

History of Art, The Power Ballads: Don't Catch You Slippin' Up!

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Of all art forms the ballad has the benefit of expediency. From event, to composition, to broadcast: no art form can compete with the efficacy and proliferation of a good song. The reach and emotional impact of a [ballad](#), "a form of verse, often a narrative set to music" allows for any event affecting individuals or groups to rapidly become popularised and understood globally. While historically ballads tended to be sentimental, their descendant, the protest song, sits alongside modern ballads with ease.

While both the ballad and the protest song can have as their basis socio/political narratives, their differences are more in the formal qualities of tempo. Ballads still tend to be slower than protest songs, but conveying in emotion what they lose in excitement.

While the ballad may satisfy with its unhurried melody and storytelling, the protest song has an immediacy of lyric and beat that gives vocal power to mass events like concerts and demonstrations.

History of the Ballad

Ballads have a long history in European culture. They [started](#) out as the "medieval French *chanson balladée* or *ballade*, which were originally 'dance songs'. Ballads were particularly characteristic of the popular poetry and song of Britain and Ireland from the Late Middle Ages until the 19th century. They were widely used across Europe, and later in Australia, North Africa, North America and South America." In the nineteenth century they were associated with sentimentality which led to the word ballad "being used for slow love songs from the 1950s onwards."

In Ireland ballads have been a very important part of the nationalist struggle against British colonialism since the seventeenth century. They reached the zenith of their popularity in the

1960s with the Dubliners, and the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem. Ballad folk groups are still in demand today in Europe and the USA.

Ballads tend to have a slower tempo that allows the audience to experience the nuances of the lyrics. An early and powerful example of this is 'Strange Fruit', a song written and composed by Abel Meeropol (under his pseudonym Lewis Allan) and recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939. A ballad and a protest [song](#), 'Strange Fruit' "protests the lynching of Black Americans with lyrics that compare the victims to the fruit of trees. Such lynchings had reached a peak in the Southern United States at the turn of the 20th century and the great majority of victims were black." 'Strange Fruit' has been described as a call for freedom and is seen as an important initiator of the civil rights movement. The lyrics are full of horror and bitter irony:

"Southern trees
Bearing strange fruit
Blood on the leaves
And blood at the roots
Black bodies
Swinging in the Southern breeze

Strange fruit hangin'
From the poplar trees
Pastoral scene
Of the gallant south"

Woody Guthrie, 'Dust Bowl Ballads' (1940)

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie (1912–1967) was an American singer-songwriter and composer who was one of the most important figures in American folk music. His songs focused on themes of American socialism and anti-fascism. As a young man he migrated to California to look for work and his experiences of the conditions faced by working class people. This led him to [produce](#) Dust Bowl Ballads, an album of songs grouped around the theme of the Dust Bowl storms that destroyed crops and intensified the economic impact of the Great Depression in the 1930s. 'Dust Bowl Ballads' is thought to be one of the earliest concept albums.

The songs lyrics tell of the storms and their apocalyptic effect on the local farmers:

"On the 14th day of April of 1935
There struck the worst of dust storms that ever filled the sky
You could see that dust storm comin', the cloud looked deathlike black
And through our mighty nation, it left a dreadful track

From Oklahoma City to the Arizona line
Dakota and Nebraska to the lazy Rio Grande
It fell across our city like a curtain of black rolled down
We thought it was our judgement, we thought it was our doom

[...]

The storm took place at sundown, it lasted through the night
When we looked out next morning, we saw a terrible sight
We saw outside our window where wheat fields they had grown
Was now a rippling ocean of dust the wind had blown”

Pete Seeger, ‘We Shall Overcome’ (1967)

Peter Seeger (1919–2014) was a popular American folk singer who was regularly heard on the radio in the 1940s, and in the early 1950s had a string of hit records as a member of The Weavers, some of whom were blacklisted during the McCarthy Era. In the 1960s, Seeger [became](#) “a prominent singer of protest music in support of international disarmament, civil rights, counterculture, workers’ rights, and environmental causes.”

‘We Shall Overcome’ is believed to have [originated](#) as a gospel song known as ‘I’ll Overcome Some Day’. In 1959, the song began to be associated with the civil rights movement as a protest song, with Seeger’s version focusing on nonviolent civil rights activism. It became popular all over the world in many types of protest activities.

The song is a very understated (both musically and lyrically) declaration of protest and unity in the face of oppression:

“We shall overcome
We shall overcome
We shall overcome some day

Oh, deep in my heart
I do believe
We shall overcome some day”

Special A.K.A., ‘Free Nelson Mandela’ (1984)

In contrast, the lively anti-apartheid [song](#) ‘Free Nelson Mandela’ written by British musician Jerry Dammers, and performed by the band the Special A.K.A. was a hugely popular song in 1984 that led to the global awareness of the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela by the apartheid South African government:

“Free Nelson Mandela
Twenty-one years in captivity
Shoes too small to fit his feet
His body abused but his mind is still free
Are you so blind that you cannot see?
I said free Nelson Mandela”

Rage Against The Machine, ‘Sleep Now in the Fire’ (1999)

Rage Against the Machine was an American rock band from Los Angeles, California. [Formed](#) in 1991, “the group consisted of vocalist Zack de la Rocha, bassist and backing vocalist Tim Commerford, guitarist Tom Morello, and drummer Brad Wilk.”

The video for 'Sleep Now in the Fire' turned a protest song into an actual protest when the band played on Wall Street in [front](#) of the New York Stock Exchange:

"The music video for the song, which was directed by Michael Moore with cinematography by Welles Hackett, features the band playing in front of the New York Stock Exchange, intercut with scenes from a satire of the popular television game show Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? which is named Who Wants To Be Filthy Fucking Rich. [...] The video starts by saying that on January 24, 2000, the NYSE announced record profits and layoffs, and on the next day New York mayor Rudy Giuliani decreed that Rage Against the Machine "shall not play on Wall Street". The shoot for the music video on January 26, 2000 caused the doors of the New York Stock Exchange to be closed."

The lyrics are spartan, yet cover many topics: bible-belt conservatism, the corrupting aspects of wealth and its connection with right-wing politics. The second verse gives a potted history of the USA: 'I am the Nina, the Pinta, the Santa Maria' (Columbus' three ships), 'The noose and the rapist, the fields overseer' (the slave system), The agents of orange (the Vietnam war), The priests of Hiroshima' (Oppenheimer's fascination with mysticism). Any shorter and these lines could almost be described as a haiku embedded within the song. The third verse deals with the future: 'For it's the end of history, It's caged and frozen still, There is no other pill to take, So swallow the one That makes you ill' referencing Francis Fukuyama's [argument](#) "that the worldwide spread of liberal democracies and free-market capitalism of the West and its lifestyle may signal the end point of humanity's sociocultural evolution and political struggle, and become the final form of human government", 'caged' because there is no alternative, and will continue this way (of making us 'ill') with no viable socio/political alternative vision:

"The world is my expense
The cost of my desire
Jesus blessed me with its future
And I protect it with fire
So raise your fists and march around
Dont dare take what you need
I'll jail and bury those committed
And smother the rest in greed
Crawl with me into tomorrow
Or i'll drag you to your grave
I'm deep inside your children
They'll betray you in my name

Hey!
Hey!
Sleep now in the fire

The lie is my expense
The scope with my desire
The party blessed me with its future
And i protect it with fire
I am the Nina, the Pinta, the Santa Maria
The noose and the rapist, the fields overseer
The agents of orange
The priests of Hiroshima

The cost of my desire
Sleep now in the fire

For it's the end of history
It's caged and frozen still
There is no other pill to take
So swallow the one
That makes you ill
The Nina, the Pinta, the Santa Maria
The noose and the rapist, the fields' overseer
The agents of orange
The priests of Hiroshima
The cost of my desire
Sleep now in the fire."

Bill Callahan, 'America!' (2011)

In Bill Callahan's (born 1966) song and video 'America!' he [contrasts](#) the symbols and perception of America globally with its darker past. He mentions legendary American songwriters and performers Mickey Newbury, Kris Kristofferson, George Jones and Johnny Cash and their past roles in the army, showing the deep connection between culture and the military in the USA. Callahan lists countries where the USA has been: Afghanistan, Vietnam, Iran, and ends with Native America, turning its colonialism and imperialism back on itself. There is also an oblique reference to the system of haves and have-nots ('Others lucky suckle teat') ending with the slight change 'Ain't enough to eat' emphasizing the growing poverty in the richest country on earth:

"America!
You are so grand and golden
Oh I wish I was deep in America tonight

America!
America!
I watch David Letterman in Australia
America!
You are so grand and golden
I wish I was on the next flight
To America!

Captain Kristofferson!
Buck Sergeant Newbury!
Leatherneck Jones!
Sergeant Cash!
What an Army!
What an Air Force!
What a Marines!
America!
[Afghanistan, Vietnam, Iran, Native America]
Well, everyone's allowed a past
They don't care to mention

Well, it's hard to rouse a hog in Delta
And it can get tense around the Bible Belt
Others lucky suckle teat
Others lucky suckle teat

America!"

Childish Gambino, 'This Is America' (2018)

In his video, 'This Is America', Childish Gambino (Donald Glover, born 1983) [shocked](#) his viewers, who were not used to seeing the cinematic realism of gun violence in a music video. Gambino focuses more on the present than the past, while using cars from the 1990s probably as a symbol of poverty. The violence and drugs scene behind pleasure-seeking party-goers is emphasised with an execution at the start and followed up by a mass murder of a gospel choir. His demeanor constantly changes very suddenly, from dancing one moment, to exhorting his clients another, then cold-blooded killing, yet despite it all, running for his life in the end as his life style catches up with him:

"We just wanna party
Party just for you
We just want the money
Money just for you
I know you wanna party
Party just for me
Girl, you got me dancin' (yeah, girl, you got me dancin')
Dance and shake the frame
We just wanna party (yeah)
Party just for you (yeah)
We just want the money (yeah)
Money just for you (you)
I know you wanna party (yeah)
Party just for me (yeah)
Girl, you got me dancin' (yeah, girl, you got me dancin')
Dance and shake the frame (you)

This is America
Don't catch you slippin' up
Don't catch you slippin' up
Look what I'm whippin' up
This is America (woo)
Don't catch you slippin' up
Don't catch you slippin' up
Look what I'm whippin' up"

Bob Dylan, 'Murder Most Foul' (2020)

In 2020, Bob Dylan (born 1941) [released](#) this seventeen-minute track, "Murder Most Foul", on his YouTube channel, based on the assassination of President Kennedy. It is a long, slow ballad that intertwines culture and politics, contrasting the optimism of the one with the

stark brutality of the other. It is the poetry of America re-examing its past at its best, the detail and condemnation in its lyrics reflecting a political undercurrent that refuses to accept modern myths, a murder 'most foul':

"It was a dark day in Dallas, November '63
A day that will live on in infamy
President Kennedy was a-ridin' high
Good day to be livin' and a good day to die
Being led to the slaughter like a sacrificial lamb
He said, "Wait a minute, boys, you know who I am?"
"Of course we do, we know who you are!"
Then they blew off his head while he was still in the car
Shot down like a dog in broad daylight
Was a matter of timing and the timing was right
You got unpaid debts, we've come to collect
We're gonna kill you with hatred, without any respect
We'll mock you and shock you and we'll put it in your face
We've already got someone here to take your place
The day they blew out the brains of the king
Thousands were watching, no one saw a thing
It happened so quickly, so quick, by surprise
Right there in front of everyone's eyes
Greatest magic trick ever under the sun
Perfectly executed, skillfully done
Wolfman, oh Wolfman, oh Wolfman, howl
Rub-a-dub-dub, it's a murder most foul

[...]

Don't worry, Mr. President, help's on the way
Your brothers are comin', there'll be hell to pay
Brothers? What brothers? What's this about hell?
Tell them, "We're waiting, keep coming," we'll get them as well
Love Field is where his plane touched down
But it never did get back up off the ground
Was a hard act to follow, second to none
They killed him on the altar of the rising sun
Play "Misty" for me and "That Old Devil Moon"
Play "Anything Goes" and "Memphis in June"
Play "Lonely at the Top" and "Lonely Are the Brave"
Play it for Houdini spinning around in his grave
Play Jelly Roll Morton, play "Lucille"
Play "Deep in a Dream", and play "Driving Wheel"
Play "Moonlight Sonata" in F-sharp
And "A Key to the Highway" for the king of the harp
Play "Marching Through Georgia" and "Dumbarton's Drums"
Play darkness and death will come when it comes
Play "Love Me or Leave Me" by the great Bud Powell
Play "The Blood-Stained Banner", play "Murder Most Foul"

Hope for the Future...

These songs show us that, despite the music industry's continuing avalanche of industrial pop, composers and bands are still able to produce music that as an art form can combine melody and criticism, that can look behind facades and describe the reality they see - which we hear only as background noise. It shows the way to other art forms that take so much time and energy and money to get up and running, that a fight for more radical content is possible and necessary.

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*Featured image: Abel Meeropol cited this [photograph](#) of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, August 7, 1930, as inspiring his poem. Meeropol published the poem under the title "Bitter Fruit" in January 1937 in *The New York Teacher*, a union magazine of the New York teachers union. Though Meeropol had asked others (notably Earl Robinson) to set his poems to music, he set "Strange Fruit" to music himself.*

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