

**Fifty Years Later: A Poem in Three Acts**  
Frank Merceret

**Act One**

The decade of the sixties,  
I knew it by its sounds.  
The whine of police sirens,  
the whump of tear gas rounds.

The sound of bombs exploding  
and all of us could see  
the carnage there in Vietnam  
nightly on TV.

The sounds of segregation,  
the sounds of men at war.  
But also there were other sounds  
that I could not ignore.

The sounds of people singing.  
The sounds of protest songs.  
The sounds of people bringing hope  
that we could right those wrongs.

Bob Dylan wrote some lyrics  
and picked up his guitar.  
He picked up his harmonica  
and set the world on fire.

And then there was Joan Baez  
whose rich angelic voice  
made it clear for all to hear:  
we could make a choice.

“Songs can’t change the world,” some said.  
“Thinking so is dumb.”  
But things did change as people sang  
“We Shall Overcome.”

Peter, Paul, and Mary  
and Pete Seeger sang their songs  
inspiring peaceful armies  
of protesters loud and strong.

Southern lunchroom sit-ins.  
Northern lunchrooms too.  
We righted wrongs with protest songs.  
We did what we could do.

And the gunfire in the jungle  
over there in Vietnam?  
We marched around the White House  
singing “peace” and “ban the bomb.”

Bullets brought down Doctor King  
and also JFK,  
but protest songs brought down Jim Crow  
and finished LBJ.

I'd like to end this poem right here  
and say the job is done,  
but I won't because I sadly fear  
the battle's not yet won.

## **Act Two**

The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act  
are both about fifty years old  
yet some parties, it seems, still go to extremes  
to keep people away from the polls.  
And even police aren't yet keeping the peace:  
some don't seem to think every life matters.

The war that we lost at such terrible cost  
should have taught us some valuable lessons.  
Yet again we're at war and just like before  
it's become quite a costly obsession.  
Just like Vietnam, we shoot and we bomb  
and bring home our soldiers in caskets.

Musicians, grab your instruments  
and writers, grab your pens.  
The sixties are long gone  
and we're in the twenty tens.  
Once again it's time to act and it seems to me  
we need to bring the music back.  
I think we need Act Three.

### **Act Three?**

I wonder who now has the ball.  
Is anyone inspired?  
Who will write the protest songs?  
The baby boom's retired.

Who will grab their keyboards  
or pick up their guitars?  
Whose new protest music  
will make them You-Tube stars?

Shall once again we overcome?  
I won't find it strange  
that if such songs are sung again,  
again the times will change.