The Power of Protest Music and its Persuasion to Promote Change

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Abstract

This paper explores *What’s Going On* by Marvin Gaye as protest music. Integrating underlying and opposing assumptions and beliefs as well as characteristics of protest music to explain Gaye’s song as a tool of persuasion. In further detail, general semantic concepts will be used to discuss the effectiveness of his song and an action will be presented as a result of research.
Protest music can help bring attention to a social movement. Due to its melody and strong lyrical content, music can persuade people to change. It’s also an additional advantage if well-known people use their voice to bring more awareness to a social problem. For example, Marvin Gaye’s, *What’s Going On* helped shed light on the troubles of black urban life during the 60s and 70s. Considering that Gaye is a popular Motown artist with a soulful voice, his song asks people to question their world and think. As a fan of Marvin Gaye, I admire when celebrities use their fame to offer help because they have the power to reach millions. *What’s Going On* is a cultural tool of persuasion because it has underlying and opposing assumptions and beliefs, it uses characteristics of protest music, and uses four general semantic concepts. For any protest song, the writer usually has a belief of right and wrong and then assumes that the lyrics will bring change.

Marvin Gaye wrote his song with the belief that there was injustice and inequality towards people. His song revealed the struggles during the 60’s and 70’s and hoped it will uplift people to take action and promote change. On the other end of things, some people believed that the political system was just and fair. Segregation, the right’s of women and minorities all serve a purpose so why change it? This opposing viewpoint is apart of mainstream America; society has already catered to this majority. Most weren’t aware of their privileges, but others fought against the civil rights of others. Due to the resistance, protest music helped bring people together to fight the “we-they” distinction and bring equality for all. Characteristics of protest music, as documented by Charles Stewart should make “demands, presents solutions or calls to action, attempt to maintain the song’s timelessness, reveal injustice, inequality, despair,
suffering, presents a “we-they” distinction, and make use of rhythm and repetition to nonverbally reinforce a lyrical message” (Stewart, 1994).

Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On* was a protest song to promote change during the 60’s and 70’s, a time of rising political, environmental, and economical awareness. *What’s Going On* was a song unlike any other song that Marvin Gaye has performed. Usually known for his contemporary radio songs, Gaye wanted to take his music into a spiritual direction. Sometime during 1969 and 1970, he said, “I began to re-evaluate my whole concept of what I wanted my music to say... I was very much affected by letters my brother was sending me from Vietnam, as well as the social situation here at home. I realized that I had to put my own fantasies behind me if I wanted to write songs that would reach the souls of people. I wanted them to take a look at what was happening in the world” (Rolling Stone, 2009). Released in 1971, *What’s Going On* “documents a volatile period in American history and Marvin Gaye’s own personal life. Dealing with the personal demons of drug addiction, depression, and his brother’s military service in Vietnam”, Gaye mixed black struggles with American struggles to write his song (Neal, 1998).

*What’s Going On* makes demands of communication. It’s suggested that people talk to each other to understand the problems in society and find a solution. For example, “come talk to me, so you can see oh what’s going on…” and “you know we got to find a way, to bring some loving here today…” are lyrics that suggest people should find a solution, possibly with the use of “Picket lines and picket signs” (Benson, Cleveland, Gaye, 1970). These lyrics tie into the struggles of the past. The Vietnam War and the civil rights movement motivated people to question politics and work together to bring change. Marvin Gaye continues to acknowledge that war is a problem, he states, “We don’t need to escalate, you see, war is not the answer” (Benson, Cleveland, Gaye, 1970).
Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On* is a timeless protest song because he doesn’t mention a specific problem or leader. So it’s easy to use this song for any problem in the future. After the 70’s, there were more wars, social movements, senseless crimes, disparities between races, and other ongoing problems. This song has been used many times throughout the years, either using the original recording or covers by other recording artist. For example, popular musical group U2 covered the song after the 9/11 attacks back in 2001. Artists Against AIDS, a large collection of musical recording artists, produced an updated version of the song along with a music video to grab the attention of the younger generation. Artists like Alicia Keys, Christina Augilera, Gwen Stefani, Destiny’s Child, Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, and Marvin Gaye’s daughter, Nona Gaye were some of the participating artists.

During the 70’s the slogan, “Black Power”, was beginning to become popular amongst African Americans. Participants of protest marches were often “greeted with more official brutality. Marchers were beaten, tear gassed, and arrested” (McKissack, 1991, p. 253). Written around the time of change, Marvin Gaye’s song helps support the black power movement. People would blast his song down the streets because he revealed the “injustice, inequality, despair, and suffering” with one song. For example, “Mother, mother, there’s too many of you crying. Brother, brother, brother, there’s too many of you dying” (Benson, Cleveland, Gaye 1970). “Don’t punish me, with brutality” recognizes the injustice from politics and the police. In addition, Marvin Gaye continues to reveal a “we-they” distinction while discussion civil rights issues by saying, “Mother, mother everybody thinks we’re wrong. Oh, who are they to judge us, simply because our hair is long” (Benson, Cleveland, Gaye 1970). His lyrics of inequality helped “play a significant role to represent, define, and motivate the civil right activities” (Kernodle, 2011).
What’s Going On has the rhythm and repetition to reinforce a message of struggle. As viewed numerous times on You Tube, his soulful voice carries over the drums, guitars, saxophones, and keyboard. When he performs this song he makes a lot of eye contact and hand gestures to tie the audience into the song. He would often add extra notes and words to keep the song current with the time of the performance. The lyrics “what’s going on” is constantly repeated in the chorus to serve as an anthem and forces the listener to question their world. Listening to Gaye’s song, you will automatically tap your feet, sway your head, or clap your hands because the rhythm is very catchy. In addition, together his lyrics have strong meaning but each individual word has meaning as well.

Words can have a lot more meaning within music. There are the lyrics of the song and the meaning of the song, which can vary from person to person. There are four general semantic concepts, the map is not the territory, affective connotations, snarl words, judgment, and inference, all helped make his song more effective as a protest song. For example, because a lot of what we know comes from other sources, the little proof we have about the 60s and 70s would come from other people. Gaye’s song is an example of the map is not the territory because he lived during that time to write about it. Those born after the 80s can only rely on other sources to share the struggles of the civil rights movement, injustice of politics, and the mistreatment from the police. He references the tears of mothers and men dying as additional information that many people may not know about. Due to the fact that he is a celebrity people will most likely believe his message and look at the world differently.

The “affective connotations of a word, are the aura of personal feelings it arouses” and Marvin Gaye uses thoughtful words to raise awareness (Hayakawa, 1992, p. 44). For example, the words “dying”, “crying”, and “brutality” are words that strike emotion and emotions are used
People cry because of death, sadness for crying, and anger for brutality. In addition, “The fear of death carries over, quite understandably in view of the widespread confusion of symbols with things symbolized, into fear of the words having to do with death” (Hayakawa, 1992, p 47). Due to the fact that death is a common fear, Gaye used dying and other words to evoke some kind of emotion from the listener to take action. Other words could have been used, but to mention death, sadness, and violence in a blunt manner helped express his thoughts better.

Judgments are “a conclusion, evaluating a number of previously observed facts” (Hayakawa, 1992, p 27). Issues like inequality and injustice led us to judge the opposing viewpoint and during the time that What’s Going On was written, the inferior group of people were judged, ridiculed, and abused with snarl words. For example, “Father, father, everybody thinks we're wrong. Oh, but who are they to judge us, simply because our hair is long” suggests that inferior people were labeled and judged because of their physical attributes (Benson, Cleveland, Gaye 1970). African Americans were called niggers, monkeys, uneducated, or worthless all because of the color of their skin. Many believed that African Americans are careless, jobless, and lazy but the reports of African Americans are not noticed. Statistics are not studied and accomplishments are not celebrated. Marvin Gaye posed the question, “what’s going on?” to get people to think. He later stated, “talk to me, so you can see” as a way to get people to communicate and understand each other’s backgrounds without passing judgment.

Marvin Gaye wrote his song so that the listener can make inferences based upon his lyrics. An inference “is a statement about the unknown based on the known” (Hayakawa, 1992, p 24). Gaye’s lyrics are left for the listener to infer what to think based on his lyrics. Some of his listeners weren’t living in the south, where a lot of events were happening. So instead his
music serves as an outlet to provide information. Marvin Gaye is the reporter and the listener is left with the job to make inferences based off of his experiences. Gaye has a lot of stage presence and he has the ability to captivate people so “the quality of inference is directly related to the quality of the report or observation from which it stems” (Hayakawa, 1992, p 25). In another word, a song with a strong message has a better chance of receiving a strong inference.

*What’s Going On* by Marvin Gaye is a timeless song that grabs the listener’s attention. Steady beat, repetitive lyrics, and strong message documents a pivotal time in America’s history. This song has been valued as a classic for many years because of it’s timeless message. As a result of this paper, listeners can take action by being more of a presence within their community. Seek out information, protest, ask questions, and vote to try to change their situation. There is more to be done than sitting around complaining on social networks; instead people should use social networks to raise awareness. Send emails, update your status, tweet your location of all the volunteer work you have done. There’s power in numbers and people should use technology to their advantage. Send links to charitable organizations and use Facebook as a way to gain momentum. Use technology for more than what it was intended for. Overall, stand up and be accounted for.
References


What’s Going On

Mother, mother
There's too many of you crying
Brother, brother, brother
There's far too many of you dying
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today - Ya

Father, father
We don't need to escalate
You see, war is not the answer
For only love can conquer hate
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today

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

In the mean time
Right on, baby
Right on
Right on

Father, father, everybody thinks we're wrong

Oh, but who are they to judge us
Simply because our hair is long
Oh, you know we've got to find a way
To bring some understanding here today

Oh

Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality

Talk to me
So you can see
What's going on
Ya, what's going on
Tell me what's going on
I'll tell you what's going on - Uh
Right on baby

Right on baby