

UNCHAINED MELODIES



ON MUSIC AND ACTIVISM

Throughout history, music has served as a vital tool for social change. From labor organizing and civil rights movements to anti-war resistance and global struggles for human rights, music has helped people name injustices, build solidarity, and sustain hope.

The quotes in this collection highlight music's power not as a quick solution, but as a steady force that accompanies collective action. Music does not replace organizing but strengthens it. These voices remind us that change is made by people working together over time, and that music helps us remember why the struggle matters, where we come from, and what we are fighting for.

Through my singing and acting and speaking, I want to make freedom ring. Maybe I can touch people's hearts better than I can their minds, with the common struggle of the common man.
— Paul Robeson

Music, as a cultural right, may aid in the promotion and protection of other human rights. It can help in the healing process, dismantling walls and boundaries, reconciliation, and education. Around the world, music is being used as a vehicle for social change and bringing communities together.
— Lia Peralta



Song is like the water that washes the stones, the wind that cleans us, like the fire which joins us together and it lives within us to make us better people.
— Victor Jara

Kids don't have a little brother working in the coal mine, they don't have a little sister coughing her lungs out in the looms of the big mill towns of the Northeast. Why? Because we organized; we broke the back of the sweatshops in this country; we have child labor laws. Those were not benevolent gifts from enlightened management. They were fought for, they were bled for, they were died for by working people, by people like us. Kids ought to know that. That's why I sing these songs. That's why I tell these stories, dammit. No root, no fruit!
— Utah Phillips



I think music has the power to transform people, and in doing so, it has the power to transform situations—some large and some small. I guess I don't like the expression "change the world" because it's just too massive a job to take on and it may lead to some kind of discouragement. Having really high expectations can be dangerous because it leads to feelings of exhaustion and frustration. I think it's important to not expect too much of yourself, or of the movement, or of the march. Be realistic about what the possibilities are to come out of each step.
— Joan Baez

A BIT ABOUT THE VOICES, REFERENCES

- Joan Baez is a folk singer and activist whose music has been closely tied to the civil rights movement, anti-war activism, and social justice causes. Interview, <https://www.oprah.com/spirit/how-sweet-the-sound-joan-baez/2>
- Lia Peralta is a human rights advocate and writer who focuses on music as a tool for community healing and social change. <https://www.savethemusic.org/blog/how-does-music-affect-society/>
- Victor Jara was a Chilean singer, songwriter, and theater director whose music became a powerful voice for working-class struggle and political resistance. <https://elsuenoexiste.wordpress.com/victor-jara/about-victor/>
- Utah Phillips was a labor organizer, storyteller, and folk musician who preserved and performed songs rooted in labor history and working class movements. <https://www.betterworld.net/quotes/music-quotes.htm>
- Paul Robeson was a singer, actor, and civil rights activist who used his artistic platform to challenge racism and colonialism. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/paul-roberson-quotes-on-art-and-protest/21208/>

REFLECTION

This is what some people say music can do for activism, have you ever felt moved by music?

