

This Is What Democracy Sounds Like: Protest Performances of the Citizenship Movement in Wisconsin and Beyond

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ABSTRACT *This article is a case study of an ongoing singing protest in Wisconsin, the group that calls itself Solidarity Sing Along (SSA). An offshoot of the 2011 Wisconsin Uprising, for the first 15 months of its existence SSA was an important nexus of local activists working to recall Republican state senators and the governor. After the recall's failure the group not only continued to carry on but quite effortlessly reoriented its claim making and centered its protests on the freedom to assemble and petition the government, which had been an important cause from early on. Maintaining its pro-labor orientation, SSA has become part of a broader movement for democratic citizenship rights. Situating the group in musical practices of the Wisconsin protests and social movements more generally, I show that how SSA makes and performs its music makes it a part of the citizenship movement. This case study reveals a novel form of claim making within the repertoire of contention practiced by social movements: SSA is a 'part-time occupation' and as such has potential to be more resilient and durable than 'permanent' occupations à la Occupy Wall Street.*

KEY WORDS: Protest music, labor movements, citizenship movements, Wisconsin Uprising, Occupy Wall Street, repertoires of contention

The Wisconsin Uprising has long been over. Gone from Capitol Square in Madison are the hundred-thousand-strong crowds of protesters. The Republican governor and state senators, who in February 2011 pushed through the bill stripping the state's public employees of collective bargaining rights, have mostly survived their respective recall elections and have been enacting their radical right-wing agenda, including restrictions on voting, environmental, and women's reproductive rights. However, it is not happening without continued opposition, smaller in numbers but just as vocal. A loosely organized group calling themselves Solidarity Sing Along (SSA) has been gathering in the State Capitol every workday since March 2011 to protest the state Republicans' actions in song. An offshoot of the 2011 Wisconsin Uprising, for the first 15 months of its existence SSA was an important nexus of Wisconsin activists working to recall Republican state senators and the governor. After the recall's failure the group not only continued to carry on (although after an internal crisis) but quite effortlessly reoriented its claim making and

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centered its protests on the freedom to assemble and petition the government, which had been an important cause from early on. Maintaining its pro-labor orientation, SSA has become part of a broader movement for democratic citizenship rights.

SSA is not the first ‘singing protest’ in the history of social movements, nor was it the only musical expression of the Wisconsin Uprising. What facilitates its longevity, while the protests out of which it emerged seem to have failed? Situating the group in musical practices of the Wisconsin protests and social movements more generally, I show that *how* and *what kind* of music SSA makes and *where* and *how* it performs it – exercising civil and political rights in reclaimed public spaces in a collaborative, participatory manner – make it a part of the citizenship movement. This case study reveals a novel form of claim making within the existing repertoire of contention practiced by social movements: SSA is a ‘part-time occupation’¹ and as such it has potential to be more resilient and durable than ‘permanent’ occupations as carried out by Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and its offshoots, which have been aptly called the ‘moment’ rather than the ‘movement’ (Gitlin, 2013).

The Wisconsin Uprising and Its Music

The 2011 Wisconsin Uprising started as a pushback to the so-called budget repair bill proposed in mid-February by the newly elected Republican Governor Scott Walker. Presented as a measure to balance the state’s budget, the bill (known as Act 10) sought to ban public-sector employees such as teachers, nurses, corrections officers, and sanitation workers from forming unions with collective bargaining powers (firefighters and police officers were exempt from the bill); it also aimed to raise workers’ health insurance and pension contributions. While both union leadership and the rank and file quickly if grudgingly agreed to the financial terms of the bill, thousands of workers from across the state descended on Madison, the state capital, to protest, to testify against the bill in the legislature’s finance committee, and to occupy the Capitol building in order to prevent the legislators from passing the anti-collective bargaining provisions quickly and quietly as they had intended. The Republicans controlled not only the governor’s office but also both houses in the legislature. The Democrats in the Assembly could do little but introduce amendments to the bill, which they did by the hundreds only to have all of them voted down in the longest non-stop session in the Assembly’s history that lasted nearly 60 hours with the bill passing in the wee hours of 25 February. In the state Senate, however, the Republicans’ majority was slim enough that 14 Democratic senators were able to deny their opponents the quorum necessary to consider the bill by decamping to neighboring Illinois, where they stayed for over three weeks until the Republicans found a loophole and approved the bill without the Democrats present.

Both parties’ unconventional legislative maneuvering was rivaled by historically unprecedented protests in Madison and across the state. Daily demonstrations in Madison’s central square, rain or shine – or rather ‘rain or sleet [. . .] wind or frigid snow,’ as Tom Morello later penned in a song inspired by the Uprising – culminated in the biggest rally in the state’s history (over 150,000 people) the day after the governor signed the anti-union bill. These record crowds of union activists, students, teachers, farmers, and small-business owners from around the state not just took to the streets but also staged a two-week-long round-the-clock ‘occupation’ of the Capitol, prefiguring by several months the OWS movement. Soon after the bill was passed and signed, the crowds inside the Capitol building and outside it dissipated but did not disappear – the Uprising just shifted

gears. Already at the early rallies, protesters floated the idea of recalling the governor and Republican senators, and before the bill even became law paperwork to recall six eligible legislators² was filed and the action shifted to collecting signatures in those senators' districts and laying the groundwork for the eventual recall effort against the governor, scheduled to begin in November 2011. But protesters' presence in and around the Capitol continued in various forms, including a group of local activists known as Solidarity Sing Along who started the lunch hour 'sing' on the day the governor signed Act 10 and have been protesting in song every workday since then.

SSA, of course, was not the first to introduce music to the Wisconsin Uprising. Many rallies opened with 'The Star Spangled Banner' and closed with Aretha Franklin's 'Respect' or Bob Marley's 'Get Up! Stand Up! Stand Up for Your Rights!' Soon after the protests started, the Massachusetts punk rock band with a history of support for progressive and union causes Dropkick Murphys released 'Take 'Em Down,' a song from their forthcoming album that organizers played at one of the rallies in Madison. The song's verses 'When the boss comes callin' we gotta organize' and 'We gotta take the bastards down' got loud cheers from thousands of the workers rallying outside the statehouse for the ninth straight day.³ Throughout the Uprising, recognized performers – Michelle Shocked, Jon Langford, and Peter Dinklage – came to the rallies to show solidarity with the workers' cause, and were themselves inspired enough to write songs, such as Morello's 'Union Town' and Tom Pacheco's 'Solidarity.'

Tom Morello from Rage Against the Machine, together with Tim McIlrath of Rise Against, MCS's Wayne Kramer, gospel-punk musician Ike Reilly, and Mike McColgan, the lead singer of the punk rock Street Dogs, were the first out-of-town recording artists to visit and play for thousands of activists in Madison. In addition to original songs such as the Street Dogs' 'Up the Union' and Morello's 'Union Song,' they performed, as Morello (2011) himself put it, a collective rendition of 'a rafter-rattling "There Is Power in a Union" and then a mosh pit-inducing "This Land Is Your Land."' The rally-like fist-pumping and punk rock pogo-ing culminated in a good portion of the audience joining the musicians on stage to sing Morello's 'World Wide Rebel Songs' from his soon-to-be-released record of the same title.

Performing Woody Guthrie's classic 'This Land Is Your Land,' Morello made a point of stressing that they would sing the song with its 'rebel, radical, revolutionary' verses that usually get left out because of references to protest and class conflict⁴ – issues not unfamiliar to his audience of protesters against union busting. But another performer, the award-winning singer-songwriter Ryan Bingham, struck an even more familiar chord at another rally a couple of weeks later. Instead of 'going to the source' and doing all of Guthrie's original stanzas, he came up with his own: 'We just won't stand for greed and evil/takin' my unions from our people/They take our dimes, they take our dollars/Try and take our unions/They gonna hear us holler.' The listeners roared with unequivocal approval.⁵

But local artists were perhaps the most creative in retelling in song the story of the Uprising itself. The folk musician Ken Lonquist was likely the first to memorialize it with his '14 Senators,' a song he composed as soon as the Senate Democrats 'went on a lam.' Soon after, the local band The Kissers penned what they called 'the song to recall by,' 'Scotty, We're Comin' for You.' Both songs, along with many others such as 'Scott Walker Blues' (Bonobo Secret Handshake) and 'Walker Never Listens' (Tribal Call), appeared on the 2012 CD 'Cheddar Revolution – Songs of Uprising.'⁶

The protesters made music too: members of the police and firefighter unions marched with bagpipes, young people in the Capitol rotunda had an ongoing drum circle accompanied by vuvuzelas and noisemakers, and a bunch of marching bands (or radical music-making collectives, as they called themselves) with telling names such as Madison's Forward!⁷ and Milwaukee Molotov Marchers were forged in the streets of Wisconsin during the weeks of demonstrations. One day during the Capitol occupation, a group of Madison musicians organized a flash mob to perform in the Capitol rotunda 'Do You Hear the People Sing' from the musical *Les Misérables*.⁸ The rotunda of the building where protesting Wisconsinites maintained round-the-clock presence to put pressure on their government was a perfect echo chamber – melodies from there carry throughout the entire building – so it was a natural place to gather and voice dissent even, or especially, when collective bargaining rights that Wisconsin public workers had enjoyed since the 1950s were revoked, the 'Rotundaville' was evicted, and the Republican-controlled state government was working to dismantle other citizenship rights, from welfare to voting. On 11 March 2011, a local activist from the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice put together a few songbooks and convened in the rotunda the first SSA. Since then, the group has become a fixture around the Capitol, 'a pilot light' (as one occasional participant put it) of the recall movement in 2011–2012 and a broader anti-Republican opposition after Walker survived the recall, the longest running protest singing event in history, and an award-winning guardian of freedom of expression.

Social Movements and Protest Music

By itself, SSA is not a movement. As I discuss later, its participants see it not as an organization but rather as a loose network of activists for various causes, some of whom show up to sing only a few times a year while others do so every day. But it is part of a movement or perhaps several movements. Growing out of the mobilization to defend collective bargaining rights, SSA has a firm pro-labor orientation. Not only many songs in its repertoire are old union tunes, but the group has strong ties with local unions: a fair number of its participants are members of various local public- and private-sector unions, it performs at local union rallies and other events such as the Labor Day Laborfest, and leaders of several state and local labor groups (AFSCME, AFL–CIO, and Wisconsin South Central Federation of Labor) have sung with, advocated for, and donated money to the group. Furthermore, SSA's repertoire and advocacy have evolved beyond the defense of collective bargaining rights and other union issues. Especially after the failure to recall the governor – and as a result of the Republican administration's attempts to crack down on its right to gather, perform, and protest in the Capitol as well as on other instances of opposition to their agenda – SSA has focused its activism on freedom of speech, the right to assembly, and equal and fair political access and representation – issues that are at the core of free speech/democratic movements, as Giddens calls them – the movements 'concerned with rights of political participation in general' (1990, p. 160).⁹

As a matter of fact, I want to propose that the '99% movement,' embodied at the national scene by OWS and responsible for this evocative catchphrase, was (or has been) not simply a movement for economic and social justice but for equality in the political sphere as well. While the clearest demand of OWS was 'a redress of the gross imbalance of wealth' (Gitlin, 2013, p. 18), it was not only about the purely economic consequences of such inequality. The framing of the issues as the 99% versus 1% also compellingly

suggested ‘the sense that power and participation in all manner of basic social institutions was organized on highly unequal bases’ (Calhoun, 2013, p. 33) and that reversal of this ‘plutocratic power’ was badly needed. The OWS’s insistence on calling for ‘inclusion, equality, and democracy’ in all spheres of social life and on performing them in the movement’s own activities (how successfully is not at issue here¹⁰) was largely due to its participants’ ‘sense that they were being treated with little of the dignity owed to *citizens*’ (Calhoun, 2013, pp. 35, 28, emphasis added). As a consequence of the sustained attack by Republican officials in Wisconsin, supported financially and ideologically by corporations and extraordinarily wealthy individuals who set up organizations such as the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) to devise model bills promoting limited government and free markets, on the citizens’ rights to form unions, to assemble and protest, to vote without restrictions, SSA participants share this sense of encroachment on their democratic rights. As I demonstrate later, while not as much at the ‘core’ of the movement, SSA, which by six months predated OWS, in many of its practices, rituals, and rhetoric resembles Occupy. There are also important differences, which, I argue, make SSA a more durable, sustainable, and more innovative protest performance than OWS. But these two acts – one shorter but more intense, another longer though more peripheral (both geographically and in terms of media coverage) – are part of the same movement for citizenship rights.

Before turning to the details of SSA’s story, it is worth looking at other studies of music in social movements. Surprisingly, there aren’t that many, especially about music *made by* movements, as opposed to music *consumed by* movements’ participants. To be sure, plenty has been written about popular music and politics, but this literature centers on professional artists-activists (such as Bob Dylan, Billy Bragg, or Bono, for example), on certain genres (folk music, hip-hop, straight edge, and punk), or on the history and role of particular songs (‘This Land Is Your Land’ or ‘Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud’) (e.g., Brown, 2008; Lynskey, 2011; Weissman, 2010).

Music making as integral part of collective action is the focus of Mattern’s *Acting in Concert: Music, Community, and Political Action* and Roy’s *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*. Examining the role of popular music in creating and maintaining explicitly political communities in pre- and post-1973 Chile, as well as among Black Creoles in Louisiana and American Indians in Minnesota and Wisconsin, Mattern (1998) distinguishes three ‘forms of acting in concert, each representing a particular form of community-based political action [...] *deliberative, pragmatic, and confrontational*’ (p. 7). The last happens when one community uses music in a contestation with another community. While this sounds contentious, Mattern argues that this way of ‘acting in concert’ may be good for democratic politics as an instrument of ‘enlisting support for the political agenda of a particular community, for publicizing a political issue, for drawing citizens into active participation in the public life of a community, and for galvanizing action on specific issues’ (25). The deliberative form of communal action describes the use of musical practices by a community ‘to debate their identity and commitments’ or negotiate ‘mutual relations’ among different communities. While these two types of action begin with a ‘presumption of divergent interests,’ the third, pragmatic, form occurs ‘when members of one or more communities use music to promote awareness of shared interests and to organize collaborative efforts to address them’ (30). None of these forms of political action through music has a better chance than any other to result in democratic change, in

other words to be successful; this, according to Mattern, depends on the social and political context. Therefore, he treats music not so much as a tool for democratic change but as a communicative forum, often an *alternative* communicative forum: music often ‘proves a form of communication through which the commonalities of community are created and discovered’; it also opens ‘social and public spaces for the communicative interactions that are necessary for the sharing of meaning and the creation of commonalities of identity [...] a sense of “who we are”’ (15–19).

Roy, in turn, focuses much less on what and how music communicates than on the social experience of music by movements’ participants. Looking at the Old Left movement of the 1930s–1940s and the civil rights movement, he argues that ‘the effect of music on social movement activities and outcomes depends less on the meaning of the lyrics or the sonic qualities of the performance than on the social relationships within which it is embedded’ (Roy, 2010, p. 2). For example, the Old Left used music to spread its ideological message and therefore had more success infusing the broader culture with the movement culture. Conversely, ‘the civil rights movement was more successful at facilitating music as *an integral part of collective action* that actually informed movement practice’ (7, emphasis added). Roy distinguishes three key roles the music can perform for social movements: recruitment, mobilization, and serving the committed. Recruitment happened by

exposing [people] to new ideas through lyrics, and helping them form network ties that can serve to draw people in [...] Mobilization [...] refers to the ways that music can facilitate actual collective actions, both by reinforcing commitments and by energizing a group as it prepares for action [...] serving the committed [...] refers to the way that music enhances solidarity, increases loyalty, reinforces identities, and gives content to ritual. (19)

The Old Left, according to Roy, deployed music predominantly for recruitment, while the civil rights movement used it to serve the committed and for mobilization: in other words, in one case music was a weapon of propaganda, while in the other it was an instrument to create solidarity.

While the role of SSA in bringing political and broader social change in Wisconsin is unclear (the short-term goal of ousting Republicans from power failed, and the struggle to restore collective bargaining rights for public-sector workers and to preserve other rights for all Wisconsinites is more long-term), in what follows I show that it certainly has been both an important communicative forum of the anti-Republican resistance and a hub of community- and solidarity-building and mobilization for causes of the democratic citizenship movement.

Solidarity Sing Along: Singing Truth to Power since 2011

This article draws on data collected through two main methods: participant observation and analysis of print and social media. Because I lived and worked as a public employee in Madison, Wisconsin, I had a front-row view of the anti-Act 10 mobilization of February–March 2011 and its musical practices. I learned about SSA within two weeks of its first sing,¹¹ and through July 2011 I occasionally participated in it and attended rallies where the group was invited to perform. I resumed my participant observation in August 2012, although less frequently, ending it a year later. Overall, I took part in about two dozen

sings and other events with SSA participation. As, at best, a subpar singer and, at that time, still a relatively recent and accidental transplant to Wisconsin, I stayed very much on the margins of the group. I had known three or four people in SSA as fellow university employees (not in my department) or through other, non-political community organizations, but did not make more than a nodding acquaintance with others in the group. The only way I participated in SSA was singing; in all other respects I was an observer (and an occasional 'liker' of posts on its Facebook page). The only 'notes' I took in 2011 were photographs for my personal 'Wisconsin Uprising Photo Album' and occasional journalism for my union's newsletter – not until much later, when I was following the group from afar on Facebook, did I realize that I was interested in SSA sociologically.

In the periods that I was away from Wisconsin, I observed the group through activities on its public Facebook page.¹² The page is run by a handful of administrators, but anyone can post there. In addition to posting links to updated songbooks, videos and photos of the sings and rallies at which SSA sang, activists of the group decide there on new tunes for the group and co-write new lyrics, debate political issues, plan the group's events, express solidarity with other protests happening near and far, and even post the weather forecast for days the group sings outside of the Capitol. All participants of the Facebook page know that it can be read by anybody, some even joke about (perhaps not so hypothetical) trolling of the page by political opponents, representatives of the governor's administration, and the Capitol police. As the group gained in eminence, at least locally, the reporting about its activities in print media and blogs surged; it was even covered in a few national outlets. Without being too engaged in the group's activities – camaraderie or conflict – I have gained a good sense of its purposes, its practices, and its performances.

The Troupe and the Mise en Scène

Despite often being called the Solidarity Singers (perhaps by analogy with Freedom Singers of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, who performed nationwide and were also active in the civil rights movement¹³), SSA participants are not professional singers and musicians. The group includes college and graduate students, nurses, small business owners, state workers, educators, and retirees, most of whom live in and around Madison, but some occasionally come from as far as three hours away. In the words of a long-time active participant, 'not only [had] many of us not been politically active until [2011], many of us had never even sung in public before.'¹⁴ Whenever they sing outside of the statehouse, at least once a week, every Friday, many SSA members bring musical instruments – various strings, an accordion, an occasional cymbal, and a mandatory cowbell (now seemingly an unofficial official musical instrument of the state of Wisconsin) – and form a pick-up band aptly named The Learning Curve. The group started small, a little more than a dozen people in the beginning, but soon drew 50–70 on a regular day and up to several hundred on special occasions such as legislative sessions days or protest rallies. The numbers of participants dwindled in the immediate aftermath of the failed recall but grew again after the beginning of a crackdown when the Capitol police started issuing citations to SSA participants first in September 2012 and then again in July 2013. As of January 2014, the group's Facebook page has almost 6500 'likes.' The number of 'likes' almost tripled over the previous year, likely because of the group's increased visibility in the local media. Some of the 'likes' are out-of-state, and the core of the group,

judging by who posts and comments regularly on the page, could be estimated around two to four dozen.

The daily sing-along happens between noon and 1 pm in the rotunda at the center of the Wisconsin statehouse. For the first year and a half, the rotunda was decorated with large handmade banners both to express the main themes of protests and to insist that protest signs were allowed in the Capitol building. While signs on sticks were never let in, the legality of even ‘soft’ banners and signs was also disputed by the Walker administration. The group’s large banners were one of the central issues in the police clampdown in 2012, and many protesters were cited even for handwritten, letter-size signs. Importantly, the group refuses to obtain permits for its daily gatherings insisting that they have a constitutional right, granted by both federal and state constitutions, to assemble in the building and petition elected officials. As the state administration started issuing tickets for ‘conducting picket/rally/demonstration w/o permit’ and ‘obstructing access/passage’ (both are violations of Administrative Code 2.14(2)(v)),¹⁵ the new editions of songbooks began to feature an excerpt from the Wisconsin State Constitution stipulating the right to free assembly and protest; it is also often read out loud at the beginning of the sings. The refusal to apply for permits is also fueled by SSA’s view of itself as only a network of individual citizens. As one of the participants, who claims to know only three other SSA attendees, wrote, ‘The singalong happens only because INDIVIDUALS decide to come to their Capitol and sing’; and each of these individuals should not be held responsible for the actions of others who happen to be present at the event, as the permit process implies (Plotkin, 2013). However, applying for a permit is not just a matter of possible liability (financial and otherwise) of the ‘organizers’ of sing-alongs. Permits, in SSA participants’ views, are necessary for organizations – which they understand to have a hierarchical structure, more or less strictly designated roles of ‘leaders’ and ‘followers,’ well-articulated, fixed objectives, and so on. In October 2012, one of the moderators of the group’s Facebook page, and a frequent conductor of the ‘sings,’ initiated a discussion about the possibility of applying for permits. Close to 50 people voiced their opinions, and the firm consensus was to continue the ‘no permit’ policy. In addition to arguments similar to those described earlier, several respondents made the connection between SSA and the occupation of the Capitol in February–March 2011 that was spontaneous and ‘permitless.’¹⁶ Members of SSA see themselves not as an organization but as a community constituted through musicking.

Continual presence at the Capitol is very important for the group. On many occasions they have refused to move outside when elected officials (usually Republicans) complained that the singing interfered with hearings occurring in the rooms near the rotunda. One participant of SSA explained that, ‘Committee hearings are EXACTLY when we should be inside making our voices heard’; another concurred: ‘The politicians in those hearing rooms need to hear us. That’s kind of the point of us being there!’¹⁷ As I have already mentioned, most participants view SSA as a continuation of the 2011 protests, and not only with respect to the issues they bring up in the songs but also to assert people’s free access to the building: ‘[SSA] makes sure that the legislators here know that we’re *still* here,’ as another singer said (Schneider, 2011, emphasis added). The group’s determination to protest on the doorstep of their adversaries and to do so very visibly and loudly is reminiscent of ‘rough music’ a direct action in the eighteenth-century repertoire of protest now largely forgotten (Tilly, 1998, pp. 45, 47) that entailed ‘a rude cacophony, with or without more elaborate ritual’ to publicly humiliate those who transgressed

community norms and that was also used against unpopular officials and in industrial conflicts (Thompson, 1992, pp. 3, 16–17).

Moreover, the rotunda is the crossroads – figurative as well as literal – of power. Throughout 2011 and early 2012 the Democratic state legislators repeatedly stopped by the Sing Along to demonstrate their support. In August 2011, after the successful recall of two Republican senators, their Democratic replacements participated in the sing-along on the day they were sworn in. Several progressive political candidates announced their electoral aspirations at sing-alongs. Besides, the ground floor of the Capitol is where the visitors to the building – among them lobbyists – come in. SSA activists see their daily presence in the state’s seat of power as a counterpoint, on behalf of all the people of Wisconsin, to the ‘backroom’ efforts of lobbyists who are perceived to represent the interests of corporations and the superrich. As the songbooks state, SSA happens at the ‘People’s House,’ alluding not only to chants of the 2011 occupation ‘Whose house? – Our house!’ but also to ‘the days of Governor [Fighting Bob] La Follette who famously threw the doors open to the people during the Progressive Era’ (Hayden, 2011). The group, however, yields the floor to prescheduled, ‘permitted’ events in the rotunda, such as weddings or Red Cross blood drives: while willing to engage in disruptive action against their direct opponents – politicians and lobbyists – whom SSA participants hope to ‘disarm, dismay, and disrupt’ and thus make them ‘attend to protesters’ demands’ (Tarrow, 2011, pp. 99, 101), they believe that everyone has an equal right to use the Capitol’s public space.

No matter how many are present at each sing, the group forms a circle at the perimeter of the rotunda – not only to underscore the rotunda’s symbolic importance as the central site of the 2011 Uprising and an intersection of all branches of the state government which they are petitioning, but also to emphasize the egalitarian character of the group.¹⁸ In this respect in particular, SSA is a good example of the democratic principles of folk music with its hootenanny-like setting. Hootenanny, a word folk singers Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie made up to describe a different way of doing music – an alternative to commercial music that maintained a clear distinction between the performer and an audience – was common at the height of folk music in the 1960s. In Seeger’s own description,

the best hoot [...] would have an audience of several hundred, jammed tight into a small hall, and seated semicircular-wise, so that they face each other democratically. The singers and musicians would vary from amateur to professional, from young to old, and the music from square to hip, cool to hot, long-hair to short. (quoted in Roy, 2010, p. 137)

Portrayed this way, hootenanny ‘evokes the New England town hall meeting both visually and interactively’; it was ‘to be an event that invited participation, an event filled with folk music and itself part of the folk process’ (Roy, 2010, p. 138). Even when visiting musical luminaries join SSA, they do not automatically become the group’s leader for the day; at most they lead a song or two, particularly if one of theirs is in the repertoire. The egalitarian, participatory, and open character of SSA is deliberately accentuated to juxtapose it with how the current Republican state administration has, in the eyes of SSA participants, been conducting its business.

To encourage participation in SSA, a sign inviting bystanders to take part is often placed in the middle of the rotunda along with spare songbooks. In the beginning, when the

songbook contained just 16 songs, every day the group would go through them without much variation in their order. But as the list of songs grew – it is now around 60 – the group daily faces a choice which songs to sing, and it picks them spontaneously and collectively as participants take turns calling out the next song. The egalitarian and collaborative character of SSA was especially evident on the day in June 2011 (slightly more than three months into the group’s existence) when a conservative group held a counter-sing-along. Unlike the ‘solidarity singers,’ who left the rotunda to sing outside because the conservative group had a permit for their event, the counter-singers assembled in a traditional choral way: more or less in the middle of the rotunda tightly packed together, a couple of rows deep facing the conductor who was the one to pick and lead the songs. The same message of participation and collaboration is reiterated on the CD that SSA recorded in 2012 around its first anniversary: ‘We have never thought of what we do as a performance. One of the central ideas of SSA is that anyone can participate. So, please, when you listen to this document of a remarkable time – sing along.’¹⁹

The Repertoire

The collaborative, inclusive, and spontaneous character of the group also manifests through its repertoire – both in its content and in how it changes. As I have already mentioned, the first songbook included 16 songs, most of them old union and freedom songs, such as ‘We Shall Overcome’ (which early on was always the opening song), ‘We Shall Not Be Moved,’ ‘Which Side Are You On?,’ ‘If I Had a Hammer,’ ‘Union Maid,’ and ‘Solidarity Forever.’ However, from the beginning a few of these classics were adapted to the Wisconsin situation: ‘We Shall Overcome’ closed with the chorus ‘Walker won’t be governor/Some day (some day soon),’ and Billy Bragg’s ‘There Is Power in the Union’ included a line ‘Down with Scott Walker/All workers unite.’ The chorus to ‘This Land Is Your Land’ has been almost completely rewritten to make references to Wisconsin’s geography and landmarks and to close with the lines that had become iconic during the protests: ‘This house is your house/This house is my house! [...] This house was made for you and me!’ The Madison band The Kissers had adopted a civil rights anthem ‘It Isn’t Nice’ (written by Malvina Reynolds in 1964) to memorialize the resistance to the passage of Act 10 by alluding to ‘crossin’ the state line’ and ‘shout[ing] out “Shame! Shame!”/down on the Assembly floor.’ The adaptation of Anne Feeney’s ‘Have You Been to Jail for Justice?’ sings out the phone number of the local Lawyers Guild that provides legal help to those ticketed for participation in SSA.

However, in addition to performing these updated standards, members of the group early on began to discuss (over Facebook as well as privately) the idea of creating their own songs, and eventually rewrote lyrics to many popular tunes to fit the issues and the circumstances, as well as the spirit, of their own protest. By summer 2011, they had an updated songbook, which over the years of SSA’s existence has gone through at least ten editions and more than tripled in the number of songs. Many songs are collaborations and some were first drafted, if not written in their entirety, on Facebook (which, to a certain extent, disproves Roy’s skepticism about the use of technology in music making by social movements²⁰).

I do not analyze in detail the songs’ lyrics as I agree with Roy that *what exactly* the group sings is no more important than *how* it does it, how it structures relationships within the group and with the outside world – how embedded their musicking is in social

relationships. But at the same time the discussion of repertoire can illuminate these social relationships, internal as well as external. For example, a few titles from the songbook's recent edition demonstrate that the repertoire more and more relies on the homegrown lyrics and reflects local issues: 'Down at the Sing Along,' 'This Little Vote of Mine,' 'When Scotty Goes Marching Home Again,' and 'The Koch Song.' These revisions allude to the issues that have been at the heart of the protest against the current state administration. But these lyrics aim not only to 'inform internally' and 'externally,' which are two of the ten primary functions of culture in social movements, according to Reed (2005), but also to historicize: 'invent, tell, and retell the history of the movement' (p. 300). At the same time, by keeping the tunes recognizable (both traditional protest songs and loans from broader popular culture ['My Bonny Lies over the Ocean,' 'When the Saints Go Marching In,' even 'Oh, Susanna']), Sing Along remains accessible to newcomers who can easily chime in – by singing, tapping, or clapping to a familiar melody. However, a good number of songs are standards that are unlikely to be nixed because they provide a connection to past protest movements, in the USA and worldwide (for example, 'The Internationale' is a recent edition to the repertoire). It is worth noting that adapting lyrics of protest songs is a long-standing tradition, with 'Solidarity Forever' itself, for example, being a revision of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic,' in turn adapted to the tune of 'John Brown's Body.'²¹

SSA's repertoire not only makes connections with past movements but helps to write the movement's own history. There was a lot of international solidarity with Wisconsin protests in early 2011: on the one hand, many in the state felt inspired by the Arab Spring and, especially, by mobilization in Egypt that had happened right before. On the other, support for the Wisconsin struggle came from around the country and around the world: for example, a popular local pizza place received delivery orders for protesters from two dozen countries, including Egypt (Greenhouse, 2011). The Wisconsin Uprising participants have been eager to repay the support – with many traveling to New York to participate in OWS in September 2011 or to Chicago to march with striking teachers in September 2012. SSA has done its part too: in May–June 2011, when sleepover protests were happening in the streets of Madrid, Spain, the group recorded and posted on YouTube the Spanish version of 'We Shall Not Be Moved' ('No nos moverán'), which within just a couple of days received over 50,000 hits and hundreds of comments.²²

However, in the selection of its repertoire SSA not only aims to historicize but also paints, or rather sings about, the society its members strive for. As Roy (2010) explained, 'social movements to some degree or another attempt to embody within themselves the world they are trying to create' (p. 238), and so does the music that they make and use. For example, in 'Save the Penokee Hills Forever' (sung to the tune of 'What a Wonderful World'), the author of the new lyrics not only memorializes the state's natural beauty that might be destroyed by newly expanded mining and fracking (one of the Republicans' agenda items) but also envisions a more harmonious future if environmental laws in general are strengthened. The SSA originals such as 'I Don't Want Your Millions, Mister,' as well as many union standards in the group's repertoire, depict the world without the rich and poor. Similarly, many songs the group sings promote all kinds of solidarities and oppose any inequalities. Many often-sung standards (including The Kissers' 'Scotty, We're Comin' for You' or adaptations of 'We Shall Not Be Moved' and 'Banks of Marble') aim at maintaining the alliance among the teachers, farmers, public- and private-sector workers that formed during the weeks of the Uprising. Early on, a line 'We are gays

and straight together' was added to the song 'We Are a Gentle Angry People' (also known as 'Singing for Our Lives' by Holly Near of the Freedom Singers) that, in addition to symbolizing the group's non-violent character, declares the group's vision of an inclusive and equal world.

There is not always a complete consensus among SSA participants; the disagreements are not about the group's positions on the issues but on how to achieve its ends.²³ For example, not everyone subscribes to the group's philosophy of non-violence. There was a long, quite heated discussion on Facebook in February 2012 about whether SSA should sing, what the initiator of this conversation called, the 'less pacified' version of 'Solidarity Forever' as he felt that this, and a few other songs, were 'sanitized' of their radical meaning²⁴ (presumably to distance the group from the Industrial Workers of the World, to which the author of the original 'Solidarity Forever,' Ralph Chaplin, belonged). While the lyrics of this song remained unaltered, now the songbook includes more radical tunes, or at least tunes with more radical connotations, such as 'The Internationale' and 'Joe Hill,' the former of course being the official anthem of the Socialist International and the latter about another IWW activist and labor icon. The expansion of the repertoire in this direction not only speaks to SSA's deliberative and inclusive character but also exemplifies culture's harmonization function for social movements, which, according to Reed (2005), is to 'smooth differences among diverse constituencies [and] provid[e] a sense of overarching connection that [...] subordinates differences' (p. 300). Harmony and fellowship are goals of SSA because it is both a singing community and a part of the movement for democratic rights.²⁵

Two Acts: SSA and OWS

Even though SSA emerged as a response to the promulgation of anti-union legislation and, like the rest of Wisconsin democratic, labor, and progressive activists, supported recalls of state Republican politicians in an effort to undo Act 10, its objectives since the beginning have been beyond electoral campaigns and legislative actions. As one of the group's regular participants articulated during a Facebook discussion about what to do after the recall (especially if it failed), 'it's not about the recall at all. It's about free speech, access, and presence.'²⁶ As I have described earlier, the right to protest without restrictions and to do so in the Capitol building has been key to the group's members and is reflected in what and how they sing. Many participants have emphasized that they return to the Capitol for sing-alongs as a response to the administration's decision in February 2011 to lock down this public building and end its occupation by pro-labor protestors. After the eviction, the Capitol was closed to the public for several days, and for weeks after that metal detectors remained at each entrance, which is highly unusual for Madison, where metal detectors, bag searches, and ID checks have not become as common as they are at entry points to educational, government, and office buildings in large cities such as New York. Traumatized and incensed by secretive and underhanded means the state Republicans used to enact their agenda, members of SSA see themselves as 'making sure that the people of Wisconsin have the right to speak out [...] have the ability to assemble and [...] that our elected officials can hear us.'²⁷ In short, from the beginning participants of SSA have viewed their actions in broader terms of defense of constitutional rights – the rights of assembly and free speech specifically – and this was publicly recognized when the group received the Civil Libertarian of the Year Award from the Wisconsin ACLU in March

2012.²⁸ After the start of the police clampdown on the group and the pressure to apply for permits, the defense of these rights has been not just a symbolic but an actual goal.

This emphasis on citizenship and conception of themselves as rights-bearing citizens – ‘the people who respect the right of all citizens to enjoy basic freedoms and have access to food, education, and health care so they can be productive members of a just society’²⁹ – is one thing that SSA and Occupy had in common. As I alluded to throughout the article, the similarities were not only in substance but also in form. Like OWS, SSA (along with several other local activist networks that emerged out of the 2011 mobilization) consciously strives to be egalitarian, inclusive, deliberative, and leaderless. Wisconsin activists are reacting specifically against the top-down, secretive, exclusionary approach of the state Republicans; Occupy, perhaps, to the domination of neoliberalism in politics. In both cases the occupation and reclamation of public spaces from private, business interests were central – the Capitol building in Wisconsin, the (disappearing) public parks and other open public spaces, associated with the public sphere (Calhoun, 2013, p. 29; Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012, pp. 280–281), for Occupy groups nationwide. Peaceful and orderly conduct is characteristic of SSA, as it was of OWS, notwithstanding disruptive tactics against their respective opponents. If in SSA’s case it might be, and has been, attributed to ‘Midwestern niceness,’ in fact in both instances it was ‘an occasion to perform “the people capable of spontaneous order,”’ to underscore the overreach, illegitimacy, or even obsolescence of current power institutions (Calhoun, 2013, p. 30). Furthermore, what is SSA if not a daily ‘general assembly’ where concerned citizens gather to deliberate amongst themselves (as much as petition the government)? Participatory democracy, as an ideal for political action as well as a principle of self-government within the movement, is a shared value for SSA and OWS.

Explaining the short-lived nature of Occupy, Calhoun (2013) argues that it was ‘less [...] a movement than a dramatic performance,’ one of the implications being that it was staged for audiences and cameras and could not endure once it was out of the public eye as a result of eviction (p. 35). SSA is a performance too, and in a much more literal sense. However, the performance and permanence here are not in opposition, as, according to Calhoun, it was in OWS’s case (37). The performing, theatrical character of SSA, I want to suggest, contributes to its longevity, and not only because of its playful and carnivalesque character that makes it fun, both for participants and audiences. While it is also an ‘occupation,’ it is somewhat different from OWS, and the differences make it more likely to last. Unlike many other musical protests that have taken place in recent years (flash mobs at foreclosure hearings,³⁰ against cuts to education and healthcare spending in Florida,³¹ or in support of the Affordable Healthcare Act³²) or even similar groups in other states, such as Michigan and Texas SSAs, the Wisconsin SSA is a regular and frequent happening. But contrary to Occupy, the actual ‘occupation,’ while happening almost daily, lasts only an hour. As a ‘part-time occupation,’ it is easier on the partakers, as it does not require round-the-clock commitment, and also attracts a demographically wider range of participants (from students to public employees to business owners). It also puts less strain on potential allies: it is likely that even the most sympathetic state legislators would have tired of the protestors’ singing if they had to listen to them (not always hitting the notes perfectly) all day long while in meetings with constituents, committees, or legislative sessions. The fact that the sings more often than not happen not in a random park or a university quad but in a symbolically meaningful public building that, though contested, is open and available to the community and is also a recognized hub of political power is of

great importance. Not only do the immediate ‘addressees’ of protest songs work in offices within the hearing distance, the location also guarantees steady attention from the media (who might be there to cover other political events), making it more difficult for the authorities to displace the ‘occupation’ quietly, or at least in the middle of the night as happened to OWS. The regrouping is also easier because it is in a building almost always open to the public and that is hard to shut down to prevent entry only by the protesters. Therefore, the only recourse against the protest is daily repression, but, as the University of Wisconsin–Madison sociologist Pam Oliver put it, ‘the repression itself becomes news [...] The danger of reacting to a protest is you might make it bigger by giving it something to push against’ (Davidoff, 2013). The brief but direct engagements with actual adversaries, rather than diffuse (even if intentionally so) opposition to a broadly construed enemy, orient protest toward a more or less meaningful endpoint (ouster of the Republicans from power and subsequent restoration of citizenship rights under the rule of the other party, in the case of SSA), even if it might not happen for years.

While Wisconsin’s SSA will not necessarily prove more important than OWS for the success of the ‘99% movement,’ it is indubitably an innovation in practices of contentious action. It is not a dramatically novel form of protest, but, as we know, innovation in repertoires occurs in ‘imperceptible ways’ and ‘at the margins of inherited forms’ of protest (Tarrow, 2011, p. 114). ‘Singing truth to power,’ SSA-style, is a new form of claim making, a new type of performance within the existing repertoire at the disposal of social movements – a part-time occupation, performed in song, the essence and spirit of which can be summarized with the words of one of its regulars³³: ‘Show up. Sing. Come back the next day and do it again. Repeat until you are heard. Be peaceful, be positive, be polite. But be strong, stand firm, endure. (And, when you can, be melodious).’

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Notes

1. By occupation I mean a continued and intentionally disruptive presence in a symbolically significant public space.
2. According to Wisconsin law, an elected official must be in office for at least a year before a recall can be initiated.
3. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6r_AXEP8CE, retrieved 2 January 2014.
4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAMvJWX8tGI>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kknr-advKkg>, retrieved 2 January 2014.
5. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyqFbBSwlzY>, retrieved 2 January 2014.
6. <http://www.wisconsinprotestsongs.com/>
7. ‘Forward’ has been Wisconsin’s official state motto since 1851.
8. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVEMZSP8Ypk>, retrieved 2 January 2014.
9. Other rights, for example women’s rights or environmental rights (especially for the state’s Native American population), are also of importance to SSA as a group and to its individual members.
10. But see, for example, Juris, Ronayne, Shokooh-Valle, and Wengronowitz (2012) on OWS’s difficulties to overcome internal inequalities in the framework of ‘majoritarian populism.’
11. ‘Sing’ (as a noun), rather than ‘performance,’ is the preferred word of the participants of SSA to describe their activity.
12. <https://www.facebook.com/SolidaritySingAlong>.
13. More on Freedom Singers, see Lynskey (2011, p. 48, *passim*) and Roy (2010, pp. 170, 203, 208–211).

14. SSA Facebook page, 17 March 2012, post by SSA.
15. As of mid-September 2013, 686 tickets had been issued to SSA participants, with more than two-thirds since Walker won the recall reelection in 2012 and almost 25% in July–August 2013. A total of 272 people had been ticketed, and 414 citations went to ‘repeat offenders.’ The three top ticketed individuals received between 35 and 53 citations each (Raygo, 2013). Citations are usually for 200 dollars.
16. Solidarity Sing Along Facebook page, 10 October 2012, post by SSA.
17. Solidarity Sing Along Facebook page, 28 February 2012, comments on the post by Steve Burns.
18. For the first 15 months, the group had a more or less regular conductor, who also ran the group’s Facebook page, liaised with the Capitol police and newspapers, ordered and sold t-shirts. He was a trained performer, which gave him more experience in leading the songs, but others, often without musical or artistic training, also stepped in to lead the sings. After the failed recall, this person left the group, and once the police started punishing the conductors, whom they perceived as group’s ‘leaders,’ more and more singers joined the rotation of song leaders.
19. <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/solidaritysingalong>.
20. Roy (2010) on making music on the Web:

The main difference between this musicking and the musicking of organizations like the civil rights movement is that the social relations are mediated by technology. It is not making music together [...] At the very least the Web can be the institutional basis of new movements to the extent that it can be thoroughly integrated into other aspects of life in the same sense that black churches and black colleges were integrated into the lives of many civil rights activists. (pp. 249–250)

21. Roy (2010) and Lynskey (2011) describe some of these adaptations in detail.
22. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_jnOXhDF6c, retrieved 2 January 2014.
23. Polletta (2004) analyzes similar pitfalls of deliberative, participatory democracy in US social movements. Arguing for the value and practicality of participatory democracy, she also notes the problems that arise when internal democracy is based on nonpolitical models like friendship, tutelage, and religious fellowship.
24. Solidarity Sing Along Facebook page, 5 February 2012, post by Ashford Wyrd.
25. I do not mean to suggest though that democracy is devoid of conflict.
26. Solidarity Sing Along Facebook page, 27 May 2012, comment on the post by SSA.
27. Solidarity Sing Along Facebook page, 17 March 2012, post by SSA.
28. As of now, SSA has been honored with three awards for its activism. In addition to the ACLU award, it received the Spirit of the Movement Award from the local progressive coalition We Are Wisconsin in September 2012 and, in June 2013, the Power of the People Don’t Stop Award from the Labor and Working Class Studies Project, a campus-labor-community initiative in Madison.
29. Solidarity Sing Along Facebook page, 26 September 2012, comment on the post by Mary Ray Worley.
30. http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2011/10/how_singing_foreclosure.php; http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2012/01/singing_protest.php, retrieved 2 January 2014.
31. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6mjGou7RBg>, retrieved 2 January 2014.
32. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx-BSnYzH6c>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGWUMk5akXk>, retrieved 2 January 2014.
33. Solidarity Sing Along Facebook page, 17 March 2012, post by SSA.

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