.

The song encapsulated the strained race relations between characters in the movie, and provided fighting words for communities of all kinds as they spoke out against oppression and injustice.

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