

Mavis Staples Freedom Highway Essay

Prompt #2: Examine music's role as a catalyst for conversations around complex issues such as inequality, racism, and discrimination, and explore the work of singers and songwriters who tackle these types of social-justice issues in their music.

Examples include Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come," The Beatles' "All You Need is Love," Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" and Public Enemy's "Fight the Power."

Music plays a huge role as a catalyst for conversations around complex issues such as inequality, racism, discrimination, and injustice. Some artists choose to advocate for change through their music and lyrics. A few examples are, "Brown and Proud" by musical group Lighter Shade of Brown, "War", by musician and activist Bob Marley, and "To Be Young, Gifted and Black", by the artist Nina Simone. Each of these artists challenges their listeners to look beyond themselves and recognize the hardships others are facing around them and in their community.

I grew up having those difficult and complex conversations with my dad. About how he had been treated because of the color of his skin. Together, we listened to the Latino group Lighter Shade of Brown, in awe of the lyrics. They are from California, just like my dad. Because of that he can relate to the lyrics, and it was important to him to share that with me. My dad and I had very different upbringings, but he never failed to educate me. Lighter Shade of Brown gives insight into the lives of Latinos in America. Their lyrics shine light on topics such as discrimination and profiling, people like my family face daily. Their music was a catalyst for those difficult but important conversations between my dad and me. They write: "Ojame, porque debemos de juntarnos. Que termine la violencia y vivir como hermanos," which, in English,

means “I hope, because we must join together. Let the violence end and live as brothers. Think of the people in the past who fought. To gain equality and more open doors that they have brought.” (Lighter Shade of Brown, 1990.) These lyrics are important because they open the listener’s eyes to the injustice and prejudice the Latino community faces in America.

Music is impactful and inspires change. Bob Marley, like many activists and artists of his time, encouraged self-reflection among those who listened to his work. His song “War” tackles the topic of racial injustice as well as the impossibility of peace between different members of the human race. Marley left it to his listeners to explicate the meaning of his music and to heed the message he's sending, as well as to reform and make personal changes. Songs like Marley’s give musicians an outlet to start those “uncomfortable” conversations. He writes, “And until there's no longer first-class nor second-class citizens of any nation/Until the color of a man's skin is of no more significance than the color of his eyes/Me say war.” In this quote, Marley is commenting on discrimination against people of color. This is something Marley, his family, and many of his listeners have battled. Without equality for all, we will never succeed at world peace. Marley also writes, “The dream of lasting peace. World citizenship and the rule of international morality, yeah. Will remain in but a fleeting illusion to be pursued, but never attained. Well, everywhere is war.” (Bob Marley, 1978)

Nina Simone, most famous for her songs “Feeling Good” and “I Put A Spell On You,” was not only a well known music artist, but she lived a double life as an activist. Nina Simone, also known as Eunice Kathleen Waymon, wrote music for other African American people during the fight for civil rights. Her song “To Be Young, Gifted, and Black”, released in 1970, is now

considered a civil rights anthem. After the success of this song, Simone believed she was being punished for her work as an activist and began to seek refuge elsewhere, such as Europe, Africa and the Caribbean. After leaving the U.S. in 1970, she later returned in 1955 and reclaimed her life as an artist and activist. She risked it all to uplift others through her music. "Oh, but my joy of today, is that we can all be proud to say. "To be young, gifted and black, is where it's at."

(Nina Simone, 1970)

Music will always hold a big role as a catalyst for conversations around complex issues such as inequality, racism, and discrimination. Artists such as Lighter Shade of Brown, Bob Marley, and Nina Simone help pave the way for other artists to express their opinions and create change. Music is a form of entertainment as well as a form of communication. Because of that, musical artists have the power to start the conversation, to make people uncomfortable with keeping quiet, to bring attention to current social-justice issues.