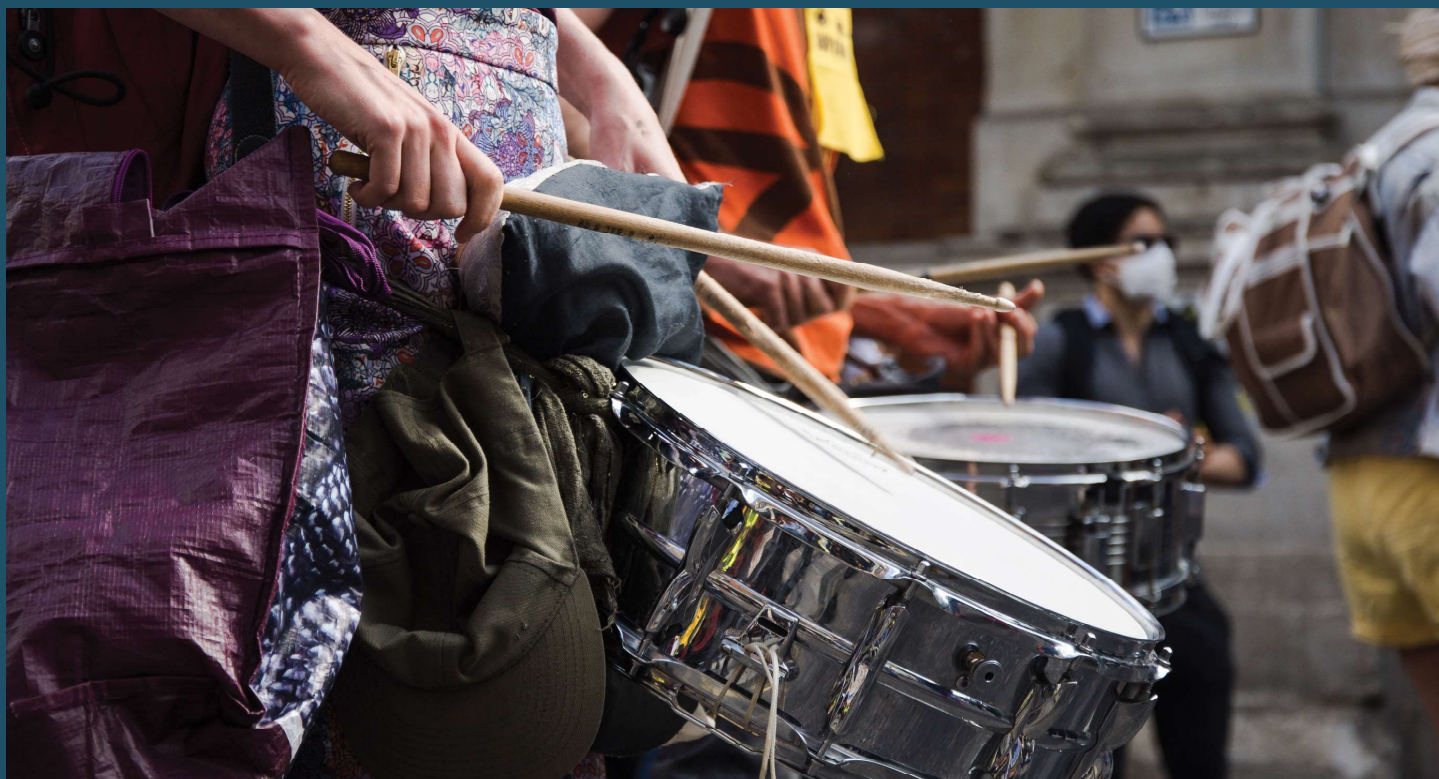


environmental youth forum

# **DIRECT ACTION TOOLKIT: MUSIC AS PROTEST**



## **What is direct action?**

**Direct action** refers to the political tactics and methods used to raise awareness or force discussion on an issue. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., nonviolent direct action “seeks to dramatize the issue [so] that it can no longer be ignored.” Like voting, direct actions, which include protests and sit-ins, are an essential part of a democracy. Unlike voting, however, direct actions can happen at any time, and anybody in a society can initiate a direct action—not just those of voting age.

## **Music as Protest**

We often think of music as a form of entertainment, but music can also be used as a highly effective form of direct action protest. The use of music as protest has a long history in America. Artists in many genres have used their music as protest, from the folk music of Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan, to rap artists like Public Enemy and The Coup. Music can be a powerful way to express your perspective and change minds on issues that matter to you.

# INSTRUCTIONS

## Step 1: Research the issue

Effective direct actions always start with a solid understanding of the issue you are trying to address and the community you are trying to reach with your message. First, understand both sides of the issue. Then figure out what you are trying to say and, just as importantly, who you are trying to say it to. Are you addressing people who feel differently from you to raise their awareness of your perspective? Or are you addressing people who agree with you to create a feeling of solidarity?

## Step 2: Pick a familiar song as a foundation

A common practice in protest music is to rewrite lyrics to an already popular song. “Battle Hymn of the Republic” is an example of a song that has been reworked over and over again, adapted with new lyrics in different contexts. The ideal song is familiar, with a simple melody that anyone can quickly learn and sing along to.

## Step 3: Rewrite the lyrics

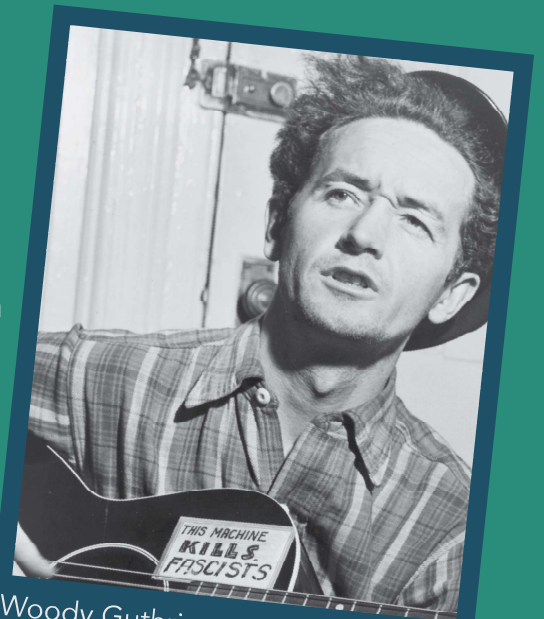
This is the fun part! Change the words in the song to create a new message about your chosen issue. Sometimes you can keep the original chorus and just rewrite the verses. It doesn’t need to be complicated—you want people to be able to learn it and sing along! Try using a rhyming dictionary (you can find one online) to help you.

## Step 4: Practice your song

Practice, practice, practice! You can sing along with a recording of the original song to help you master the melody. If you are going to perform this at a protest, you’ll want to be able to sing it with a clear melody even without the backing track.

## Step 5: Record or perform your song!

Make your voice heard! Songs are great to perform at protests and gatherings, and if those platforms aren’t available to you, you can also use technology to share your message. Try recording your song using a video or voice memo app, or use an app like TikTok or a video editor to create a duet recording with a friend.



Woody Guthrie, with “this machine kills fascists” written on his guitar, championed the use of song as a form of protest.

**“It’s a folk singer’s job to comfort disturbed people and to disturb comfortable people.”**

Woody Guthrie  
Folk Singer/Songwriter