

FORE 63333 | Final Assignment

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Resistance Grooves

The Future of Music Activism

"Resistance Grooves" captures the evolving landscape of activist musicians navigating the complex dance between creativity, distribution, and suppression. From the first strum of resistance to the echoes of censorship, each wave reveals the hidden grooves of struggle, survival, and song.

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Framing



I chose to explore the future of music activism because I believe music has historically played, and continues to play, a unique and potent role in shaping social and political movements. Music has the power to cross borders, dismantle barriers, emotionally engage audiences, and articulate demands for change in ways that traditional political discourse often cannot. Given the accelerating technological, political, and economic shifts in our world, I was curious about how the mechanisms of music activism are evolving, and how musicians who seek to inspire resistance and social transformation might navigate emerging opportunities and threats.



Today, music activism faces:

- Suppression
- Economic instability
- Platform risk
- Cultural fragmentation
- Commercial co-option
- Emerging tech-powered opportunities for new forms of resistance and reach

By mapping the actors and relationships, it became clear to me that music activism is not just an individual effort but a complex, adaptive system that is vulnerable to disruption but also rich with creative resilience. Exploring this system helps anticipate how future activism strategies might evolve, and how musicians might sustain their voices under increasingly chaotic and contested conditions.



History and Current Conditions, Current State of Play ▶



Humans have likely used music to express resistance, grief, and solidarity since prehistoric times, long before we had written records. For as long as humans have had both drums and grievances, music and protests have been intertwined for millennia. Music activism has shaped social movements for centuries, using songs to inspire change, challenge injustice, and unite people across generations. Through every era of struggle, music has carried the hopes, grief, and resistance of those fighting for a better world.

Era	Highlights
Prehistoric–Ancient Times	One of the earliest known instances of organized labor resistance, most likely accompanied by protest chants, occurred in Ancient Egypt, Deir el-Medina workers' strike, c. 1150 BCE, reign of Ramses III.
Early Post-Ancient Era (c. 500–1000 CE)	Oral folk protest traditions; Celtic bardic songs mourning conquest and loss; early Slavic and Norse protest ballads
Classical–Medieval Era (1000–1400s)	Greek lyrical protests (e.g., Aristophanes); medieval troubadours criticizing kings and clergy; rise of oral-to-written protest ballads
Renaissance–Early Modern Era (1400s–1600s)	Protestant Reformation songs (Martin Luther hymns), satirical ballads against kings and clergy, peasant revolt songs, printed broadside ballads
18th–19th Century	Slave spirituals with coded resistance messages (e.g., "Go Down Moses"), revolutionary songs (e.g., "La Marseillaise"), abolitionist songs
Early 20th Century	Labor movement songs (e.g., Joe Hill, "Solidarity Forever"), anti-war anthems from World War I
1950s–1970s	Civil Rights music (e.g., "We Shall Overcome"), anti-Vietnam War songs (e.g., "Fortunate Son"), global liberation movements (e.g., South African anti-apartheid songs, nueva canción in Latin America)
1980s–1990s	Benefit concerts (e.g., Live Aid, Sun City), punk activism (e.g., Dead Kennedys), early hip hop activism (e.g., Public Enemy), rise of corporate co-option
2000s–2010s	DIY digital protest music (e.g., Occupy anthems), Black Lives Matter music movements (e.g., Kendrick Lamar's "Alright"), Arab Spring musical activism
2020s–Present	Streaming activism (e.g., protest playlists), blockchain and NFT experiments for activist art, climate protest music, global waves of activism, algorithmic censorship challenges

Music Activism Ecosystem



Core Energy (Musicians Only). At the center of the music activism ecosystem are **musicians** themselves. Musicians generate the initial energy (e.g., the art, the message, the emotional spark) that fuels broader movements for change. Without musicians, none of the surrounding activism system can function. They act as a creative catalysts.

Immediate Support Activation. Musicians don't stand alone. **Activists, social movements, NGOs, fans and communities, funders, and legal advocates** form a powerful inner ring of support (green circles). These actors protect musicians, amplify their message, fund their work, and guide strategic action. This first layer transforms personal artistic expression into organized collective action.

Distribution and Amplification. Next, the movement energy spreads outward through distribution platforms and amplifiers. **Traditional platforms, Underground platforms, blockchain spaces, underground funding channels, academic and cultural institutions, and both independent and mainstream media** carry activist music and financial support to larger audiences (blue circles). These amplifiers shape how far and how fast activist messages travel. But, they also introduce new tensions between freedom and control.

Suppressors and Risks. At the outer edge, the ecosystem encounters suppressors and risks. **Governments, corporate censors, and police and security forces** (red circles) attempt to restrict activist music, censor distribution, and suppress mobilization. Suppression pressure flows inward threatening the core, but often unintentionally fueling even greater resistance among musicians and movements.

Contextual Forces and Full Dynamics. Finally, we zoom out to see the full dynamics of the system. **Public opinion, technological evolution, legislation, global events and crises, economic conditions, and platform governance and algorithms** (purple circles), form the environmental context, shifting constantly and unpredictably. These forces reshape who wins and who struggles in the music activism ecosystem. The system is never static. It pulses, adapts, and transforms over time much like music itself.

Key Issues in Music Activism Today



1. Co-option and Commercialization

- Activist music is often co-opted by corporations for branding ("woke-washing") without real support for causes.
- Meaning is diluted when protest music becomes a commodity for marketing.
- Activists risk losing authenticity and control over their narratives.

Result = True activist energy can be drained or redirected by corporate interests.

2. Censorship and Suppression

- Governments and corporations censor activist musicians directly (e.g., banning songs, canceling performances).
- Platform algorithms shadowban or deprioritize politically charged music.
- Activists increasingly face surveillance, criminalization, and harassment.

Result = Harder to reach audiences and to survive as an activist artist.

3. Safety, Security, and Risk for Musicians

- Musicians face real physical risks: arrests, violence, threats, doxing.
- Digital threats (hacking, harassment, doxxing) are rising for outspoken artists.
- Lack of legal protection for artist-activists in many regions.

Result = Need for new support structures, digital security practices, and solidarity networks.

4. Platform Dependency and Algorithmic Bias

- Musicians depend heavily on corporate-owned platforms (Spotify, YouTube, Instagram) that can silence or restrict them without transparency.
- Algorithmic content moderation can unintentionally (or intentionally) marginalize activist content.
- Newer platforms (blockchain, decentralized media) offer hope but are still risky, small, or unstable.

Result = Fragile access to audiences, vulnerable to platform politics.

5. Economic Instability and Funding Challenges

- Activist musicians often lack access to mainstream funding (label deals, sponsorships) because of political risk.
- Crowdfunding (Patreon, Kickstarter) and underground crypto-based funding are growing, but not always stable.
- Global economic crises (e.g., pandemic aftermath, inflation) worsen survival conditions.

Result = Financial survival is a constant battle and can mute activism if artists must self-censor to survive.

6. Fragmentation and Audience Polarization

- Increasing political polarization globally means activist musicians are often preaching to smaller, fragmented audiences.
- Cultural fragmentation can make building mass movements harder.
- Echo chambers and filter bubbles trap activist music in limited spheres.

Result = Harder to scale activist influence without crossing ideological divides.

7. Opportunities through New Technologies

- Blockchain, NFTs, and decentralized streaming offer potential freedom from censorship and new funding models.
- AI tools can create, distribute, and analyze activist content more widely.
- Alternative platforms (e.g., Audius, decentralized radio) are growing.

Result = Tech disruption is both a threat **and** a huge opportunity if activists can innovate.

Issue structure and dynamics

This table shows how music activism faces systemic challenges linked to familiar systems archetypes. Co-option and commercialization mirror a **Tragedy of the Commons**, suggesting a leverage point in creating protected spaces or agreements that preserve activist intent. Censorship, suppression, and personal risk to musicians reflect **Shifting the Burden**, where deep structural reforms rather than targeting individual voices are needed. Platform dependence and algorithmic bias represent **Fixes That Fail**, highlighting the need to develop alternative distribution networks and advocate for platform accountability. Economic instability reflects **Growth and Underinvestment**, pointing toward new funding models and resilient infrastructures for activist artists. Fragmentation and polarization align with **Drifting Goals and Success to the Successful**, suggesting that intentional community-building and narrative coherence are crucial. New technologies offer fresh opportunities, emphasizing the importance of foresight and adaptive innovation in sustaining the future of music activism. However, these opportunities show **Limits to Success**.

Issue	Archetype	Case Studies
1. Co-Option & Commercialization	Tragedy of the Commons	- Public Enemy, USA - Macklemore & Jamila Woods, USA
2. Censorship & Suppression	Shifting the Burden	- Mahsa Amini Protests, Iran - Anti-War Protests, Russia
3. Safety, Security & Risk of Musicians	- Shifting the Burden - Fixes That Fail	- Pussy Riot, Russia - Myanmar, Burma Post-Coup Crackdown - Belarus 2020 Protests - Cuba's San Isidro Movement
4. Platform Dependence & Algorithmic Bias	Fixes That Fail	- Black Lives Matter - Chilean Feminist Rap Collective
5. Economic Instability & Funding Challenges	Growth and Underinvestment	- Public Enemy, USA - Bob Marley, Jamaica
6. Fragmentation & Audience Polarization	- Drifting Goals - Success to the Successful	- The Dixie Chicks, USA - Little Nas X, USA - Black Lives Matter, USA - Climate Music Movement, USA
7. Opportunities Through New Technologies	Limits to Success	- Iran's Women, Life, Freedom Movement - Cuba's San Isidro Movement

1. CO-OPTION AND COMMERCIALIZATION - *Tragedy Of The Commons*

Commons = the authenticity and emotional power of a protest song | **A = Corporate Use** - financial gain | **B = Activist Use** - social change

Reinforcing Loop 1 (R1) - Corporations

The more corporations are financially incentivized to promote a protest song, the more they utilize it commercially. The more corporations promote, play and sell a protest song, the more financial gains from the song.

Reinforcing Loop 2 (R2) - Activists

The more activists are motivated by a protest song, the more they employ it to drive social change. The more the song drives social change, the more activists are motivated to use it.

Reinforcing Loop 3 (R3) - Corporations' Use and Diminishing Returns

The more corporations sell or promote a protest song, the higher the total activity of the song. The more activity causes saturation and lessens the emotional impact and authenticity, reducing gains use for both corporations and activists. In response, corporations intensify their use of the protest song, perpetuating a cycle of diminishing returns.

Why? As companies overuse a protest song, audiences become desensitized, weakening its impact. In response, companies escalate usage in larger campaigns, further diluting its effectiveness and fueling a cycle of diminishing returns.

Reinforcing Loop 4 (R4): Activists' Use and Diminishing Returns

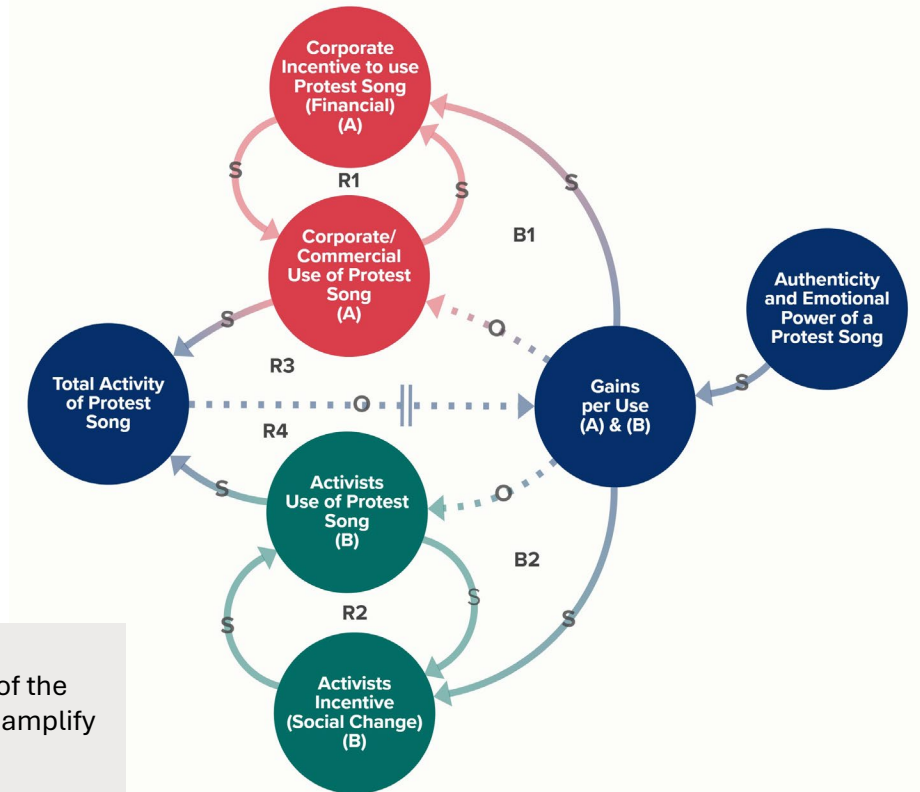
Similarly, the more activist use a protest, the more total activity of the song. This contributes to the overall saturation of the song and lessens the gains per use for both activists and corporations. Activists, noticing the reduced impact, further amplify their use of the song, reinforcing the cycle.

Why? Activists use protest music to inspire, but as overuse weakens its impact, they amplify it further, unintentionally diminishing its uniqueness and effectiveness in a cycle of reduced influence.

Balancing Loops (B1 & B2) - Authenticity and Usage

The greater the authenticity and emotional power of a protest song, the higher the gains per individual use. This increase incentivizes both corporations and activists to use the song more, leading to greater total activity. However, this heightened activity eventually reduces the gains per individual use.

This map emphasizes that thoughtful and deliberate use of protest music is essential to maintain its effectiveness. By being mindful of how and when these songs are employed, we can preserve their emotional impact and ensure they continue to serve as powerful tools for social change.



CASE STUDIES – TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS

"White Privilege II" by Macklemore, Ryan Lewis & Jamila Woods

Background: Released in 2016, this song addresses systemic racism and the complexities of white privilege within the music industry and society at large.

Corporate Overuse: Some corporations co-opted the song's themes for marketing campaigns, attempting to align their brands with social justice movements without enacting meaningful change.

Activist Overuse: The song was widely discussed and shared within activist circles, sometimes overshadowing voices from marginalized communities directly affected by the issues discussed.

Diminishing Returns: The song's message became diluted as it was appropriated for various agendas, reducing its effectiveness in sparking genuine dialogue about racial inequality.



Public Enemy
Burn Hollywood Burn
1990

"Burn Hollywood Burn" by Public Enemy

Background: Released in 1990, *Burn Hollywood Burn* is a protest song criticizing Hollywood's systemic racism, stereotyping of Black people, and lack of Black representation behind the scenes. It's a metaphorical call to dismantle exploitation in media.

Overuse by the Public: In 2025, during the Los Angeles wildfires, users on TikTok and Instagram paired fire footage with the song, misinterpreting it as literal rather than metaphorical. Chuck D publicly condemned the trend, clarifying its true meaning.

Overuse by Corporations: While no brands directly used the song, platforms like TikTok and YouTube amplified the trend through algorithms, indirectly commercializing it via viral engagement and monetization without regard for message integrity.

Overuse by Activists: There's no evidence of activist overuse. In fact, many supported Chuck D's effort to reclaim the song's meaning.

Diminishing Returns: The song's message was diluted by meme culture and viral misuse, confusing its intent and reducing its activist impact.



2. CENSORSHIP & SUPPRESSION

Shifting The Burden

Shifting the burden occurs when governments rely on censorship instead of addressing the root causes of social dissent and political reform. The side effect is that censorship drives activism underground, making resistance more creative, widespread, and difficult to control.



Symptomatic Solution = **Censorship**

Problem Symptom = **Resistance**

Fundamental Solution Ignored = **Political Reform**

B1 - Activist Adaptation Loop (Problem Symptom & Symptomatic Solution)

Problem Symptom: The more music activists resist censorship and distribute protest music, the more governments enforce censorship to limit activist reach.

Symptomatic Solution: The more governments enforce censorship to limit activist reach, the less activists can resist censorship diminishing their reach through mainstream platforms.

B2 - Government Censorship Loop (Problem Symptom & Fundamental Solution Ignored)

Problem Symptom: The less activists can resist censorship and distribute their music, the less governments feel pressured to implement political reforms.

Fundamental Solution Ignored: The less governments feel pressured to implement political reforms, the more activist resistance grows over time.

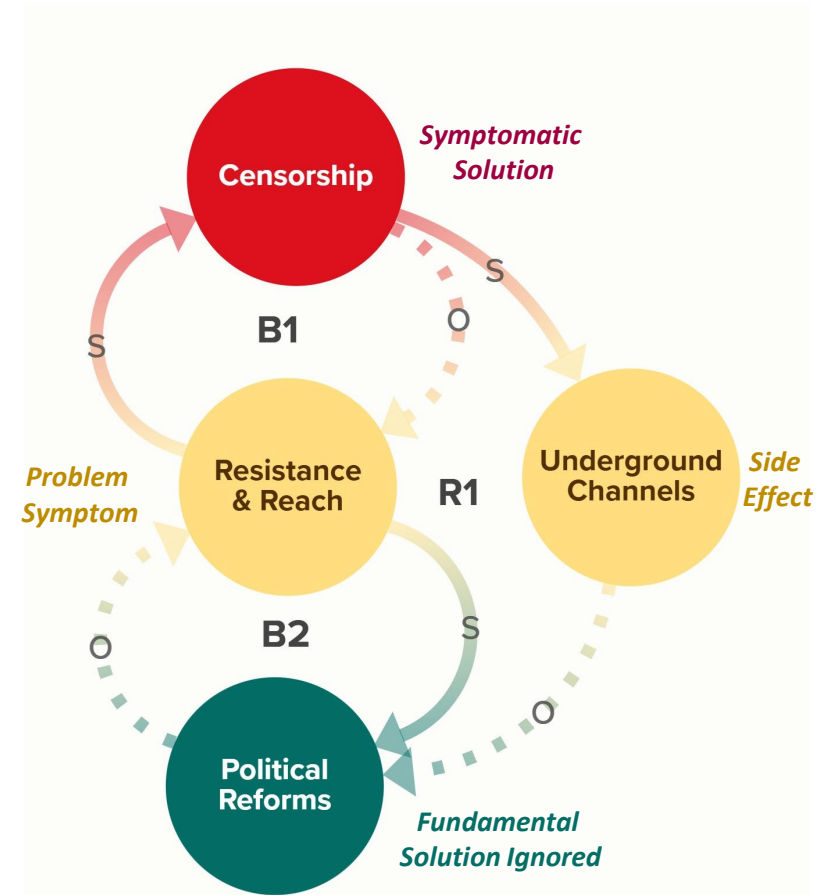
R1 - Side Effect (Underground Networks & Growing Resistance)

Symptomatic Solution: The more governments censor protest music, the more activists develop new underground distribution channels.

Side Effect: The more activists develop new distribution channels, the less governments feel the need to address political reform because they see underground channels as less of a threat to their authority and an acceptable level of containment of protest music.

Fundamental Solution Ignored: The less governments address political reform, the more activist resist and their underground reach grows even stronger.

Problem Symptom: The more activist resistance and underground reach grows stronger, the more governments escalate censorship, reinforcing the cycle.





CASE STUDIES - CENSORSHIP

Iran's Crackdown on Women's Rights Protest Music (2022–Present, Mahsa Amini Protests)

Symptomatic Solution: Iranian government blocks internet access, censors music and videos related to Mahsa Amini's death and women's rights protests.

Fundamental Solution Ignored: Failing to reform laws on women's rights, political freedoms, and policing practices.

Side Effect:

- Protest songs like *Baraye* by Shervin Hajipour spread globally, winning a Grammy ("Best Song for Social Change").
- Iranian underground musicians and poets gain global visibility, making censorship increasingly ineffective outside Iran.

Result: The more censorship occurs, the more international solidarity grows, putting external pressure on the Iranian regime.

Russia's Crackdown on Anti-War Messaging (2022–Present)

Symptomatic Solution: After invading Ukraine, Russia criminalized calling the conflict a "war," shut down independent media, and banned platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

Fundamental Solution Ignored: Addressing internal public opposition to the war, dissatisfaction with governance, and calls for political accountability.

Side Effect:

- Explosion of VPN use across Russia (millions of users), rapid migration to encrypted apps, samizdat (self-publishing underground newsletters) revival.
- Underground cultural resistance grows. Musicians, writers, and artists subtly embed anti-war messages in coded forms.

Result: Instead of silencing opposition, censorship drives it underground, radicalizing parts of society and increasing distrust in state media.

3. SAFETY, SECURITY, AND RISKS FOR MUSICIANS

Shifting The Burden

Balancing Loop 1 (B1)

The more musicians experience "Rising Physical and Digital Risks" (e.g. threats like arrest, violence, harassment, hacking, and doxxing), the more they feel pressure for immediate action, which means the more musicians respond by relying on "Individual Self-Protection Strategies" (e.g. self-censorship, stronger passwords, shifting to safer platforms, or hiding their activism). At first, this seems to reduce immediate risk. However, these actions are symptomatic solutions. They manage the symptoms without addressing why the system is dangerous for musicians in the first place.

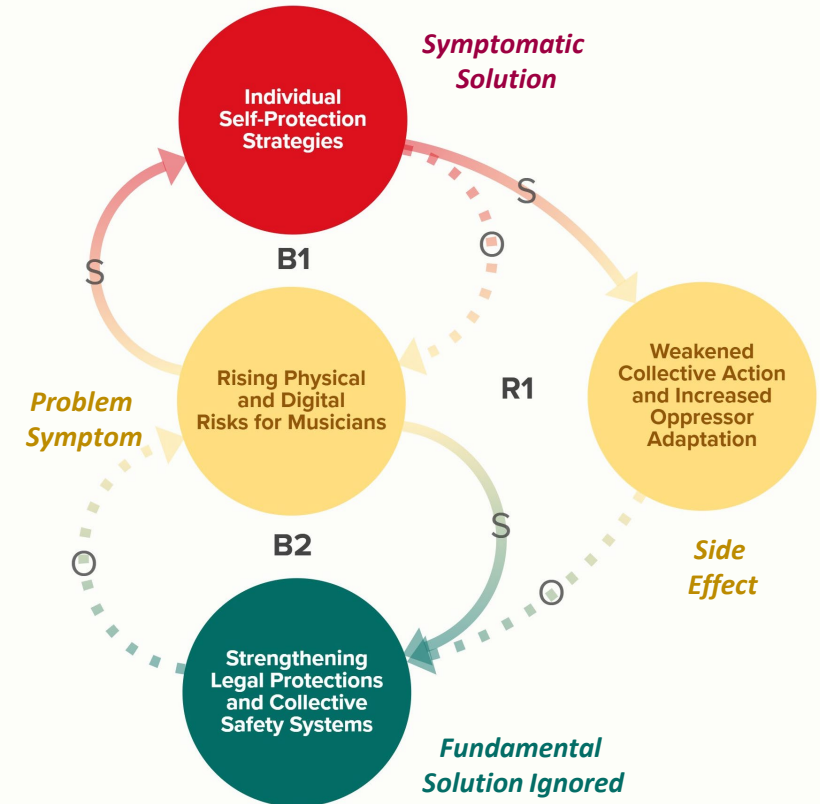
Balancing Loop 2 (B2)

The more musicians also experience "Rising Physical and Digital Risks," rather than only reacting with quick fixes, some musicians and allies choose to invest in structural change by focusing on more "Strengthening of Legal Protections and Collective Safety Systems" (e.g., building Advocacy campaigns for artist rights, new laws that protect freedom of expression, cross-border solidarity networks, emergency legal and digital support systems. As these fundamental solutions are strengthened, "Rising Physical and Digital Risks" decrease over time. The result is 1) musicians are better protected legally and socially, 2) harassment and violence carry greater consequences for perpetrators, and 3) music communities grow stronger and more resilient. With lower risk, musicians can act more freely and collaborate more effectively, which in turn makes it easier to further strengthen "Legal Protections and Collective Safety Systems." This creates a virtuous cycle where each investment in structural solutions makes the environment safer, enabling even more collective action and freedom.

Reinforcing Loop 1 (R1)

The more musicians use individual self protection strategies, the more unintended consequences which are "Weakened Collective Action and Increased Oppressor Adaptation" (e.g., musicians become isolated from one another. Movements lose momentum and public attention fades. Oppressors adapt and escalate their tactics because they face less organized resistance.)

The more "Weakened Collective Action and Increased Oppressor Adaptation," the less attention on "Strengthening Legal Protections and Collective Safety Systems." The Less Strengthening Legal Practices and Collective Safety Systems, the more "Rising and Digital Risks for Musicians." As collective action weakens and oppressors grow stronger, the "Rising Physical and Digital Risks for Musicians" actually increase over time. This renewed rise in risk creates even more pressure for Immediate Action, pushing musicians into even more reliance on "Individual Self-Protection Strategies." This forms a vicious cycle that traps musicians in constant reactive self-defense, while the broader conditions worsen.





CASE STUDIES – SAFETY & SECURITY

Russian Punk Band Pussy Riot

BI – Self Protection Strategies: After their 2012 performance at a Moscow cathedral, Pussy Riot members were arrested and imprisoned. This prompted many Russian musicians to retreat from visible protest.

RI – Oppressor Adaptation: The Russian government increasingly cracked down on music-based dissent by implementing broader anti-extremism laws and platform surveillance showing the adaptive response of authoritarian regimes.

B2 - Structural Shift Attempt: The group and allies used global visibility to establish long-term safety mechanisms including legal defense networks, EU-based exile funds, public education on protest rights in Russia. While limited inside Russia, these international protections helped sustain activism from abroad and increased global awareness of musician repression.

Myanmar (Burma) Post-Coup Crackdown on Protest Musicians (2021–Present)

B1 - Individual Self-Protection Strategies: After the 2021 military coup, artists like rapper *Byuhar* and performance group *Rap Against Junta* became targets for protest songs critical of the regime. Musicians began self-censoring or fleeing the country.

R1 - Oppressor Adaptation Loop: Meanwhile, some artists collaborated with international organizations to call for legal and human rights protection. However, the military adapted quickly by blocking platforms, increasing digital surveillance, and issuing arrest warrants.

B2 - Structural Shift Attempt: Efforts by international human rights organizations to document abuses and press for sanctions against the junta represent attempts to shift toward long-term solutions, though enforcement remains limited.

3. SAFETY, SECURITY, AND RISKS FOR MUSICIANS

Fixes That Fail - Underground Platforms And Activist Musician Safety

Blockchain and underground digital platforms are becoming crucial shelters and weapons in the evolving battle ground of music activism, enabling resistance, resilience, reach, and new forms of funding outside traditional systems.

Balancing Loop 1 (B1)

- The more activist musicians are vulnerable to censorship on traditional platforms, the more they adopt underground platforms like blockchain, crypto, and NFTs for distribution and funding.
- The more musicians adopt underground platforms, the less vulnerable they are to censorship on traditional platforms and they are able to solicit funding.

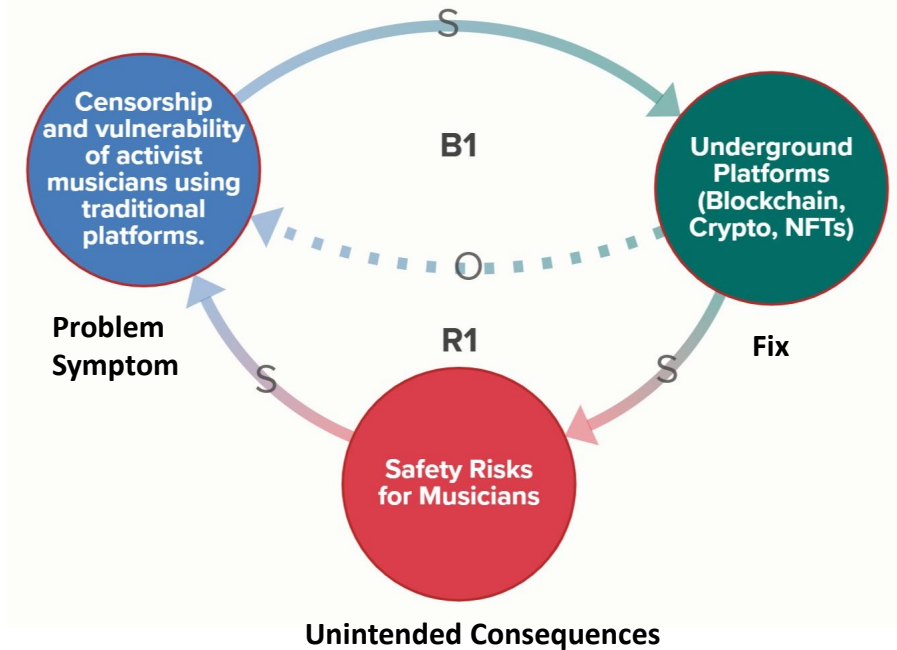
Reinforcing Loop 1 (R1)

- The more activist musicians adopt underground platforms, the more safety risks they face along with their donors (due to public exposure, surveillance, traceability).
- The more safety risks they face, the more vulnerable they become to government crackdowns.
- The more vulnerable they are to crackdowns, the more they seek to adopt underground platforms.

In seeking freedom through underground platforms, activist musicians risk building new chains of vulnerability, locking themselves and their donors into a cycle of exposure and suppression. Blockchain offers freedom, but permanence without protection becomes a trap.

Why? Musicians use blockchain, NFT and crypto to bypass censorship and secure distribution and funding. However, blockchain records are permanent and public which means governments or hostile actors can track activists over time. Safety risks for musicians actually increases because their identity or activist actions are now irreversible and transparent.

Strategic Lesson: Every tech "fix" (blockchain, NFTs) needs parallel planning for privacy, anonymity, and exit strategies.



CASE STUDIES - UNDERGROUND PLATFORMS AND ACTIVIST MUSICIAN RISKS

Belarus 2020 Protests: Underground Musicians and Crypto Fundraising

Context

- After the rigged 2020 presidential election in Belarus, a huge wave of protests emerged.
- Music was *central* — protest anthems and flash mobs singing banned songs were common.
- Artists and protest groups used crypto (Bitcoin, Ethereum) for funding because banks were weaponized against them.

Unintended Consequences

- Blockchain wallets used for fundraising were public and traceable.
- The authoritarian regime employed forensics tools to track activists through blockchain metadata.
- Arrests of musicians, including the bands NizKiz and Tor, and activist funders followed.



Cuba's San Isidro Movement (2018–present)

Context

- Artists, rappers, and musicians (like Maykel Castillo and Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara) led resistance against censorship and authoritarianism.
- Some used blockchain-based platforms to share music, art, and raise international support.

Unintended Consequences

- Heavy government monitoring of internet connections plus any blockchain related activity tied to "subversive" artists.
- Artists were arrested partly based on digital activity linked to activist art funding.



4. PLATFORM DEPENDENCE & ALGORITHMIC BIAS

FIXES THAT FAIL

Short-term platform success traps activist music in long-term cycles of control and censorship. Activist musicians use major platforms to quickly reach audiences, temporarily easing access problems (balancing loop). However, platform dependence creates algorithmic bias and censorship, which worsens access over time and deepens reliance on the same platforms (reinforcing loop).

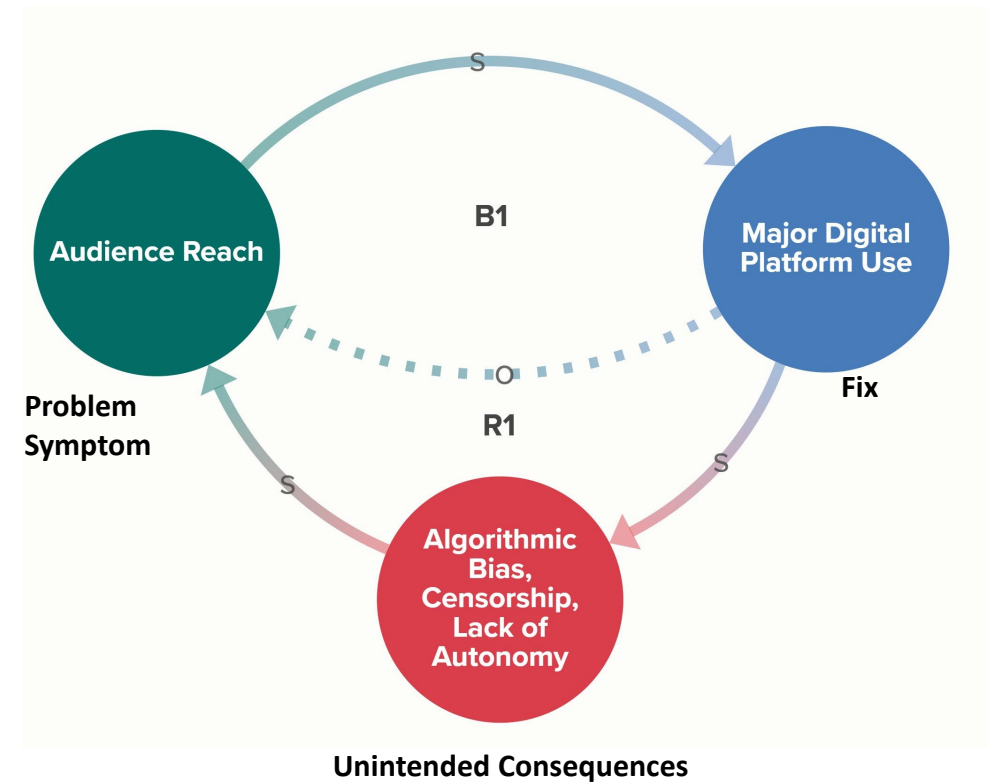
- Problem Symptom = Difficulty reaching audiences freely
- Quick Fix = Use major global digital platforms (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Spotify)
- Unintended Consequences = Algorithmic censorship, bias, geo-blocking, demonetization worsened the problem symptom

Balancing Loop (B1)

- The more activist musicians struggle to reach audiences (Problem Symptom), the more they turn to major platforms to amplify their message (Fix).
- The more they use major platforms, the less immediate difficulty they have reaching audiences (Problem Symptom reduced).

Reinforcing Loop (R1)

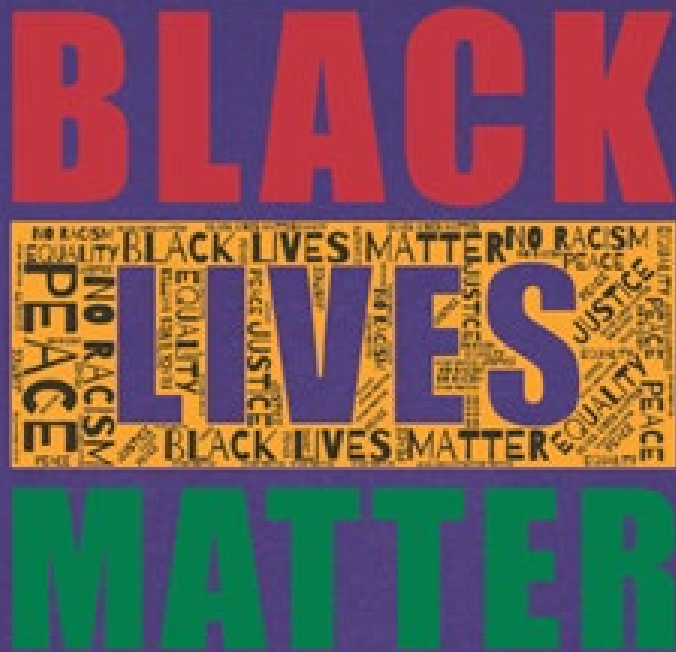
- The more activist musicians struggle to reach audiences (Problem Symptom), the more they turn to major platforms (Fix).
- The more they use major platforms, the more they suffer from algorithmic bias, shadowbanning, censorship, and loss of autonomy (Unintended Consequences).
- The more algorithmic bias and censorship occur, Activist music becomes hard to find, monetize and protect, the more they struggle to reach audiences again (Problem Symptom worsens).





TIME.COM

LASTESIS: The 100 Most Influential People of 2020



CASE STUDIES – PLATFORM DEPENDENCE & ALGORITHMIC BIAS

Feminist Rap Collectives on TikTok (e.g., Chilean feminist protest songs)

Problem Symptom: Feminist musicians struggled to mobilize public attention for protests against gender violence.

Fix: They used TikTok to go viral and some feminist protest songs gained millions of views.

Unintended Consequences: TikTok's moderation algorithms (partly automated, partly human) often flagged protest videos for "nudity" or "violence," even when content was symbolic (like protest costumes), removing or limiting videos. Activists found their most powerful protest performances increasingly censored or hidden, making it harder to organize or gain global visibility.

Black Lives Matter Protest Music on Instagram (2020)

Problem Symptom: Musicians and activists struggled to spread messages during mass protests.

Fix: They used Instagram Reels and Stories to reach huge audiences quickly.

Unintended Consequences: Instagram's algorithms deprioritized "political" content unless users paid for boosted posts, shadowbanned certain hashtags (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter), and sometimes removed activist content. Activists found it increasingly hard to organically reach audiences, forcing them to spend money on ads or abandon platforms worsening the original reach problem.

5. ECONOMIC INSTABILITY AND FUNDING CHALLENGES

Growth And Underinvestment In Music Activism

B1 - Investment Complacency

- The higher the expectations for the impact of protest music, the greater the awareness of the need to invest in infrastructure and support.
- The greater the awareness of investment gaps, the more funding and resources are allocated to music activism.
- Increased funding and infrastructure strengthen the capacity for activist musicians, creating a more sustainable ecosystem for activist music (including networks, platforms, and industry support).
- A more sustainable ecosystem enhances the reach and influence of activist music.
- However, as activist music gains visibility and influence, funders and audiences may assume it is already effective and well-supported. This perception reduces the perceived urgency to invest further, leading to complacency and potential stagnation.

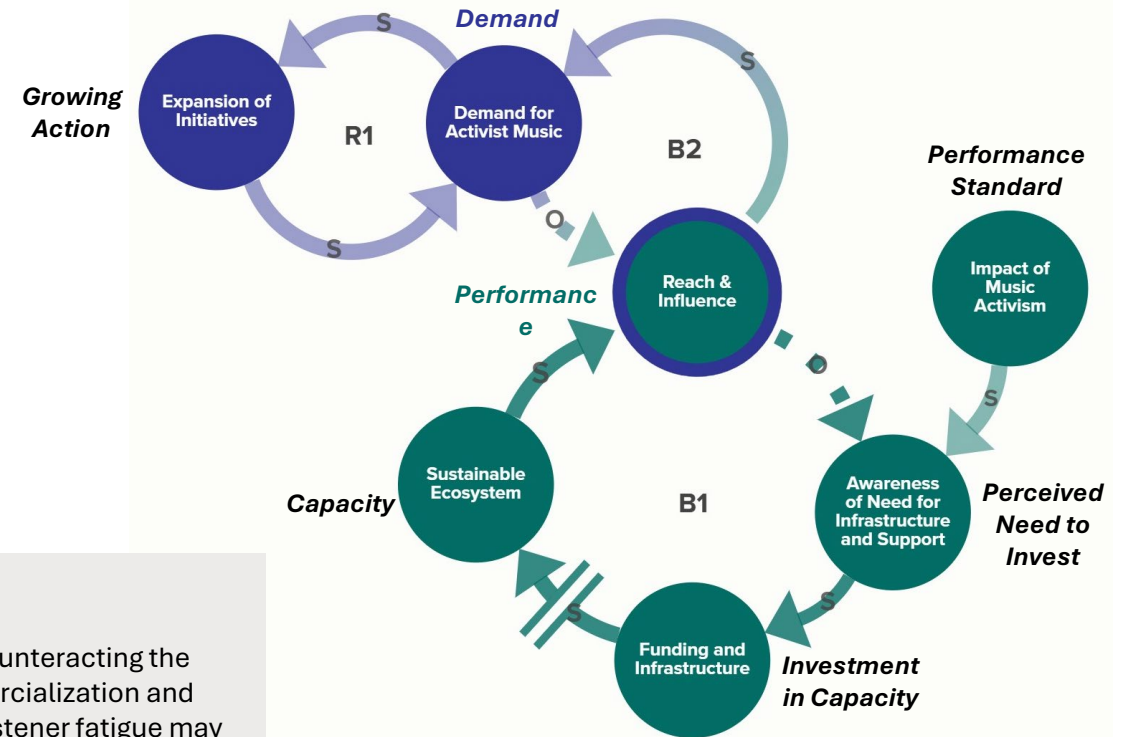
B2 - Commercialization & Oversaturation

- The greater the reach and influence of activist music, the higher the demand for it.
- As demand for activist music grows, the actual reach and influence of activist music decline, counteracting the initial growth in demand. **Why?** The industry seeks to commercialize it for mass appeal. Commercialization and oversaturation can dilute the messaging, causing activist music to lose its real-world impact. Listener fatigue may also set in, reducing engagement with activist messages.

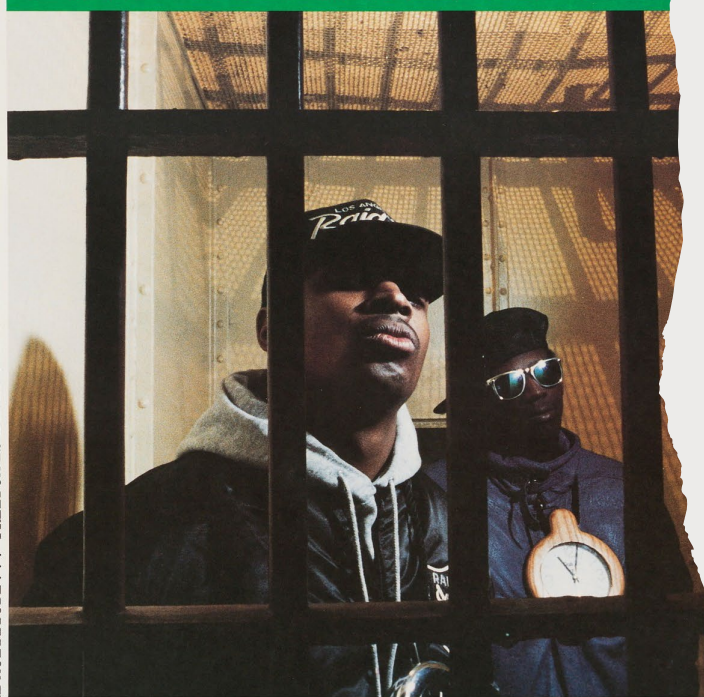
R1 - Activism Growth

- As demand for activist music increases, more artists and initiatives incorporate activism into their work. This leads to an expansion of activist music, with more artists, collectives, and platforms emerging.
- The greater the presence of activist music in the industry and culture, the more audiences seek it out, further increasing demand. This cycle reinforces itself, driving continued growth in activist music. A growing presence of activist music fuels even greater engagement, visibility, and expansion.

In the early stages, the reinforcing loop (R1) dominates, driving growth as more people seek out activist music. If this growth leads to authentic movement-building and sustainable investment, activist music can retain its impact. However, if commercialization overtakes authenticity, the balancing loop (B2) kicks in, leading to declining influence despite high demand. Whether activist music increases or declines depends on how well artists, communities, and platforms navigate commercialization and sustain real-world impact.



PUBLIC ENEMY



THE NEW ALBUM "IT TAKES A NATION OF MILLIONS TO HOLD
"DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE" B/W "PROPHETS OF RAGE" THE

Def
Jam
recordings

CASE STUDIES - ECONOMIC INSTABILITY AND FUNDING CHALLENGES

Public Enemy

R1 - Activism Growth

Early albums (*It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, *Fear of a Black Planet*) created a wave of politically conscious hip-hop.

B1 - Investment Complacency

After their initial breakthrough, major labels and audiences assumed political rap would self-sustain, leading to less label support for activism-heavy projects.

B2 - Commercialization & Oversaturation

Hip-hop commercialization in the 1990s shifted industry focus toward less politically charged material (e.g., gangsta rap or party rap), pushing Public Enemy's activism out of the spotlight.

Bob Marley

R1 - Activism Growth

Early on, Bob Marley's music sparked a massive movement. He amplified Pan-Africanism, anti-colonialism, and spirituality through reggae globally.

B1 - Investment Complacency

As he became an international superstar, many assumed Marley no longer needed activist support. "Bob Marley is the revolution" became the myth. Meanwhile, financial and political struggles behind the scenes continued.

B2 - Commercialization & Oversaturation

Global markets softened and sanitized Marley's image. Reggae became marketed as a "chill" lifestyle brand, stripping away much of its revolutionary urgency for international audiences.



6. FRAGMENTATION & AUDIENCE POLARIZATION

Success To The Successful

Allocation to Activism = The degree to which people, media, money, and institutions choose to support and amplify activist musicians instead of ignoring them or siding with backlash and boycotts.

Reinforcing Loop (R1)

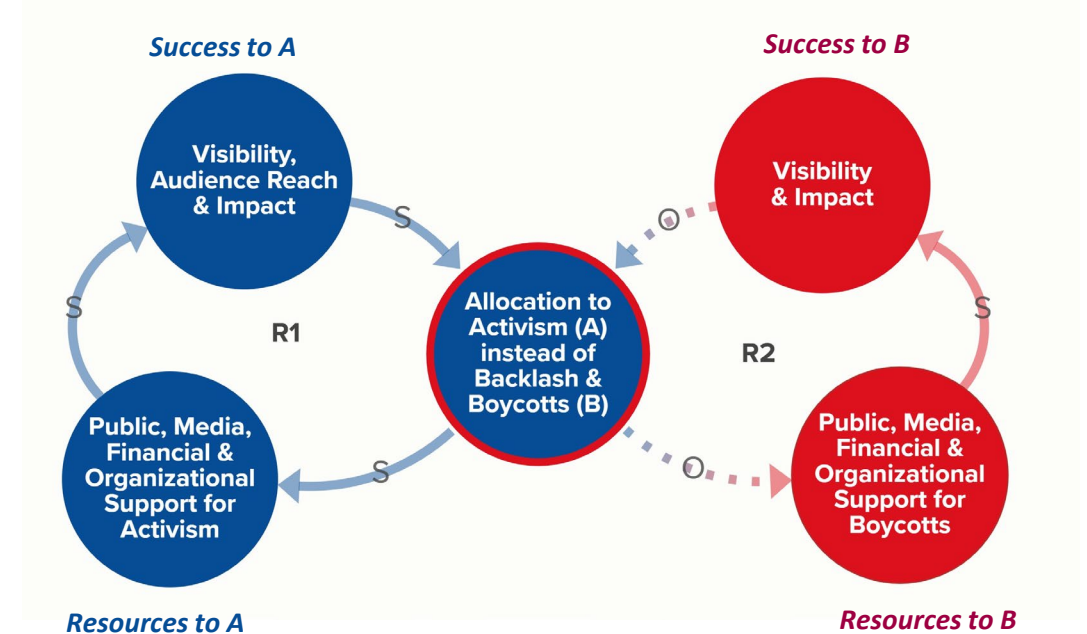
- More allocation to activism results in more audience, media, and financial support for activism
 - When more public attention, media space, financial support, and institutional opportunities are directed toward activism, resources flow to activist artists.
- More audience, media, and financial support for activism leads to more visibility, audience impact, and cultural influence of activism
 - These resources help spread the activist message, growing the artist's visibility, cultural relevance, and audience engagement.
- More visibility, audience impact, and cultural influence of activism results in more allocation to activism
 - As activism becomes more successful and visible, more people, media, and institutions feel encouraged to further allocate their support to activism.

Reinforcing Loop (R2)

- More allocation to activism means less public, media, and organizational support for backlash and boycotts.
 - As more attention and resources flow to activism, backlash efforts receive fewer resources (less media amplification, less public support).
- Less public, media, and organizational support for backlash and boycotts, results in less visibility and effectiveness of boycott efforts.
 - With fewer resources, backlash efforts weaken, losing visibility and influence.
- The less visibility and effectiveness of boycott efforts, the more allocation to activism.
 - As backlash becomes less successful and visible, people/media feel safer or more motivated to shift even more attention toward activism.

Summary

Activism grows stronger when it gains early support, pulling more resources and reducing backlash and boycott power. Backlash weakens as activism success increases, further shifting resources away from opposition efforts.



CASE STUDIES – FRAGMENTATION & AUDIENCE POLARIZATION

The Dixie Chicks Boycott

Background: In 2003, during a concert in London, Natalie Maines of the Dixie Chicks said they were ashamed that President George W. Bush was from Texas. This triggered a huge backlash, especially from conservative country music fans and U.S. radio stations.

Initial allocation to backlash: Conservative radio stations boycotted the Dixie Chicks, banning their music.

More media amplification of the backlash: Right-wing commentators, country music channels, and pro-Bush fans flooded the conversation, increasing the visibility of the boycott.

More audience choosing the backlash: Conservative audiences organized CD-burning parties and protests, reinforcing the idea that boycotting the Chicks was the "successful" path if you were patriotic. This is the early Success to the Successful for the *backlash side*. The more the boycott got attention, the more others joined, and the more success the boycott had.

But then... fragmentation and audience polarization escalated

New allocation to activism/resistance: Progressive and anti-war audiences began supporting the Dixie Chicks. They were praised by liberal media, became a symbol of free speech, and even won multiple Grammy Awards later for their "*Not Ready to Make Nice*" comeback. The country music scene split: Conservative listeners stuck with "patriotic" country acts. Liberal/progressive listeners drifted toward crossover acts or away from country altogether.

Activist side succeeded in the broader music industry (winning critical acclaim, Grammys, new audiences).

Backlash side succeeded in the country music world (holding radio control and conservative loyalty).

This led to long-term fragmentation. Country music became much more politically homogeneous and conservative after 2003, while more progressive audiences left or redefined their own spaces in pop, indie, and folk genres.

Lil Nas X – "MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name)" Controversy

Background: Lil Nas X released a provocative video featuring LGBTQ+ and religious imagery.

Initial backlash: Conservative politicians, religious groups, and some media figures called for boycotts of Lil Nas X and his sponsors.

Amplification: Right-wing media amplified outrage, pushing the narrative into the mainstream.

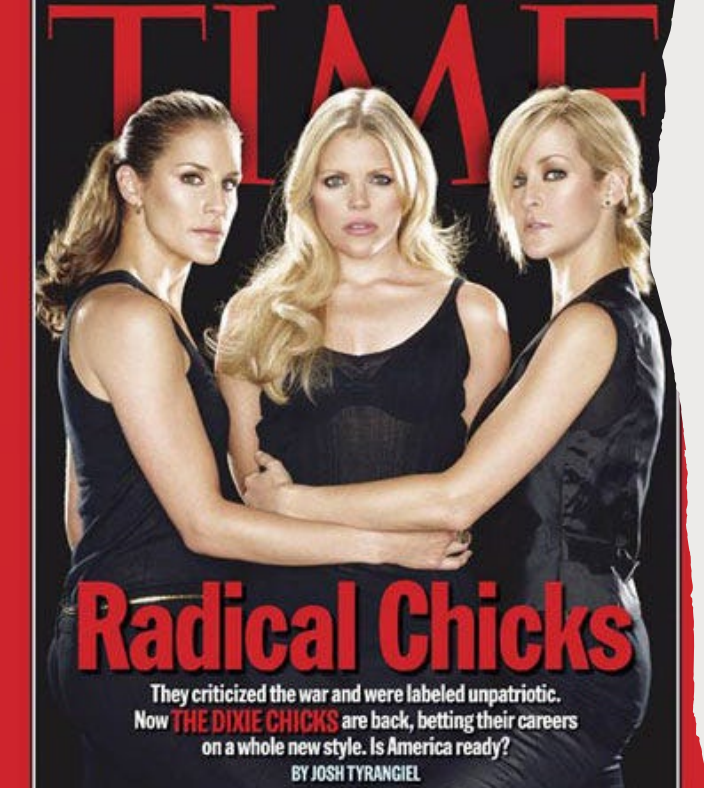
Backlash initially gained attention. Lots of boycotts were threatened.

But then...

Lil Nas X's fans and broader LGBTQ+ community amplified support: He leaned into the controversy with humor and defiance.

More allocation to activism: Sales, streams, and cultural influence exploded.

Fragmentation: Conservative critics retreated to parallel media ecosystems. Progressive fans amplified LGBTQ+ expression in mainstream pop.



6. FRAGMENTATION & AUDIENCE POLARIZATION

Drifting Goals

Balancing Loop 1 (B1)

- The more musicians recognize the gap between social injustice and activist demands, the more they use protest music to mobilize activism, protests, and political engagement.
- The more activism grows, the more governments, corporations, or institutions feel pressure, leading to small policy wins, awareness, or cultural shifts.
- The more small victories occur, the less urgent the gap between social injustice and activist demands seems, reducing activist intensity.

Balancing Loop 2 (B2)

- The more musicians try to reduce the gap between social injustice and activist demands, the more they face resistance & absorption (government pushback, industry co-opting, media dilution).
- The more they face resistance, the more pressure there is to lower the goal from demanding systemic change to raising awareness.
- The more the goal shifts toward awareness instead of action, the less the gap between social injustice and activist demands seems urgent, reducing the movement's effectiveness.

If B1 dominates, protest music continues pushing for real systemic change, sustaining activism. However, if activists slow down after small wins, B2 can take over, causing goals to drift.

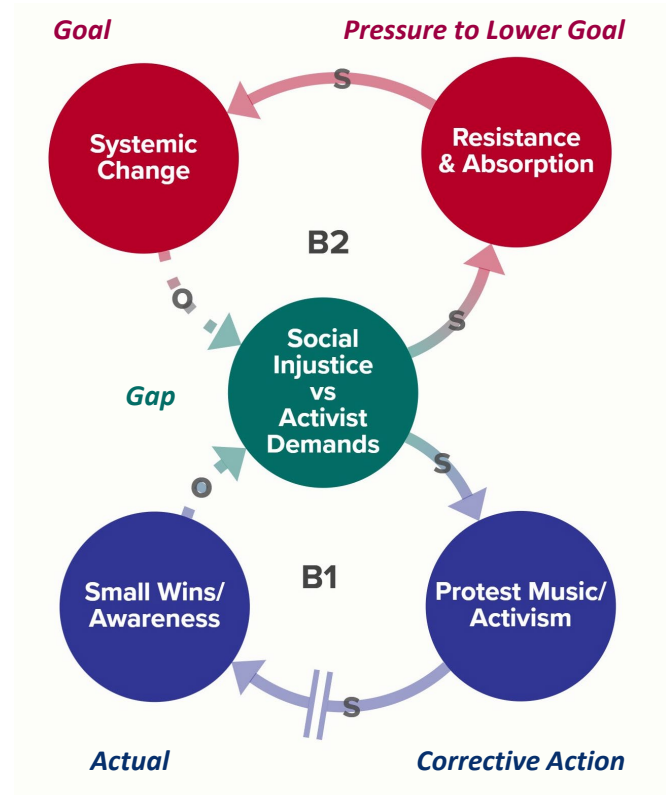
If B2 dominates, protest music loses systemic demands and shifts into a symbolic movement focused on cultural awareness instead of political change. The issue remains but seems less urgent over time.

Summary

Protest music starts with strong systemic demands, but over time, industry and political resistance push goals toward awareness instead of action. If Corrective Action (B1) remains strong, movements can prevent goal drifting and sustain systemic change efforts. If Drifting Goals (B2) dominates, protest music becomes cultural history rather than an active force for change.

To keep protest music effective, activists must:

- Refuse to lower demands, keeping policy change at the core.
- Tie music to direct action (protests, strikes, movements).
- Form activist coalitions to sustain long-term pressure.
- Use modern media to maintain cultural relevance.
- Subvert corporate co-opting, staying independent and radical.
- Evolve through awareness of how struggles and different inequalities inter-connect
- Make protest music a movement, not just a soundtrack for activism.
- Positive Example - Rage Against the Machine





CASE STUDIES – FRAGMENTATION & AUDIENCE POLARIZATION

Black Lives Matter Music Surge (Post-George Floyd, 2020)

B1 (Corrective Action)

Songs like H.E.R.'s "*I Can't Breathe*," Lil Baby's "*The Bigger Picture*," and others drove activism, protests, corporate pledges, and police reform discussions.

B2 (Goal Drift)

Many corporations adopted *performative* "Black Lives Matter" campaigns (e.g., posting black squares, releasing diversity statements) without enacting meaningful systemic changes like reforming hiring, funding activists, or police defunding.

Fragmentation

Artists and audiences split. Some demanded sustained systemic reforms, others settled for cultural inclusion or visibility.



Climate Justice Music Movement

B1 (Corrective Action)

Artists like Billie Eilish (*Overheated* documentary + concerts) and indigenous musicians (like Xiuhtezcatl) aligned music with climate strikes and youth-led systemic action targeting fossil fuels, deforestation, and corporate lobbying.

B2 (Goal Drift)

As climate activism became trendy, music increasingly focused on individual action narratives ("use less plastic") rather than collective systemic reforms (ending fossil fuel subsidies, regulating corporations).

Fragmentation

Climate musicians split. Some continue demanding systemic reforms. Others lean into lifestyle branding (e.g., "eco-friendly" albums, carbon-neutral tours).

7. OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Limits To Success In Tech Driven Music Activism

New technologies expand activist reach, but success generates system resistance that constrains future impact.

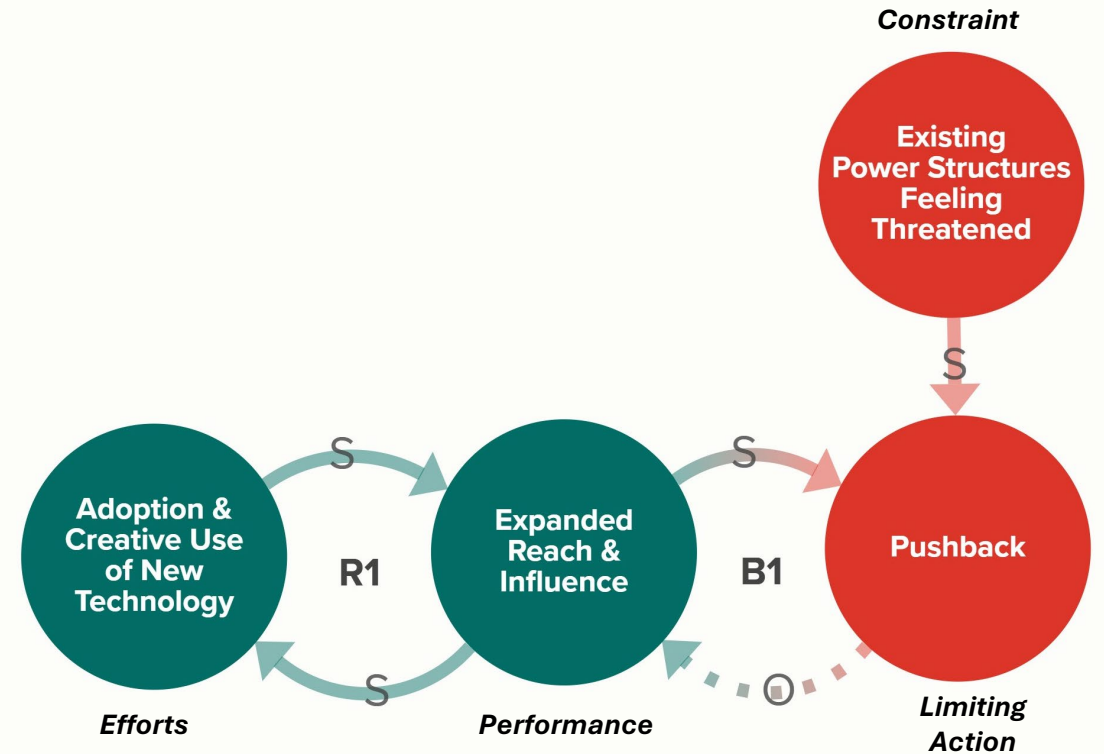
As activist musicians adopt new technologies (Efforts), their reach and influence grow (Performance), but this success threatens entrenched powers (Constraint), leading to new forms of censorship and suppression (Limiting Action) that slow future activist growth.

Reinforcing Loop (R1) - Growth Phase

- The more music activist learn and use emerging technologies (e.g., blockchain, NFTs, decentralized platforms), the more they expand their reach and visibility. There is more motivation and capacity for activism through music.
- The more reach and visibility, the more musicians adopt and develop creative use of these new technologies.

Balancing Loop (B1) - Constraint Phase

- The more existing power structures (e.g. governments, corporations, gatekeepers) feel threatened by music activism, the more pushback (e.g., regulation, censorship, platform co-option, suppression of decentralized tools)
- The more pushback, the less expand reach and influence of music activism.
- The less reach and influence, the less pushback from power structures





CASE STUDIES – OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Iran – Anonymous Music and Blockchain Distribution

R1 – Growth Phase

Protest musicians began releasing their work anonymously via IPFS (InterPlanetary File System), blockchain domains (.eth, .crypto), and NFT music drops. This enabled them to avoid takedowns on Spotify/YouTube and gain direct support via Ethereum and privacy coins.

B1 – Constraint Phase

Government responded with increased surveillance, VPN crackdown, and AI-assisted tracking of blockchain wallets linked to activist media. NFT-linked protest music became harder to circulate inside Iran.

Cuba - San Isidro Movement - Rap, Art and Blockchain

R1 - Growth Phase

Musicians like Maykel Castillo and artist-activists like Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara shared protest art and music via decentralized platforms. They attracted international attention, support, and donations using blockchain tools and alternative networks.

B1 - Constraint Phase

Cuban government declared them enemies of the state. Internet access was throttled or blocked, and Castillo was imprisoned. Blockchain activity was criminalized when associated with “counter-revolutionary content.”

Complexity, Adaptability, Emergence

Music activism qualifies as a Complex Adaptive System because it is dynamic, decentralized, responsive, and emergent. It constantly evolves through feedback, collective creativity, and adaptive strategies. Despite disruption, it reconfigures itself sometimes becoming stronger and more resilient in the process. Here is an explanation of how it exhibits key CAS characteristics:

Agents - Music activism is made up of diverse, semi-autonomous agents including (e.g., Musicians, fans, collectives, organizers, platforms, algorithms, NGOs, governments, cultural institutions, diaspora communities, and AI tools) Each has its own goals, information, resources, and rules of interaction.

Synchronization - Agents often synchronize emotionally and socially through shared rhythms, chants, and protest songs, coordinated movements (e.g., flash mobs, concerts, viral trends), temporal alignment with global events (e.g., George Floyd protests sparking synchronized global artistic response). This entrainment fuels solidarity, motivation, and action.

Self-Organizing - Music activism does not require central control. Movements emerge from informal networks, underground scenes, and online communities. Musicians respond to local injustices and inspire others to act in different geographies. Coordination happens through hashtags, collaborations, remix culture, and emergent leadership.

Self-Sustaining -The system often generates its own momentum. Music becomes both output and input. It fuels movements and reflects them. Cultural memory is preserved and reactivated during new struggles (e.g., repurposing protest songs). Emotional and collective resonance gives music activism its renewable energy.

Purposeful - Though decentralized, the system demonstrates collective intent. Its goal is to challenge injustice, mobilize action, and express identity. It is often framed by moral or visionary purpose (e.g., liberation, dignity, climate justice).

Use Feedback to Modify Behavior - Musicians adapt based on audience engagement, state repression, algorithmic visibility, and viral dynamics. Movements recalibrate tone, style, or delivery when songs are banned, co-opted, or lose potency. Platforms and governments also adapt in response (tightening controls or rebranding messages).

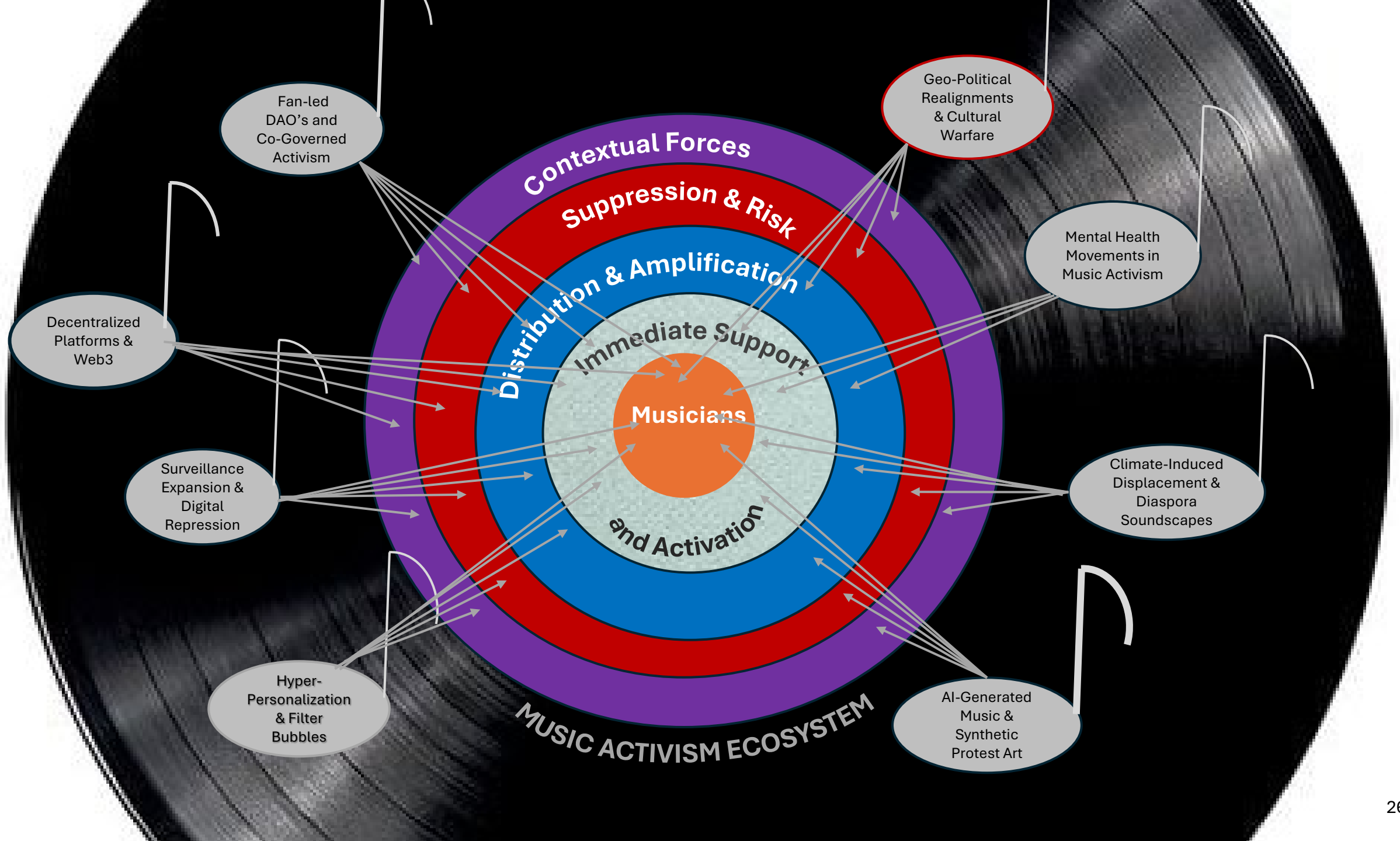
Environmental Modification - Music activism alters the environment that shapes it. It influences legislation, public opinion, education, and policy debates. It challenges cultural norms, reshapes values, and influences tech design (e.g., demands for ethical streaming). It creates new spaces, both online and offline, for dissent and belonging.

Replicating, Repairing, Maintaining, Re-organizing - When suppressed, the system reorganizes through diaspora activism, encrypted networks, or alternative genres. It repairs itself through intergenerational memory (e.g., revisiting legacy protest songs). It maintains momentum by shifting formats (vinyl to digital, physical to virtual concerts). It reorganizes when disrupted (e.g., moving from public squares to live-stream protests to underground)

Emergence: Micro and Macro Evolution - At the micro level, new genres, remix formats, lyrical tropes, and protest aesthetics emerge constantly. At the macro level, global movements form around shared values (e.g., feminist punk, climate activism). Patterns such as resilience, resistance through art, or decentralized leadership emerge not from design but from interaction.

Emerging Change

Trend	What It Is	Impact	Effect on the System
Fan-Led DAOs & Direct Support	Fans and communities use Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs) to fund, support, and co-create music activism.	Empowers fans as collaborators and funders; gives artists more independence and resilience.	Shifts power from institutions to peer networks. Redefines support roles in activism. Redistributes control and resources; builds artist-fan solidarity and resilience structures.
Decentralized Platforms & Web3	Blockchain tools enable independent distribution, ownership, and funding outside traditional systems.	Breaks reliance on corporate platforms and enables new funding routes.	Undermines platform monopolies; empowers artist-controlled distribution and fan ownership via NFTs and DAOs; enables censorship-resistant music economies.
Surveillance Expansion & Digital Repression	Governments track activist artists and audiences through digital surveillance.	Artists face arrest, harassment, or censorship based on digital activity.	Raises barriers to open expression; accelerates underground network-building.
Hyper-Personalization & Filter Bubbles	Algorithms curate content based on behavior, limiting exposure to dissenting views.	Activist content fails to reach broader audiences or cross ideological divides.	Limits the reach and resonance of protest music; challenges cross-community solidarity. Weakens collective identity; protest music becomes niche-targeted.
AI-Generated Music & Synthetic Protest Art	AI tools generate music and lyrics, raising authenticity and ethical concerns.	Potential to dilute or manipulate the intent of activist music.	Challenges the trust and symbolic power of activist music; risks co-option. Raises questions of authorship, authenticity and voice in digital protest.
Climate-Induced Displacement & Diaspora Soundscapes	Climate migration sparks new cultural fusions and activist musical forms.	Music reflects themes of loss, resistance, migration, and survival.	Creates new hybrid activist expressions rooted in displacement and identity.
Mental Health Movements in Music Activism	Artists advocate for emotional well-being and trauma-informed activism.	Music activism includes mental health resources and care infrastructure.	Promotes long-term engagement by integrating emotional care and resilience practices. Shifts focus from urgency and burnout to healing and sustainability.
Geo-Political Realignments & Cultural Warfare	Authoritarian regimes ally and reframe protest music as extremist or foreign propaganda.	Musicians face legal action, censorship, or exile.	Pushes activist musicians into encrypted, exilic, or anonymized systems of resistance. Drives music activism into global solidarity networks and coded resistance.



Complex Adaptive Systems + Disruptive Change = Chaos

Most Disruptive Change

Geo-Political Realignments & Cultural Warfare is the most disruptive emerging change as it targets music's core functions of expression, visibility, and solidarity. With this change, suppression tactics are more sophisticated with new technologies (e.g., AI surveillance, platform moderation, voice biometrics). Authoritarian regimes increasingly label music as extremist, terrorist, or foreign propaganda. Human rights groups and artistic freedom organizations (e.g., Freemuse, PEN International, Index on Censorship) report worsening repression of artists overall.

Future Scenario -- The Rise of a 'Cultural NATO of Repression'

Autocratic states form a de facto "Cultural Nato of Repression" sharing AI-based systems trained to detect protest music across languages, rhythms, tonal patterns, and emotional intensity. Protest music that was once protected becomes punishable overnight. Regimes not only censor music but also how music makes you feel. These AI detection systems don't need to understand lyrics. They react to entrainment patterns and frisson-inducing soundscapes (e.g., goosebumps or shivers) that correlate with social unrest. In this new era, regimes fear not what music says, but how it synchronizes the hearts of strangers into a single beat to instigate social action.

How It Tips the System Into Chaos

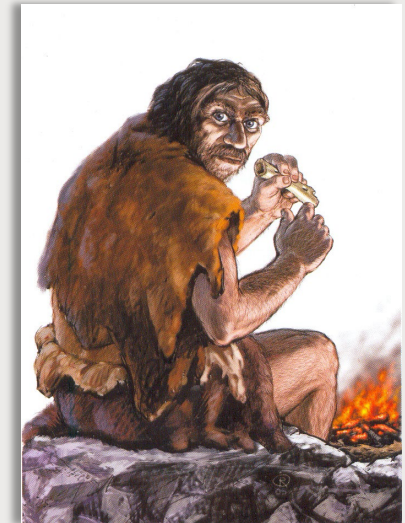
- Legal protections fracture across borders
- Musicians are forced underground, cut off from fans and collaborators, divided by region, access, and algorithm
- Solidarity networks begin to fragment. They become decentralized and isolated.
- Musicians begin masking messages, hiding identity, shifting genres, even generating AI decoys.
- Protest music becomes so fluid and disguised that it's hard to tell what's resistance, what's propaganda, and what's distraction.
- Collaboration collapses under fear & surveillance
- Emotional exhaustion weakens momentum

What Chaos Looks Like

- **Unpredictable suppression:** Artists silenced before even releasing a track.
- **Platform instability:** What's allowed today is banned tomorrow.
- **Emotional volatility:** Fear, mistrust, betrayal within once-cohesive musician and activist communities.
- **Cultural disorientation:** Protest becomes aesthetic, satire, encrypted metaphor *but, no one knows if it still works.*

What Happens After Chaos?

- Music activism **regenerates after chaos. Music is more primal than language.**
- We could see a **rebirth of underground sonic resistance networks**
- Or a world where **music is emotionally powerful but politically muted?**
- Music activism could **return to its roots as ritual or ceremony.**
- **AI-generated protest avatars** could be used as the only voice left standing.





“Music preceded spoken language. The structures that process music are evolutionarily older than the structures that process speech.”

-Dr. Daniel Levetin, Neuroscientist & Author

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR ACTIVISM

If music is **more universally acceptable and understood than speech**, then...

- **Music activism accesses deeper evolutionary pathways** (e.g., emotion, bonding, entrainment)
- It's **harder to suppress** entirely, because it's not just message, it's **movement and memory**
- This might explain why **authoritarian regimes fear it**, because it unites before it informs

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