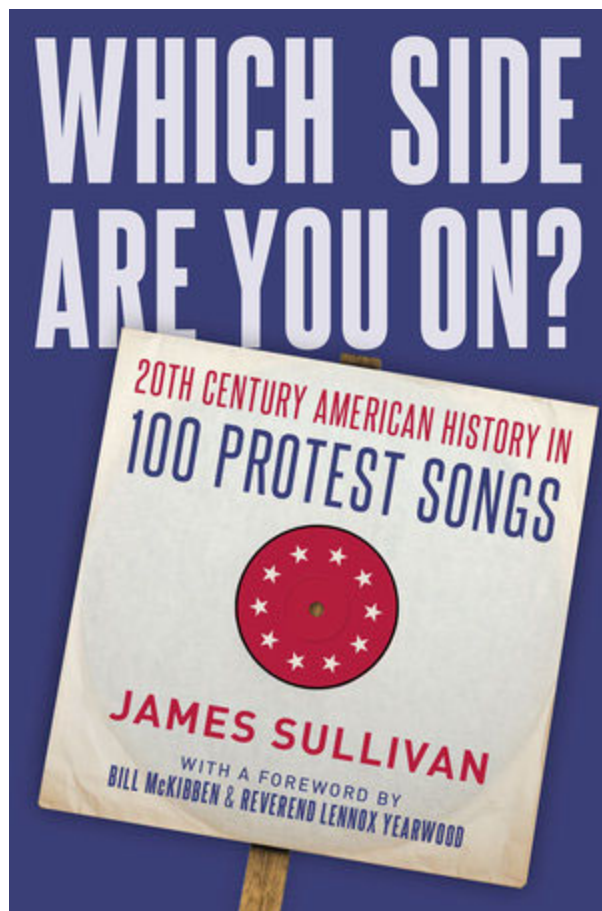


'Which Side Are You On?: 20th Century American History in 100 Protest Songs' Doth Protest Too Little

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James Sullivan

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In *Which Side Are You On?: 20th Century American History in 100 Protest Songs*, James Sullivan sets out to "tell the story of modern American democracy" through 100 songs that "span a century of petition in the name of social progress." In nine chapters, the author explores the connections between social movements in the US — nonviolence, labor, civil rights, feminism, environmentalism, free speech, gay rights, immigration rights, and anti-nuclear activism — and songs that either emerged from or came to be associated with those causes. The tenth and final chapter looks at protest in the 21st century and the Trump era.

The book is not meant to be an all-inclusive history of protest in song but a "selective survey"; it focuses only on the United States and songs in English, and omits such major figures as Bob Marley, the Clash, Fela Kuti, and Victor Jara, to name just a few. The narrow scope is regrettable; its English-only bias excludes, for example, the politically potent salsa birthed in New York City during the late '60s and '70s. It's no crime for an author to choose to be selective rather than comprehensive. The book's greater flaws are its bland politics and confusion about what constitutes a protest song, the omissions and missed opportunities, and an over reliance on secondary sources that renders the entire account a rehash of other writers' far more incisive works.

Sullivan's politics are liberal and his sympathy for the popular struggles he surveys is evident throughout the book. His liberalism, however, is fundamental to what's wrong with *Which Side Are You On?* Rather than "tell

the story of American democracy", as this anodyne formulation would have it, protest songs denounced its failures, the systemic, brutal injustices of class, race, and gender. In the chapter "Workers Unite", for example, which discusses ten songs associated with labor movements, "class struggle" never appears, although militant workers who risked their livelihoods and lives certainly knew what it meant; the concept was part of their political vocabulary and their understanding of what they were engaged in.

The Communist Party played a critical role in labor struggles from the early to mid-20th century, yet it gets only one mention in the entire chapter: "The National Miners Union, an offshoot of the American Communist Party..." (To be fair, Sullivan does acknowledge the Communist Party in his cursory discussion of McCarthyism, where he hardly could ignore it.) The Industrial Workers of the World, whose members were known as the Wobblies, is noted briefly in the context of the execution of IWW militant and songwriter Joe Hill. Sullivan's assessment of radicalism in the labor movement comes down to this: "Socialism was considered by some members of the intellectual and working classes to be a viable alternative to capitalism." Really! Do tell!

Sullivan's obliviousness about radical history leads to one of his worst sins of omission: the arrest, trial, and execution of [Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti](#). In the '20s, the case of the Italian-born, working-class anarchists was a *cause célèbre* for radicals in the United States and worldwide and it remains one of the most egregious episodes of state repression of the Left — and of anti-immigrant bigotry. There were songs about it, too, both during their lifetimes and decades later: composer Ruth Crawford Seeger wrote "Sacco Vanzetti" in 1928; Woody Guthrie recorded a dozen "[Ballads of Sacco and Vanzetti](#)" in the '40s; and in 1971 Joan Baez wrote (with Ennio Morricone) and recorded "Here's to You" (also known as "The Ballad of Sacco and Vanzetti") for the Italian film [Sacco e Vanzetti](#) (Giuliano Montaldo, 1971). Yet the two

men and their story — which says much about "modern American democracy" — are entirely absent from Sullivan's century of protest song.

In the blandly titled chapter, "Nonviolence", Sullivan mentions "the appalling violence that gripped the Democratic National Convention in 1968", making what actually was a savage police riot against protesters sound like a natural disaster. In the same chapter, he looks at nine antiwar songs and one patriotic one, Irving Berlin's "God Bless America". He notes that Woody Guthrie hated that song for "what he felt" was its "simplistic jingoism" and that he wrote "This Land is Your Land" as a riposte to Berlin. Ignoring the question posed by his book's title, Sullivan doesn't say where he comes down. The chapter bizarrely concludes with a discussion of an episode of the '70s sitcom *All in the Family*, in which conservative Archie Bunker squares off against his liberal son-in-law Mike Stivic over Irving Berlin's "God Bless America". Sullivan ends with this gem of noncommittal banality: "In the unending debate about the morality of war, both sides have historically resorted to song. Whatever the answers, the question endures: 'What are we fighting for?'"

The book's fourth chapter, "The Rights of Women", focuses not on feminist movement anthems but on ten blues and pop songs. " *You Don't Own Me*" by Lesley Gore and Dionne Warwick's "*Don't Make Me Over*" can be heard as expressing proto-political sentiments but it's a stretch — actually a category error — to see them as protest songs; they were products of the pop music industry, not of a social movement. Dolly Parton's and Loretta Lynn's takedowns of sexism in "*Just Because I'm a Woman*" and "The Pill" come closer to feminist critique and were particularly noteworthy for a conservative genre like country music but Sullivan brings nothing new or provocative to his discussion of those milestones.

He does somewhat better with black women blues singers, drawing on Angela Davis' arguments in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (Pantheon, 1998)

about the relationship between blues tropes of sexuality and travel and black people's freedom struggles. Women's blues are, as he says, "a form of protest". But "The Rights of Women" overlooks explicit feminist statements — no mention of Queen Latifah's "U.N.I.T.Y." or feminist punk like [Bush Tetras'](#) "Too Many Creeps", inexplicable omissions in themselves and particularly in a pop-centric discussion.

There's yet another major gap: the rise of a feminist counterculture in the '70s entirely escapes Sullivan's notice. But during that decade, Olivia Records released lesbian feminist music whose popularity and influence was acknowledged even by mainstream publications like *Rolling Stone*. Moreover, Olivia practiced intersectionality *avant la lettre* when it helped produce the Varied Voices of Black Women tour in 1975.

Sullivan's chapter "Gay Pride" looks at ten songs that were embraced by gay men, like Connie Francis' "Where the Boys Are", and others that became gay anthems, like the Diana Ross disco smash hit "I'm Coming Out". Sullivan offers the by-now commonplace observation that gay men's camp sensibility could express resistance to oppression. He gives readers a potted history of gay and lesbian politics, name-checking the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis (but not the later, more militant Gay Liberation Front) and an account of the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion that says nothing new (and draws solely from one source, David Carter's *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, St. Martin's Press, 2004). Sullivan notes the sociopolitical significance of early disco and the central role of gay DJ and party promoter David Mancuso in shaping disco culture before it became a mass pop phenomenon. He duly notes the homophobic "disco sucks" backlash, moves on to AIDS and the birth of the militant protest group ACT UP, and Bruce Springsteen's "Streets of Philadelphia".

But as with his discussion of women's music, Sullivan ignores actual gay protest and political songs and the artists who wrote and performed them. Any reader familiar with, or who participated in gay male culture and activism during the worst years of AIDS is likely to be dismayed (as was I) that Sullivan writes admiringly about Springsteen's lugubrious and apolitical "Streets" yet says nothing about [Michael Callen](#), a singer-songwriter who was one of the era's most prominent gay and AIDS activists.

Sullivan's failure to venture beyond oft-told accounts of gay culture after Stonewall means he misses one of its most notable (and outrageous) moments: the 1973 debut of the first gay country band, [Lavender Country](#). Led by singer-songwriter Pat Haggerty, [Lavender Country](#) released one eponymous album that included "Cryin' These Cocksucking Tears", a fearless protest against homophobia. The album, recorded for a private label and known only among cognoscenti of gay music, was re-discovered in the early 2000s and re-issued in 2014.

Sullivan's treatment of music associated with the Civil Rights movement comprises movement anthems ("We Shall Overcome"), socially-conscious pop and soul ("Keep on Pushing", "A Change is Gonna Come"), and, of course, "Blowin' in the Wind". (The bard of Hibbing, who said he didn't write protest songs and told Phil Ochs that "[politics is bullshit](#)", appears in the book more than any other artist.) These are appropriate but obvious choices.

Sullivan, had he gone beyond the familiar, might have shone a light on a lesser-known but important African American artist who brought pointed political protest to the blues, a genre often wrongly seen as apolitical: J.B. Lenoir. The Mississippi-born singer and guitarist is known to blues aficionados for his 1955 hit "Mama, Talk to Your Daughter". But in the '60s, Lenoir wrote songs about racial discrimination, the Civil Rights movement, and the Vietnam War: "Shot on James Meredith", "Alabama March", "Born Dead", "Vietnam

Blues", and "Down in Mississippi" (memorably covered in 2007 by [Mavis Staples](#)). Lenoir performed some of these songs when he toured Europe in 1965 but they were deemed too controversial for release in the United States and only came out in America years later.

It's hard to figure out whom the author intends as the readership for *Which Side Are You On?* Perhaps a young one unfamiliar with the history of US social protest movements and their cultural articulations. For them, Sullivan's book might serve as a useful primer. But for the millennials and even younger activists involved with— and often leading— today's renewed radical social justice and socialist movements, Sullivan's superficial and second-hand treatment (he did no original research, not even interviews) will be weak tea indeed. I suspect that older and more experienced radicals, whether retired from the fray or still involved, are likely to find it even less palatable.

JAMES SULLIVAN SACCO AND VANZETTI J.B. LENOIR MICHAEL CALLEN
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