

Fifty Years Later: A Poem in Three Acts
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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.