

The tradition of protest songs in the United States is a continuum, which began in colonial times with the British Broadside Ballads, was nurtured in the 19th century through the Negro spirituals, and throughout the 20th century by performers such as Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan. Out of necessity, blacks developed strategies of veiled protests to a fine art during the 19th century. The perennial cause of the black protest was the status forced on them by white supremacists. The spirituals encouraged them to persevere in their efforts to free themselves from the shackles of slavery. Many of the spirituals were modified in the 1950s to accommodate the needs of the Civil Rights Movement. This appropriation of the Southern rural folk music tradition was the genesis of a phenomenon which has become known as the American folk music revival. The foremost figure of the movement was Woody Guthrie, the author of "This land is Your Land." Guthrie is cited as major influence on his disciple Bob Dylan, who was pronounced the folk messiah of the folk circles. This paper seeks to determine whether Dylan was, in contrast to his assertions, a topical songwriter writing about particular events or whether he was in fact an apolitical artist, whose personal insight and feelings simply happened to fit the era's frame of mind. What is it about Dylan's music that is still has the ability to speak to new generations in the 21st century?