

A Critical Exploration of Protest Culture in the Performing Arts

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ABSTRACT

Protest culture in the performing arts constitutes an artistic and civic response to injustice, failed governance, social exclusion, and abuse of power, among other social anomalies. It is a long-standing practice that transforms creative expression into activism. Studies on the art of protest in performing arts often emphasise historical examples of resistance but give limited attention to how performance elements such as voice, body, rhythm, space, costume, music, and audience participation produce dissent. This study reassesses the political value of protest performance and identifies the artistic strategies through which it confronts sociopolitical abnormalities. The study adopts a qualitative research design, and is carried out through a performance analysis of purposively selected theatrical and musical protest forms. It draws theoretical insights from Richard Schechner's Performance Theory and Jacques Rancière's Politics of Aesthetics, especially his notion of 'the distribution of the sensible' to explain how artistic performances create spaces for political visibility and resistance, and how protest performances disrupt dominant social arrangements by amplifying marginalised voices and challenging overriding narratives. Finding reveals that protest performance exposes injustice, preserves social memory, mobilises civic consciousness, and challenges established hierarchies of visibility and voice. This positions the performing arts as active instruments of social engagement and reconstruction beyond entertainment. The study concludes that protest performance remains vital to democratic renewal, ethical awareness, and social transformation.

Keywords: Protest culture in performing arts, Sociopolitical tension and resistance, Performance theory, Politics of aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

Human society is sustained through organised systems of regulation that ensure order, continuity, and collective stability. Social life depends upon shared values, institutional structures, and patterned behaviour that guide interaction and maintain cohesion. Through socialisation, individuals internalise norms and expectations, thereby aligning personal conduct with communal standards. Émile Durkheim (1979) locates this cohesion in a collective moral order that binds members of a society together and secures conformity. Contemporary sociological studies reaffirm that social order is maintained through a combination of institutional authority, cultural transmission, and participatory frameworks that reinforce shared obligations (Alexander, 2017). Despite these mechanisms, social control remains limited in its capacity to eliminate dissent. Historical and contemporary evidence shows that no society achieves total compliance, as structures of regulation often generate conditions for resistance. Protest emerges where systems fail to secure justice, inclusion, or legitimacy. It is therefore not an anomaly but a recurring social response to inequality, exclusion, and institutional breakdown. Recent scholarship emphasises that protest is embedded within the functioning of democratic and non-democratic societies alike, serving as a corrective mechanism when formal structures fail (della Porta, 2015).

From a psychological standpoint, Sigmund Freud (1961) identifies defiance as an outcome of tensions between instinctual drives and cultural restraint, where suppressed impulses seek expression beyond regulatory limits. Sociological interpretations extend this view by locating protest within structural contradictions. Vladimir Lenin (1977) argues that resistance intensifies when existing systems become untenable and populations perceive no viable means of redress within them. Recent analyses of global protest movements further indicate that defiance is shaped by material conditions, political exclusion, and mediated communication, particularly within digitally networked societies (Gerbaudo, 2019; McGarry et al., 2020). Scholarly opinion remains divided regarding the

value of protest. Barbara Tuchman (1977) cautions that revolutions may reproduce the systems they seek to dismantle, thereby complicating their emancipatory claims. Conversely, Frantz Fanon (2004) positions resistance as a necessary force through which oppressed groups confront domination and assert agency. Recent critical studies extend this debate by examining how protest may be co-opted, commodified, or redirected within global capitalist and media systems (Boltanski, 2014; Dean, 2019). These positions establish protest as a contested but indispensable element of social transformation.

The performing arts function as a potent medium of embodied dissent. Performance translates protest into visible and audible form, employing voice, gesture, movement, sound, and spatial arrangement to confront audiences with lived realities. Unlike textual forms, it produces immediacy and shared experience, thereby intensifying engagement and response. Contemporary studies on protest aesthetics identify performance as a structured mode of communication through which dissent is organised, circulated, and received (McGarry et al., 2020; Cury, 2021). In African contexts, performance traditions further extend this function by embedding protest within communal participation, ritual practice, and collective memory, thereby linking artistic expression to social action (Barber, 2018). However, despite increasing attention to protest culture, a significant gap persists in scholarship. Much existing work remains descriptive, focusing on historical instances or thematic concerns, with limited sustained analysis of the aesthetic mechanisms through which performance produces dissent. There is insufficient engagement with how artistic elements—embodiment, rhythm, visual composition, and spatial interaction—operate as structured techniques of resistance. Furthermore, the relationship between live performance and mediated protest forms remains under-examined, particularly within African performance discourse.

The study addresses this gap by reassessing protest culture in the performing arts as an aesthetic practice that shapes perception and civic engagement. The aim is to examine how performance constructs dissent, interrogate its strategies, and evaluate its effectiveness within contemporary society. The objectives are to identify the artistic mechanisms of protest performance, analyse their social implications, and establish their relevance within current political and cultural conditions. The study is justified by the increasing reliance on artistic forms in articulating dissent across global and African contexts, especially within technologically mediated environments. The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in Richard Schechner's Performance Theory as well as the political aesthetics of Jacques Rancière, whose concept of the distribution of the sensible explains how art organises what can be seen, heard, and recognised within a social order. This framework enables an understanding of protest performance as an intervention that reconfigures perception and challenges established hierarchies of visibility and voice. The study adopts qualitative performance analysis, examining selected theatrical and musical works to explore how protest is constructed and communicated. This approach allows for detailed interpretation of aesthetic elements and their social implications, thereby establishing the performing arts as active instruments of resistance rather than passive reflections of society.

Protest culture and the Performing Arts

Protest culture refers to the patterned practices through which individuals and groups express opposition to perceived injustice, inequality, or institutional failure. It encompasses social, political, and artistic dimensions, operating through organised movements, symbolic actions, and creative expression. Contemporary scholarship defines protest culture as a system of meaning-making that combines ideological position with aesthetic form, thereby shaping how dissent is articulated and understood (della Porta, 2015; McGarry et al., 2020). It is necessary to distinguish between related terms often used interchangeably. Protest denotes an explicit expression of opposition, often directed at specific policies or conditions. Defiance refers to the refusal to comply with authority or norms. Resistance implies sustained opposition aimed at structural transformation, while dissent signifies disagreement within an established framework. These distinctions clarify the scope of protest culture as a continuum of actions ranging from expression to transformation.

The performing arts encompass theatre, music, dance, and other forms of live or mediated artistic expression that involve embodied presentation before an audience. These forms operate through visual, auditory, and kinetic elements, creating a multi-sensory mode of communication. Performance is inherently social, requiring interaction between performers and audiences, and is therefore uniquely positioned to engage with collective concerns (Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Schechner, 2020). The relationship between art and society is reciprocal. Art

draws from social realities while simultaneously shaping perception and interpretation. Contemporary cultural theory emphasises that artistic production is not neutral but participates in the construction of meaning and power relations (Rancière, 2004). Within this framework, the performing arts function as communicative and participatory media that enable audiences to engage with social issues through shared experience. Protest culture in the performing arts therefore refers to the use of theatre, music, dance, spoken word, and other live or embodied artistic forms to challenge political power, social injustice, cultural oppression, or economic inequality. Protest within the performing arts must therefore be understood as an aesthetic construction rather than mere expression. It involves the deliberate organisation of artistic elements to produce meaning, evoke response, and challenge established orders. This perspective shifts analysis from what protest art represents to how it operates. By focusing on form, structure, and audience engagement, protest performance is revealed as a strategic practice that intervenes in social life, reorders perception, and enables new forms of civic awareness.

Advocates of Protest Tradition

Classical reflections on protest locate it within the structure of social change, where dissent operates as a response to contradictions embedded in political, economic, and cultural systems. Protest is therefore not treated as incidental disruption but as a patterned reaction to imbalance within social organisation. Within this tradition, thinkers approach protest from differing premises, yet converge on its role as a force that confronts stagnation and compels re-evaluation of authority. Frantz Fanon situates protest within the historical condition of domination, particularly under colonial rule, where resistance emerges as a necessary act through which the oppressed reclaim agency and humanity. For Fanon (2004), protest is inseparable from liberation, functioning as a process through which imposed identities are rejected and new forms of self-definition are asserted. Fanon's position recognises that while some movements may fail or be compromised, the impulse toward resistance retains legitimacy as a response to structural injustice. This view aligns with broader revolutionary thought that frames protest as a necessary intervention when systems foreclose avenues for redress. In a related yet distinct formulation, William Blake (1984) conceives conflict as an essential condition for human advancement. His poetic philosophy rejects harmony as a sufficient basis for progress, arguing instead that opposition generates movement and transformation. Blake's formulation remains one of the most cited articulations of this position:

without contraries is no progression
Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy,
Love and hate are necessary to
Human existence (Blake, 1984, p. 69).

This assertion positions protest within a broader metaphysical structure in which contradiction is not only inevitable but productive. Conflict, in this sense, is not an interruption of order but a condition for renewal. Materialist interpretations of protest further develop this understanding by linking resistance to concrete socio-economic conditions. Lenin (1977) identifies protest as a response to structural pressures that render existing arrangements unsustainable. He argues that resistance intensifies when populations recognise the impossibility of continuing under prevailing conditions, drawing attention to the material triggers of revolt. According to him, "Economic upheavals, failure of a government policy, national or racial conflicts or a sharp aggravation of social contradictions, the want and misery of the masses etc." (Lenin, 1977, p. 547).

This position establishes protest as historically grounded, arising not from abstract discontent but from identifiable conditions that generate collective dissatisfaction. It underscores the relationship between material deprivation and political action, framing protest as a response to lived realities rather than ideological abstraction. Further support for the necessity of protest is found in revolutionary discourse that emphasises its role in transforming society. Leon Trotsky (1957), for instance, describes protest as an intense rejection of the existing order combined with a willingness to undertake sacrifice in pursuit of change. He considers protest as "a bitter hostility to the existing order and a readiness to venture on the most heroic efforts and sacrifices in order to bring society out, up on an upward road" (Trotsky, 1957, p. 62).

This formulation reinforces the idea that protest is not merely expressive but oriented towards transformation, requiring commitment and collective effort. Despite these affirmations, counter-positions caution against an unqualified endorsement of protest. Tuchman (1977) argues that revolutions often reproduce the structures they

oppose, thereby raising questions about their long-term efficacy. This critique introduces scepticism into the discourse, suggesting that protest may generate cycles of instability rather than lasting reform. Similarly, Robert Hutchins (1968) contends that in a society governed by justice and humane values, the need for protest would diminish significantly, implying that dissent reflects systemic failure rather than inherent necessity. These positions do not deny the occurrence of protest but question its outcomes and sustainability. African perspectives extend the discourse by situating protest within artistic and cultural practice. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1981) conceptualises the artist as a socially engaged figure whose work exposes injustice and mobilises public awareness. For Ngũgĩ, artistic production is inseparable from political responsibility, with the creative practitioner positioned as an agent of social interrogation. This view locates protest within cultural expression, emphasising the role of performance, language, and narrative in confronting domination.

Niyi Osundare (2007) advances the idea of the writer as a corrective voice, one who intervenes in public life through artistic expression. His formulation presents the creative practitioner not as a detached observer but as an active participant in addressing social imbalance. Within this framework, protest is integrated into artistic practice as a means of engaging with collective concerns and advocating change. These perspectives establish protest as a necessary but contested social force. While classical and revolutionary thinkers emphasise its role in confronting injustice and enabling transformation, critical voices highlight its potential limitations and unintended consequences. African theorists extend the discourse by embedding protest within artistic practice, thereby linking resistance to cultural production. This synthesis affirms that protest cannot be reduced to a single function; it operates as a dynamic process shaped by historical conditions, material realities, and aesthetic forms. Its significance lies not only in its capacity to challenge authority but also in its ability to reconfigure how societies perceive and respond to injustice.

Protest Culture, Performance Theory and the Politics of Aesthetics in the Performing Arts

The performing arts constitute a distinctive mode through which protest is rendered embodied, immediate, and communal. Protest culture in performing arts finds resonance with Richard Schechner's (2005) conception of performance which he extends to everyday life, rituals, and social interactions. This mode of performance situates dissent within the physical presence of bodies, voices, and shared space, thereby transforming resistance into lived experience. In this sense, protest is not only articulated but enacted, where the body functions as a site of political meaning and visibility (Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Butler, 2015). This embodied dimension collapses the distance between representation and experience, enabling audiences to encounter protest as a present condition rather than a mediated report. As such, performance operates at the intersection of aesthetic practice and civic engagement, where artistic expression becomes inseparable from social intervention. The aesthetic force of protest in the performing arts is structured through identifiable devices that organise perception and communicate dissent. Voice operates as a primary medium through speech, chant, and song, projecting opposition into public space. Gesture and movement translate political claims into visible action, while rhythm coordinates collective participation, particularly in musical and dance forms. Spectacle functions through visual arrangement, costume, lighting, and spatial design, producing images that capture attention and sustain memory. Symbolism condenses political meaning into recognisable forms, enabling communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Studies on contemporary protest aesthetics demonstrate that these elements are deliberately mobilised to generate visibility, evoke emotional response, and sustain collective engagement (McGarry et al., 2020; Cury, 2021). In this regard, protest performance is not spontaneous expression but a structured aesthetic practice governed by artistic choices.

Audience engagement remains central to the efficacy of protest performance. The performing arts address spectators not as passive recipients but as participants within a shared experiential field. Richard Schechner (2020) emphasises that performance establishes a relational space in which meaning is co-produced by performers and audiences. This relational dynamic intensifies the impact of protest, as audiences are drawn into processes of interpretation, identification, and response. Fischer-Lichte (2008) further argues that the co-presence of performers and spectators generates a transformative effect, where perception is altered through collective experience. Such engagement produces what may be described as a communal awareness, where dissent is not only observed but felt and negotiated within a group.

The explanatory framework for understanding this process is provided by Rancière (2004), whose theory of political aesthetics conceptualises art as a reorganisation of perception. Rancière's (2004, p. 12) notion of the "distribution of the sensible" refers to the system that determines what is visible, sayable, and intelligible within a given social order. Protest performance operates by disrupting this distribution, making visible what has been excluded and amplifying voices that have been marginalised. Contemporary interpretations of Rancière's work highlight that aesthetic practices do not merely represent political realities but actively reshape them by altering the conditions of perception (Panagia, 2009). Within this framework, protest in the performing arts becomes an intervention that challenges established hierarchies and introduces new modes of recognition. A necessary distinction must be drawn between textual protest and live performance. While textual forms articulate dissent through language, performance extends this articulation through embodiment, spatial presence, and sensory engagement. Textual protest often operates through reflective interpretation, whereas performance confronts audiences with immediacy, producing direct sensory and emotional engagement. Studies on protest communication indicate that even in digital environments, the most effective forms of dissent retain performative elements, including visual framing, bodily expression, and narrative enactment (Gerbaudo, 2019). This suggests that performance remains central to the structure of protest, whether enacted on stage, in public space, or across mediated platforms.

Protest in the performing arts is an aesthetic intervention rather than passive reflection. It does not merely depict social conditions but actively participates in their reconfiguration. By organising perception, mobilising affect, and facilitating collective engagement, performance transforms dissent into a structured practice that challenges authority and invites reconsideration of established norms. Recent scholarship affirms that aesthetic strategies are integral to political action, shaping how protest is perceived, experienced, and sustained within contemporary societies (McGarry et al., 2020; Thompson, 2009). In this regard, the performing arts function as a site where protest acquires form, meaning, and force. Their significance lies not only in their capacity to represent dissent but in their ability to produce it as a shared and transformative experience, thereby reinforcing the position of performance as a central medium through which societies interrogate power and negotiate change.

Historical and Contemporary Forms of Protest Performance

Protest performance has developed across historical periods as a cultural answer to domination, social injury, state violence, racial exclusion, economic deprivation, and failed public authority. In traditional societies, protest was not always separated from ritual, festival, satire, praise, dirge, masquerade, dance, or communal song. It appeared within public forms through which communities corrected misconduct, ridiculed oppressive figures, mourned collective injury, and demanded moral accountability. In this sense, performance did not merely entertain; it served as a social instrument through which the community judged power, preserved memory, and voiced discontent. Traditional African performance practices provide strong examples of this relationship between art and resistance. Masquerade, oral poetry, festival drama, praise-singing, abuse poetry, drumming, and communal dance have often functioned as indirect but effective means of public correction. Their force lies in their collective nature. They allow grievances to be staged without reducing protest to direct confrontation alone. Karin Barber's (2018) study of African popular culture shows that African expressive forms frequently operate as public commentary, carrying social criticism through accessible and communal media. This means that African protest performance is not always organised as formal opposition; it may appear as ridicule, coded language, parody, lamentation, or ritualised exposure of abuse.

Modern theatre inherits this tradition but places it within more formal dramatic structures. Theatre activism uses plot, character, conflict, dialogue, music, stage image, and audience contact to expose public disorder. In colonial and postcolonial societies, theatre became a powerful site for confronting imperial domination, racial oppression, class exploitation, dictatorship, and state corruption. The value of theatre as protest lies in its ability to convert public pain into shared dramatic experience. A stage production gathers bodies in one space, presents social injury through human action, and allows the audience to witness oppression as something immediate, not distant. Theatre activism in Africa has repeatedly demonstrated this power. Ngũgĩ's community-based theatre practice in Kenya, for instance, showed how theatre could move beyond elite literary circulation into peasant and worker participation. His work emphasised that performance could become a means of political education, collective memory, and cultural recovery. In Nigeria, Hubert Ogunde's travelling theatre used music, satire, dance, and popular dramatic form to challenge colonial and postcolonial misrule. His protest plays, including *Strike and*

Hunger, Bread and Bullet, and *Yoruba Ronu*, show how modern Nigerian theatre transformed public grievance into popular performance. Recent scholarship on street theatre and the #EndSARS protests also confirms that Nigerian youths used public space, bodily assembly, comedy, music, and dramatic display as tools of activism during the 2020 demonstrations (Bamidele, 2026).

Music has also served as one of the most enduring media of protest. Its strength lies in rhythm, repetition, memorability, and mass circulation. Protest songs can travel more quickly than speeches because they are portable, emotional, and easily repeated. Reggae, Afrobeat, hip-hop, gospel-inflected protest songs, labour songs, and freedom chants have all functioned as sonic weapons against oppression. Reggae developed from the struggles of dispossessed black communities in Jamaica and became a global idiom of resistance through the works of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Burning Spear, and later Lucky Dube. Its use of bass rhythm, repetition, Rastafarian symbolism, and anti-Babylon rhetoric made it a musical language of defiance. Recent scholarship on protest music affirms that music remains central to social movements because it strengthens collective identity, sustains morale, and turns political demands into memorable public sound (Eyerman, 2002; Jolaosho, 2019; Manabe & Drott, 2025). Afrobeat, especially through Fela Anikulapo Kuti, offers a major African model of musical protest. Fela's music combined satire, Yoruba-inflected speech, jazz, highlife, call-and-response, pidgin English, dance, and extended instrumental performance. His songs were not only musical compositions but public indictments of military brutality, corruption, neocolonial exploitation, religious hypocrisy, and elite betrayal. Balogun (2023) argues that Fela's Afrobeat should be read as a philosophy of nonviolent resistance, shaped by human rights abuse and governmental irresponsibility in postcolonial Nigeria. This makes Afrobeat more than entertainment; it becomes a civic performance in which music, speech, body, and audience response operate together as political criticism.

Contemporary Nigerian music continues this tradition in altered forms. Hip-hop, Afrobeats, street-pop, satire songs, and digital music performances now participate in public criticism. Studies of Nigerian protest songs show that musicians continue to use lyrics to confront poor governance, police brutality, poverty, hunger, and youth disillusionment (Egere, 2025). Jemiluyi and Tajudeen's (2025) study of Nasboi's "Hunger Games" presents the song as a protest against economic hardship and post-election frustration in Nigeria's present political climate, thereby linking popular music to current public anger. These examples show that musical protest has not disappeared; it has changed its language, platforms, rhythm, and audience. The transition from stage-based and street-based protest to digital protest marks one of the most significant developments in contemporary performance. In the digital age, protest is no longer limited to theatre buildings, public squares, or concert venues. It now circulates through livestreams, hashtags, short videos, memes, online concerts, spoken-word clips, digital posters, and hybrid performances. Social media platforms have turned performance into a mobile and repeatable form. A chant, gesture, image, or song can be recorded, shared, remixed, and re-circulated across national boundaries. This has changed the scale and speed of protest performance.

The #EndSARS movement is a major Nigerian example of this transition. It joined street assembly with digital circulation, using slogans, music, visual images, spoken-word performance, comedy, celebrity participation, and online documentation. Gabriel and Afolabi's (2025) study of #EndSARS examines the fusion of art and activism through digital activism, showing how creative and performative expressions amplified the movement and built solidarity. Ogunleye and Kwaghkondo (2026) argue that X/Twitter played a major role in mass mobilisation during #EndSARS, especially in circulating outrage, coordinating participation, and sustaining collective identity. These studies demonstrate that contemporary protest performance is increasingly mediated, yet still depends on recognisable artistic devices: image, sound, rhythm, repetition, staging, and public address. This digital expansion is not limited to Nigeria. Muya and Onyinge's (2026) study on Kenya's 2024 Gen Z anti-tax protests shows how performative art and social media shaped political activism, especially through memes, satire, public enactments, and online circulation. Such examples indicate that contemporary protest performance has become hybrid. It moves between street and screen, body and image, live action and digital replay. The protester may now be performer, witness, recorder, distributor, and commentator at the same time.

However, this shift also raises new questions. Digital protest increases visibility, but it can also expose activists to surveillance, misinformation, state monitoring, and platform control. It can intensify mobilisation, but it may also shorten public attention. It can preserve protest memory, but it may also convert resistance into spectacle.

For this reason, mediated protest should not be celebrated without scrutiny. Its power lies in circulation, but its vulnerability also lies there. Historically and contemporarily, protest performance therefore moves across several forms: traditional African expressive practices, modern theatre activism, reggae, Afrobeat, protest songs, street theatre, digital activism, and hybrid performance. What connects these forms is their refusal to leave injustice unnamed. They transform grievance into public experience and convert social pain into shared cultural action. The historical forms relied on communal presence, song, satire, ritual, and bodily gathering; contemporary forms add digital circulation, platform visibility, and transnational participation. Together, they show that protest performance remains one of the most adaptable instruments through which societies confront power, mourn injury, demand justice, and imagine change.

Critique of Protest Culture in the Performing Arts

Protest performance is a powerful instrument of social questioning, but its force must not be treated as automatic. Its first major limitation is co-option. Once a protest enters public circulation, its songs, slogans, gestures, costumes, images, and symbols may be absorbed by the same systems it opposes. State institutions, political parties, cultural agencies, corporate brands, and media organisations may detach protest materials from the conditions that produced them and repackage them as heritage, entertainment, reconciliation, or public relations. Gabriel and Afolabi's (2025) study of Nigeria's Sòrò-Sókè movement shows that digital activism can amplify resistance, however, the visibility that strengthens protest also exposes its symbols to appropriation and political neutralisation. Reggae provides a useful illustration of this tension. It is obvious that with a music of such power, protests can literally move mountains. Some reggae songs project protest, defiance and revolutionary content. The messages are so clear that they need no further analysis.

Bob Marley's "Babylon," "Get Up Stand Up," and "War" are major protest songs because they convert racial injustice, state domination, and the demand for human dignity into memorable musical address. In "Babylon," Marley rejects imposed identity and domination.

Babylon

We refuse to be
What you wanted us to be
We are what we are
That's the way
It's going to be...
We've been trodding on your wine press
Much too long
And we've been taken for granted
Much too long.... (Bob Marley, 1979)

In "Get Up Stand Up," the short command to "stand up" becomes a call to civic refusal. Marley, in this Reggae song, stirs the populace to fight for their rights, since they are now enlightened.

Get Up Stand Up

Get up stand up
stand up for your rights
Get up stand up
Don't give up the fight.....
You fool some people sometimes
But you can't fool all the people
All the time
So now we see the light
We gonna stand up for our rights.... (Bob Marley & Peter Tosh, 1973)

In "War," adapted from Haile Selassie's 1963 United Nations speech, the song links racial hierarchy, unequal citizenship, and colonial violence to global disorder.

War

Until the philosophy
Which holds one race superior
And another
Inferior

Is finally
And permanently
Discredited
And abandoned
Well everywhere is war
News of war

That until there are no longer
First class and second class citizens
Of any nation
It's a war
Until the colour of a man's skin
Is of no more significance
Than the colour of his eyes
It's a war

That until the basic human rights
Are equally guaranteed to all
Without regard to race
That until that day
The dreams of lasting peace
World citizenship
And the rules of international morality
Will remain but a fleeting illusion
To be pursued, but never attained

And until the ignoble and unhappy regime
That now holds our brothers
In Angola, in Mozambique, South Africa
In sub-human bondage
Have been toppled
Utterly destroyed
Until that day
The African continent will not know peace
We Africans will fight, if necessary
And we know we shall win
As we are confident in the victory
Of good over evil 2x (Bob Marley, 1976)

These protest songs have become work songs and demonstration anthems for protesters all over the world. Bob Marley's band was invited to Zimbabwe to play on the eve of that nation's independence in April 1980. Marley was a state guest during the independence celebrations because the Zimbabwean nationalists claimed that it was his music that heightened their motivation and strengthened their resolve, in their battle trenches during the war for independence. It is also on record that Rastafarians took an active part in the people's revolution of Grenada of March 13, 1979 in which the government of Prime Minister Gairy was sacked in a revolution that was akin to the storming of the Bastille in the French revolution of July 14, 1789.

These songs demonstrate how protest music can carry moral urgency across borders. Yet their later circulation through concerts, recordings, streaming platforms, merchandise, documentaries, and commercial culture also shows how radical music can be admired, consumed, and domesticated without necessarily sustaining the struggle it announces. A related problem is commodification. Protest performance may begin as civic dissent but later become a marketable product. Songs may be streamed, chants printed on shirts, images sold as posters, costumes turned into fashion, and protest gestures circulated as style. This does not mean circulation is useless; it often helps movements travel beyond their original locations. The danger begins when the market value of protest becomes more important than the injustice being challenged. McGarry et al. (2020) explain that protest aesthetics are formed through images, symbols, graffiti, art, and the choreography of public action, but these same elements become available for circulation beyond the movement's control. Aesthetic resistance may therefore be consumed as cultural display while the political demand remains unanswered. The third limitation concerns the gap between momentary affect and sustained transformation. Protest performance can produce sympathy, anger, courage, and temporary solidarity, but these effects do not necessarily become policy change, legal reform, or institutional accountability. A performance may unsettle spectators without altering structures of power. Earl, Maher, and Pan argue that repression now includes digital surveillance, tracking, content control, and other mechanisms that weaken mobilisation. Their argument shows that visibility alone does not guarantee political safety or success. A protest may be widely seen and still be contained.

There is also a tension between art and activism. Art often works through suggestion, symbolism, irony, and layered meaning. Activism often requires clarity, urgency, strategy, and direct demand. When protest performance becomes too didactic, it may lose artistic force; when it becomes too abstract, it may fail to communicate the urgency of the struggle. The artist must therefore negotiate between aesthetic freedom and civic responsibility. Hartmann, Manning, and Green (2022) show that public protest is always interpreted through competing social frames; the act does not control all meanings attached to it. The same applies to theatre, music, dance, and street performance. Institutional control and censorship further limit protest performance. The performing arts are often feared because they gather bodies, stir emotion, and produce shared response. A play, concert, procession, dance, or street performance may create a public atmosphere that the state cannot fully manage. This explains why protest performance is frequently monitored, banned, interrupted, defunded, or criminalised. In digital culture, control also appears through account suspension, algorithmic hiding, video removal, hashtag manipulation, surveillance, and online harassment.

Audience reception is another problem. Protest performance does not carry one fixed meaning. The same performance may be read as patriotic, rebellious, offensive, courageous, excessive, partisan, comic, or irrelevant. Reception depends on ideology, class, religion, ethnicity, gender, generation, and media framing. A song intended to awaken civic consciousness may be reduced to entertainment; a symbolic gesture may be treated as disrespect; a performance against injustice may be reframed as disorder. Aristotle's observation, in *Peter's Quotations*, that "civil confusions often spring from trifles but may decide great issues", remains useful here because small symbolic actions can acquire enormous political weight (Peter, 1977, p. 452). The critique of protest culture must also recognise the danger of revolutionary reversal. Protest may challenge oppression, but successful dissent can later generate new forms of exclusion, authoritarianism, or moral rigidity. Barbara Tuchman's warning, in *Peter's Quotations*, that "every successful protest puts on in time the robes of the tyrant it has deposed" is instructive (Peter, 1977, p. 453). This however does not invalidate protest; it demands vigilance. Protest performance must not only attack visible injustice; it must also interrogate the ethics of the movement it serves. A protest that refuses self-criticism may reproduce the coercive habits of the authority it opposes.

The effectiveness of protest performance's value does not lie only in immediate policy victory. It may expose hidden violence, preserve public memory, create language for grief and anger, challenge silence, and strengthen civic awareness. Notwithstanding, It can be censored, commodified, misread, appropriated, or emptied of political content. Protest performance is therefore not a complete solution to injustice. It is a cultural force within a wider structure of struggle, and its power becomes meaningful when linked to organisation, education, legal pressure, ethical leadership, institutional reform, and sustained civic participation.

The discussion so far reveals that protest performance functions first as an instrument of social exposure. It brings concealed injustice into public visibility and gives form to conditions that official language may deny.

Through theatre, music, dance, street action, satire, digital art, and public assembly, protest performance converts private suffering into shared recognition. Studies on art activism affirm that creative practice can amplify marginalised voices and bring neglected experiences into public discussion (McGarry et al., 2020). Protest performance serves as a medium of memory preservation. It records injury not only through documents but through sound, gesture, image, movement, and public repetition. Songs, chants, dramatic scenes, costumes, murals, and digital clips become repositories of collective memory. In this sense, performance does not merely respond to crisis; it helps societies remember what power may wish to erase. Studies of digital activism and #EndSARS show how creative expressions preserved accounts of police brutality, grief, solidarity, and demand for justice (Bamidele, 2026). Protest performance operates as a tool for civic awareness. It can translate political issues into forms that are emotionally accessible and publicly intelligible. This is significant because many citizens may not engage long policy documents or formal speeches, but they may respond to a song, performance, image, dramatic scene, or public ritual. Bamidele argues that popular culture and digital media energised youth mobilisation through Afrobeats, dance routines, cultural symbols, and online participation.

Evidence of impact can be seen in how protest performance shapes consciousness and engagement. It can create solidarity, strengthen movement identity, and sustain public morale. Gabriel and Afolabi (2025) argue that digital activism amplified the movement's message and mobilised broad participation. Likewise, research on social media and mass mobilisation shows that X/Twitter shaped the tempo and texture of #EndSARS by aiding circulation, participation, and collective consciousness. The findings also reveal a dual nature. Protest performance has the capacity to challenge power, but it is also vulnerable to absorption into the structures it contests. Its images may be commercialised; its slogans may be appropriated; its digital traces may be surveilled; its message may be distorted; its audience may treat it as spectacle. This duality is central to any serious critique. Protest performance is neither powerless nor automatically transformative. Its force depends on context, organisation, reception, repetition, and the ability to move from symbolic exposure to sustained public action. Within contemporary socio-political conditions, protest performance remains highly relevant. Economic hardship, police violence, racial injustice, climate anxiety, gendered abuse, authoritarian governance, and youth unemployment continue to generate new forms of artistic dissent. Studies of protest tactics in South Africa, digital mobilisation in Nigeria, and performative activism in Kenya show that protest culture is expanding across street, stage, music, and digital media. The central finding, therefore, is that protest performance should be understood as a contested civic instrument. It exposes injustice, preserves memory, and mobilises awareness, but it must be linked to sustained social processes if it is to move beyond affective impact. Its strength lies in making injustice visible and felt; its weakness lies in the possibility that visibility may be mistaken for victory.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined protest culture in the performing arts as a form of artistic resistance. It establishes that protest performance transcends an artistic reaction to social disorder to a deliberate cultural practice through which members of the audience are mobilised to resist injustice, challenge authority, and stimulate civic consciousness. From traditional African expressive forms to modern theatre activism, reggae, Afrobeat, street performance, and digitally mediated protest, the performing arts have remained central to the public articulation of dissent. The study shows that protest performance derives its strength from embodiment, immediacy, sound, movement, spectacle, and audience participation. These elements enable it to reach audiences beyond the limits of written discourse. Through performance, social pain is made visible, public anger is organised, and suppressed voices gain presence. This explains why oppressive institutions often fear protest theatre, protest music, and other forms of resistant performance. However, the study also concludes that protest performance must be approached with caution. This is because it can be censored, commercialised, misread, appropriated, or reduced to spectacle. Visibility does not always produce justice, and emotional response does not always lead to reform. For protest performance to achieve lasting significance, it must be linked to sustained civic action, political education, institutional accountability, and collective organisation. The study has established that the performing arts should be understood as active instruments of social interrogation rather than passive reflections of society. Protest performance remains relevant in contemporary socio-political conditions because injustice, exclusion, state violence, economic hardship, and failed governance continue to demand artistic and civic response. The performing arts, therefore, remain vital to democratic renewal, ethical reflection, and the continuing struggle for a more just society.

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