

# Harmonic Resistance

## *Singing as an Act of Non-Violent Resistance in Protest Movements*

Singing is a powerful component of social cohesion, yet the science of this power remains under-theorized within critical discourse. This paper focuses specifically on protest movements and argues that singing functions not merely as a cultural artifact, but as a somatic form of non-violent resistance. In this framework, the physiological and affective responses of the body become the machine for democratic change against oppression.



Fig 1: MinneFolk Resistance Singers  
Minneapolis, Feb 2026

Existing literature tends to frame protest music as a tool for agitation, mobilization, or the articulation of anger rather than recognizing it as a systematic presence. Resistance singing is not merely a spontaneous or occasional feature of a movement; it is a recurring, structurally embedded practice that is intentionally cultivated, scaled, and sustained. For example, the singing of "We Shall Overcome" during U.S. civil rights marches was not simply an emotional outburst but an intentional tool that reinforced solidarity for both participants and potential supporters.

The true transformative power of singing in protest lies in its capacity to shift the atmosphere from hostile to calm. With an emphasis on Harmonic Resistance, this paper sharpens the definition of 'harmony' not merely as musical harmony, but as resonance—a material force that synchronizes the nervous system under stress. More than a balm for individuals, singing together as a collective creates a stabilizing force that deflects the negative tensions inherent in protest spaces. This resonant force emits a feeling of harmony that transcends the mere sound of the music.

## **Chapter 1: Atmosphere, Affect Theory, Emotion, and Culture**

Many experiences during our lifetimes are sensed but not easily translated into common linguistic categories such as "joy," "happiness," or "panic." In a recent publication, White and De Antoni (2025) note that while anthropologists have long been interested in these types of felt experiences, they have traditionally focused more explicitly on the public expression and symbolic display of feeling, which they termed "emotion." However, there is now increased study and emphasis on

describing feelings that are sensed within and between bodies but do not always take linguistic or conceptual form. These elusive sensations are what we now term 'affect'.

White and De Antoni further argue that affect consists of "felt experiences that could exceed or precede cognition and language," representing a "contagious involvement and coordination of bodies that can be witnessed during rituals, political rallies, festivals, or in stadiums". They contend that although registered through biological and bodily sensation, "affects are also culturally conditioned and can, in turn, strongly influence sociocultural dynamics". These sociocultural dynamics define the mechanism behind communal singing. The affect of joining the vibrations of a singular voice with another creates a harmonic resonance that can coalesce into Harmonic Resistance.

To define the atmosphere of protest environments, one must recognize that it is not a prescribed container for political action with predictable outcomes. Rather, it is a dynamic field of affect characterized by unrecognizable yet contagious energy circulating between bodies. Mainstream discourse often simplifies and under-analyzes this public expression of emotion, translating the "buzz" (affect) into familiar terms. Yet, this contagious buzz constitutes the framework of protest and can transform a space into a battlefield. Oppressors often rely on the emotional regulation of the crowd, framing protesters as angry, hysterical, or dangerous to justify repression. Harmonic Resistance disrupts this by introducing a counter-affect. White and De Antoni assert that affect is a "contagious involvement and coordination of bodies" that can be witnessed in political rallies, arguing that these forces are culturally conditioned and capable of strongly influencing sociocultural dynamics.

These dynamics define the mechanics of communal singing. Harmonic Resistance is the affect of joining the vibrations of a singular voice with another, creating a harmonic resonance that builds into resistance. Viewing protest movements through the lens of affect theory sharpens our understanding of how a collective force significantly transforms gathering spaces. This aligns with the concept of Affective Contagion, where affect circulates among the collective, creating a feedback loop of resonance that becomes the fuel of a movement.

In recent contexts, oppressors have testified that they were provoked by the emotions of individuals and crowds, using this provocation as evidence of criminal intent to justify harsh and deadly force. In contrast, resistance singers gathering on the street outside a hotel of known violent oppressors created a peaceful affect. Through Harmonic Resistance, these singers were able to bypass the criminalization and violent outcomes that often result from accusations of provocation, ultimately diminishing the anger felt by a violated community. This demonstrates how resistance

singing can transform a protest from a site of potential violence into a sanctuary of community and cultural resilience.

## Chapter 2: Critical Joy Studies and Somatic Physiology

During the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, The Freedom Singers revitalized the song "This Joy That I Have." The chorus rings out with the lyrics, "*the world didn't give it, the world can't take it away*," emphasizing the need to draw from a deep well of personal sustenance to carry on despite the hardships and repression faced daily. The use of joy to drive determination leads to a critical inquiry: Can a physiological response be considered a form of resistance?

In the case of Resistance Singing, melody and rhythm are not merely socio-cultural markers but real forces that regulate the nervous system. In the context of protest, where the body is often the target of violence (batons, tear gas, arrest), the act of singing becomes a somatic counter-attack. Drawing on White and De Antoni, the power of communal singing lies in its ability to synchronize the nervous systems of a crowd. This is not merely metaphorical; it is a physical phenomenon where the vibration of multiple lungs and vocal cords acts as a powerful source of acoustic energy. This acoustic energy is achieved through the collective vocalization of multiple singers, which creates a localized sound field—a complex, moving pattern of oscillating sound waves. While group singing does not change the actual density of atmospheric air, vocal vibration changes the physical density of the human chest wall through a phenomenon known as "vocal fremitus."

When examining the dual nature of social environments within protest zones—specifically atmosphere and emotion—we draw upon Ben Highmore's theories of atmosphere and Sara Ahmed's work on the cultural politics of emotion. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) Sara Ahmed explores "how emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies. Bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others". Her work elucidates the complexity of emotions and how they shape nations, cultures, and social hierarchies. Ahmed's work serves as an invitation to further research pointing to joy as an emotion that can shape the trajectory of a protest movement.

### Critical Joy Studies: A New Academic Field

Kristie Soares, in her article *Critical Joy Studies: The Emergence of a Field and a Movement* (2025), notes that the term "Critical Joy Studies" first emerged through a set of panels at the 2023 meeting of the American Studies Association. Soares's article examines how joy in diasporic media, music, and public demonstrations resists dominant and oppressive narratives. While Soares's specific focus is

through the lens of Latinx communities, this framework can be explicitly applied to examine how joy functions as political resistance in public demonstrations at large.

### Chapter 3: Collective Singing as an Act of Resistance

Milena Petrović, in the peer-reviewed publication *Group Singing and Collective Identity* (2017), cites that "group singing evokes emotions, raises morale, strengthens solidarity, fosters hope, and unifies members against a common opponent (Bensimon, 2012)." Consequently, group singing can be considered a social phenomenon, a social ritual, and a shared experience that Durkheim termed "collective effervescence." Through her research, Milena concluded what many others have found: "Social benefits relate to an enhanced sense of social inclusion and better social well-being" (Petrović, 2017). She further cites research from Rabinowitch et al. (2012) reporting that "singing increases empathy."

Findings from a large-scale study of choral singers *Mechanisms for the Induction of Emotion Through Music* by Juslin and Västfjäll (2016), "found that singers experience significant reductions in stress and anxiety compared to non-singers". The study notes the "social joy" derived from group singing. Study after study reports the benefits of singing, the social connections built and deepened, and the influence created when collective voices join together for a common goal.

With the power of group singing acknowledged, the critical question of leadership within this vocalized resistance must be addressed: Who will sing? Who will lead? Who holds the power to define the emotional mood of a movement? The tension between leadership—where a designated songleader imposes a narrative based on songs with historical context or religious tone—and following the emerging "vibe" that arises organically from the multitudes has drastic impacts on the atmosphere. It requires vigilance and awareness of the potential for co-optation when a chosen song of resistance is deemed institutionalized or ineffective, necessitating a shift to a repertoire led by the collective. The power of singing, therefore, is not located in the lyrics alone, nor in the spirit of a leader, but in the invisible space that is created organically when bodies resonate in unison.

Throughout history, the effectiveness of Resistance Singing has been demonstrated: the Human Rights Choir during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1959); Estonia's Singing Revolution (1988–1991); the Otpor! Movement in Serbia (1998–2000); and the ongoing resistance in Minneapolis (2026–present). The resistance choir of Minneapolis (Fig. 2) has published a "toolkit" in which they state: "Singing Resistance is building a mass movement of singers to protect and care for our communities in the



Fig 2: Minneapolis Protesters gather outside ICE hotel to sing of peace and forgiveness

face of rising authoritarianism... We are grounded in love, nonviolence, and solidarity. In the context of intense and escalating violence towards our communities and federal invasions of our cities and towns, we sing because song is an antidote to fear, song helps us connect to each other, and through song we can name and protect what we hold sacred.”

Minneapolis is not the only city forming a citizen choir. Across the United States, thousands of communities are forming citizen choirs, all under the umbrella of Singing Resistance. In a political landscape that is stoking fear and division, the growing number of collectives signing up for resistance singing demonstrates a radical refusal of imposed chaos.

Moving beyond the historical recognition of protest songs and their place in the urgent task of resistance, one must ask: what are the political mechanics of group singing? Singing is not merely a symbolic accompaniment to resistance; it is the essential act that reconfigures power relations. Central to this is the theory of Harmonious Unification, which argues that the act of unifying many distinct voices creates a counter-hegemonic space that disrupts oppressive structures. By examining the interplay between space, sound, and body, group singing functions as a machine of liberation, transforming individuals into a unified political force capable of challenging authority without resorting to physical violence.

In conclusion, this paper defines Harmonic Resistance as the transformative act of joining voices together to achieve common goals and display defiance through the acoustic energy of sound waves. Harmonic Resistance is not merely a metaphor; it is an act that reconfigures power and confidence, becoming a political act in itself. Embedding songs in protest rallies is a strategic practice that functions as a machine for democratic change. When tensions rise and emotions threaten to become destructive, the communal voice acts as a regulatory machine, blanketing the crowd in an affective shield of unity, peace, and hope. This approach is not a passive retreat but an active redirection or construction of an alternative path. The act of singing as a collective can imbue hope and encourage unity rather than incite aggression and division. Protest movements that avoid violence garner more sustained support. By garnering more support, hope is felt physiologically and therefore expressed politically. Therefore, singing as an act of non-violent resistance transforms the very atmosphere of dissent, turning a site of potential violence into a sanctuary of collective resilience. Through this critical examination, we can better understand that the most radical act in a chaotic world may be the collective decision to join our voices together in a hopeful song.

## Sources:

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## Images:

Fig 1: <https://mennofolkmusic.com/projects/resistance-singers/>

Fig 2: Kamrin Baker, <https://www.goodgoodgood.co/articles/singing-resistance-minnesota-ice-protest>

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