

Resonant Bodies, Resonant Streets: Singing Boston Into Protest History

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This thesis examines vocal music as a strategic tool for political mobilization and community formation in Boston across multiple historical periods. Focusing on protest traditions from the civil rights era and folk revival through the Vietnam War and late 20th century hardcore punk, the study argues that singing has repeatedly transformed public spaces into sites of collective political action. In Boston's protest history, vocal music was not merely an artistic expression but a mechanism that unified participants through shared cultural memory, broadened access to political movements, and sustained communities facing social and political strain.

The thesis begins with the role of gospel and spiritual traditions within Boston's Black churches, particularly institutions such as Twelfth Baptist Church and Charles Street AME Church. These congregations mobilized sacred music during the civil rights era to link contemporary activism with the historical memory of slavery, abolitionism, and faith based resistance. Participatory singing, call and response patterns, and familiar spirituals enabled congregants to transform meetings and demonstrations into solidarity, fortifying the idea that activism was both a political and spiritual practice.

The paper then turns to the mid 20th century folk revival centered in Cambridge venues such as Club 47 (later known as Club Passim), where performers like Joan Baez helped cultivate political consciousness through the accessibility of protest songs. Folk music's portability and

participatory nature allowed audiences to move gradually from spectatorship to engagement, shaping the emotional vocabulary of antiwar demonstrations during the Vietnam War. Songs learned in clubs and campuses reappeared in rallies and marches, where collective singing transformed temporary gatherings into cohesive dissent.

Finally, the thesis examines Boston's hardcore punk and straight edge scenes of the 1980s, where shouted vocals, gang choruses, and DIY organizing created new forms of youth solidarity and dissent. Despite differences in style and ideology, these musical traditions reveal a consistent pattern: shared vocal expression enables individuals to become political actors within a collective. Vocal music has continuously functioned as a scaffold within Boston's protest traditions, demonstrating that when people raise their voices together, they build the frameworks that make resistance possible.