Where have all the protest songs gone?

*Today’s minstrels say the rise-up anthems are still out there, but you have to know where to listen.*

Sometime in the late 1960s, Pete Seeger — in his prime with just a banjo and a 12-string guitar — stepped up to a single microphone on the concert stage of the Sydney Town Hall in Australia, and started singing.

One after another, the simple yet profoundly affecting songs that moved a generation — a couple of generations, actually — poured forth like some kind of healing sacrament. Audience voices raised in unison, in harmony, in joyful dissonance, with Seeger’s energetic encouragement. This was the soundtrack of an era, accompanied with his musical contemporaries Joan Baez, Bob Dylan.

Two hours later, the exhausted but jubilant folk singer made his final exit, waving his instruments above his head. The crowd dispersed into the warm night, still roaring out the songs we were convinced could and would make the world a better place. Maybe they did. For a while.

The protests accompanying this weekend’s G20 summit in Toronto might be remembered for their noise and fury, but probably not for songs.

In a time of great social unrest, people looking for protest music have to go farther afield than at any other time in the past century. While there were a few commercially successful songs with social impact, popular music in the United States was dominated by boy bands, female solo artists, and an enchanting but innocuous dance-based hip-hop. Protest music played very little part in the largest social movements, even as musicians expressed their solidarity through other means.

Protest songs — at least the kind that galvanized thousands at a time during the labor struggles of the 1920s and ’30s, anti-nuclear and civil rights marches in the 1950s, the anti-Vietnam war rallies in the 1960s and the economic upheavals in Britain during the Thatcher years — seem to have disappeared from the landscape. At least they have from the commercial airwaves. But their spirit drives much of the best contemporary music.

“They haven’t disappeared, we just have to hunt them down,” argues Bruce Cook, who has never wavered in a 40-year career from an almost obsessive devotion to taking on war-mongers, empire builders and environment polluters with narrative-based songs of often brutal outspokenness.

Protest songs are alive and well, he says. They are just hiding in plain sight. “We just don’t hear them. We don’t hear anything worthwhile these days unless we go looking for it.”

Cook singles out American songwriter and activist Ani DiFranco for special praise. “She’s a beautiful singer, a great guitarist and a brilliant lyricist. She doesn’t close her eyes to what’s going on around her, and she’s not afraid to speak up. And I don’t discount punk and reggae as breeding grounds for some of the best politically intense songs ever recorded — from the Clash and Bob Marley right up to the present.”

Neil Young’s 2006 album, *Living with War*, was a toxic indictment of George W. Bush’s foreign policy. Young has complained publicly about the lack of contemporary songwriters willing to step up to the protest plate. At 64 then, he felt forced to do their work for them.
It has been said that Bruce Springsteen’s 2007 album Magic, with its hallucinatory vision of an America gone mad with war lust, consumerism and revenge, was the New Jersey rocker’s response to Young’s challenge. Three years earlier, American punk rocker’s Green Day’s American Idiot album, now also a hit Broadway musical, was praised by many for its brave, satirical take on modern America and its powerful endorsement of love and humanist ethics.

The absence in the public arena of songs of conscience may well be an effect of the wired age, along with so many previously cherished forms of social interaction, suggests guitarist Brian Gladstone, the proudly unreconstructed hippie founder of the Association of Artists for a Better World. “People concerned about the issues that have always troubled us are more likely to turn to Facebook to find a like-minded community than to sing songs in the streets, the way we did in the 1960s,” he says.

“There are plenty of protest songs out there, but they just aren’t part of the cultural mainstream any more. Radio doesn’t play them, and people don’t seem to do things together, as a community. We’re all connected individually to some kind of device, working alone, amusing ourselves alone, enlightening ourselves alone.”

“It’s not that the issues needing attention are more numerous or complex than they were a couple of generations ago,” says Canadian folk music veteran Ken Whiteley. “You can look at 150 different issues and reduce them to just two things: greed and the abuse of power.”

“In complicated, distracted times, I’ve learned that timely songs performed in the right manner, accompanied by humor and common language, can really get inside people.”

The Future of Protest Music

There may be hope for the Pete Seeger stalwarts among us. Protest music, unlike the media discussed above, has an emotional connection that, from time to time, can conquer the human drive for technological progress. As Willie Peacock, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee member, noted, “When you sing, you can reach deep into yourself and communicate some of what you’ve got to other people, and you get them to reach inside of themselves. You release your soul force, and they release theirs, until you can feel like you are part of one great soul.”

No social networking site has yet managed to replicate this feeling—one that sits at the very heart of protest movements. Will this distinct advantage be enough to save the protest song? It’s an increasingly tenuous thread to cling to, but protest music fans have never had difficulty embracing lost causes.

What is the author saying about the seeming disappearance of protest music in our modern music scene? Where has it gone and why is it disappearing?