

# Making *Activist Songbook* Virtual

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## Overview

March 2020 was a turning point. My 40-minute morning walks to school would be replaced by the ritual of logging onto Zoom to teach a few steps from my bed. Since October 2017, I have been working on participatory events with organizing and singing workshops in a project called *Activist Songbook*.<sup>1</sup> Like many in-person gatherings around the United States, this live performance had to go virtual or be cancelled. In Part One of this article, I start by providing context about adapting songs for the streets to an online platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Part Two, I provide details about virtual solutions the creative team tried between March and June 2020 to make the songs and content accessible to organizers. I offer personal insights and practical steps as ways to connect in this time of disconnect as an educator and musician dedicated to social justice. First, here is an overview of the project.

*Activist Songbook* is an ongoing community-collaborative intervention launched thanks to Asian Arts Initiative and The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage (*ex*)*CHANGE: History Place Presence* grant in Philadelphia in October 2017.<sup>2</sup> New Haven-based writer Aaron Jafferis and I as the composer began the process to create 53 new raps and songs to energize and support individuals and movements fighting hate crimes. Part of the process includes asking Asian Pacific American activists, immigrants, and refugees questions such as:

1. What are the sounds your movement needs that do not yet exist?
2. How can we work together to create these songs?

Material emerges from interviews, meetings, and research with individual organizers and activist groups. Jafferis and I turn this material into musical templates to use in marches, meetings, rallies, and more. We organize ideas and stories to engage community members in one of four ways identified by the organizers themselves: Challenge, Nurture, Instruct, and Rally. The resulting songs circulate via in-person workshops, live events, zine scores, music videos, and now during shelter-in-place 2020, an online *Activist Songbook* platform.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Details at <https://www.activistsongbook.org>

<sup>2</sup> Details at <https://www.pewcenterarts.org/grant/exchange-history-place-presence>

<sup>3</sup> Details at <https://www.theactivistsongbook.org>

The songbook is a collection of 26 narrative songs and 26 rally songs. Narrative songs tell a story and require rehearsals to be performed. Rally songs can be taught outdoors to a group of people to be used within 10 minutes at a march or protest event. Usually the rally song is the hook or chorus of the narrative song, so if a listener knows the rally song, they can sing along with parts of the narrative song. Both types of songs are to sustain movement building.

This 53rd song is an invitation to make original material informed by what Jafferis and I have learned through the process of creating *Activist Songbook*. We lead workshops to guide individuals in story sharing, identifying organizing needs, learning *Activist Songbook* material, and writing new verses or music. Some of the 53rd songs are created in collaboration with us and some are created with other singer-songwriters and rappers. Ultimately the 53rd song represents an infinite number of future songs informed by the process of *Activist Songbook*.

Initially provoked by the racially-motivated murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American beaten to death by two white Detroit auto workers in 1982, *Activist Songbook* provides a way for human rights organizing and songs to intersect through collective music-making. Central to *Activist Songbook* is the ongoing legacy of intersectional activism by honoring individuals such as Grace Lee Boggs (1915–2015), a Chinese American revolutionary involved in the Black Power Movement. Inspired by multigenerational activists, organizers, and whistleblowers throughout the United States, Jafferis and I interview, write portrait songs informed by the interviews, and work with the interviewees to ensure that the songs based on their lived experiences are accurate and useful.

For example, “We Are Leaders” is prompted by Wei Chen’s memories of becoming an organizer. The song tracks Chen’s journey: from being the 16-year-old victim of anti-Asian beatings, to organizing classmates for an eight day boycott, to building a movement with Asian and Black students that changed school policy throughout Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup> After Chen’s feedback on our initial draft (he wanted a song to inspire and unite, not depress and divide), Jafferis and I rewrote the song’s hook so it can be used in rallies:

The system separates us by our tongues, by our skin,  
where we’re from, where we’ve been,  
so we think we will never break the boxes they got us in.  
But every time we come together, we win.  
We are youth. We are leaders.  
We have the power to make a change. I believe this.

Our creative process for *Activist Songbook* convenes stakeholders to tell their stories and discuss their organizing needs. Initial meetings with Asian Pacific American activists generate ideas to inform the compositions and develop community collaborations. Together, we consider how the songs can be most useful in current organizing work.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with Wei Chen at Asian Arts Initiative in Philadelphia on October 16, 2017.



Still from “We Are Leaders” Video created for the International Festival of Arts & Ideas, 2020

Since 2017, Jafferis and I have worked in Philadelphia, the San Francisco Bay Area, and New Haven in collaboration with Asian Arts Initiative, Montalvo Arts Center, the International Festival of Arts & Ideas, and local activist groups to develop songs and raps, participatory workshops, and related organizing events. Asian Pacific American activists are underrepresented in history books and mainstream media. This has led to feelings of isolation, tokenism and whitewashing, feelings especially voiced by youth who search for role models and return empty-handed. *Activist Songbook* is a necessary interruption of systemic racism and xenophobia, where Asian Pacific Americans are perceived as foreign, even within social movements; on the periphery of the Black-White, Latinx, and Indigenous struggles. Highlighting Asian Pacific American stories and strategies with an original repertoire of songs circumvents conventional power hierarchies, especially as we have had to move online during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

## Part One: Adapting During COVID-19

It starts with text messages, the quickest way for the creative team to reach each other. This includes *Activist Songbook* co-creator Jafferis and International Festival of Arts & Ideas producer Missy Huber located in New Haven, as well as music director (and later also audio/video editor) Stephanie Tubiolo located in Princeton, and myself located in San Francisco. We plan auditions and workshops for *Activist Songbook*, an ongoing community music-making initiative to counteract hate and energize movements.

**March 12, 2020 Texts**

11:26 AM: “Just talked to library, who said announcement is about to go up on website that they're cancelling all events (incl. our auditions) starting tomorrow, through April 12th. So I think we should switch to online auditions for now and keep Byron and Stephanie where they are.”

11:29 AM: “Ok, sounds good. Instead of making people upload videos to youtube, should we make a private Dropbox folder they can upload to? I'm happy to do it, and happy to make some videos in lieu of the workshop”

12:19 PM: “Hi all. Heard. I think can we have a call about the mechanics of video submissions?”

12:31 PM: “Sounds good, Missy, Aaron, and Stephanie. LMK when to telephone. Missy, should I cancel my travel or do you or Lud need to? Thanks all.”

12:44 PM: “Byron can I call you.”

12:55 PM: “Yes”

12:56 PM: “I'm here at school trying to figure out what to do about all the upcoming music events”

12:57 PM: “We do have many online resources which could be helpful for ASB, but right now it's trying to wade through all the information”

1:23 PM: “Flight rebooked for April.”<sup>5</sup>

My travel plans for April, May, and June are also cancelled. Looking back on these texts, virtual solutions are already being suggested with “switch to online auditions,” “make a private Dropbox folder,” and “videos in lieu of the workshop.” On March 13, 2020, the New Haven Free Public Library where we were scheduled to hold auditions, announced that it was closed to the public indefinitely. Many public institutions, restaurants, concert halls, theaters, and other locations are closed due to COVID-19. Shelter-in-place becomes a common phrase.

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<sup>5</sup> Personal mobile text correspondence with the author.

On April 14, 2020, Joe Amarante in the *New Haven Register* writes:

“The COVID-19 pandemic claimed another arts victim Tuesday when New Haven’s International Festival of Arts & Ideas announced its 25th anniversary edition would be online only, with all live events canceled.”<sup>6</sup>

The title for this article is “New Haven Arts & Ideas Fest cuts live events for online; \$9.2M impact.” *Activist Songbook* is one of the few projects the Festival keeps as the creative team—supported by producers Rob Aqui and Ronee Penoi from Octopus Theatricals—pivots from live to online events. We also realize the significant need for *Activist Songbook* to continue. Music Director Tubiolo writes in an email on March 14, 2020:

“As more and more people become isolated in their homes, a project like this which connects them and gives them a creative outlet (something I’ve personally been desperate for!) is more essential than ever and could be a huge gift from Arts & Ideas to the community... It’s easy to feel like life is just frozen right now—it’ll be hugely comforting to a lot of people to be making new art and new friends.”<sup>7</sup>

The creative team’s devotion helps *Activist Songbook* become one of seven main event categories at the 2020 International Festival of Arts & Ideas, alongside Ideas Series: *Democracy*, *We the People*, Neighborhood Festivals, Tours, Storytelling, *More Or Less I Am*, and the Yale-China Fellowship. Additional events include Let’s Make A Dance, Keybank Food Series, NEA Big Read, Virtual Box City, Juneteenth, and Arts on Call.<sup>8</sup> Lucy Gellman quotes Festival Co-Director Tom Griggs in “Arts & Ideas Goes Virtual” in *New Haven Arts*:

““While it won’t be possible for us to continue with the live programming that we had planned, we’re excited by the new virtual and physically distanced program that we are reimagining to virtually embrace our audience, artists, and community, and to deliver, in a new way, all the things you know and love about the Festival.”<sup>9</sup>

Recognizing the critical role of communal experience to build solidarity, *Activist Songbook* invites aesthetic participatory action by echoing elements found in protest anthems such as chants, call and response, and sing-alongs. To make this project virtual, the creative team continued to consider ways to cultivate civic engagement online. Three key ideas include that our process is both long lasting and responsive, that there be little to no barrier to participation, and that there are multiple ways to access and be involved in the project as we move *Activist Songbook* online.

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<sup>6</sup> Joe Amarante, “New Haven Arts & Ideas Fest Cuts Live Events for Online; \$9.2M Impact,” *New Haven Register*, April 14, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Personal email correspondence with the author.

<sup>8</sup> Details at <https://www.artidea.org/2020-festival>

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Gellman, “Arts & Ideas Goes Virtual,” *New Haven Arts*, April 14, 2020.

## Part Two: Moving *Activist Songbook* Online

### Long Lasting and Responsive Process

Successful peaceful protests are able to quickly gather people often because organizing has happened carefully over time. *Activist Songbook* started development with Asian Arts Initiative in Philadelphia in 2017, to be part of their 25th Anniversary Celebration in May 2018. The creative process for *Activist Songbook* paralleled the formation of social movements by gathering people hurt by injustices. Jafferis and I worked closely with Asian Arts Initiative and Philadelphia's Asian activists with residencies for interviews and workshops for music creation. Our meetings shared the dual purpose of generating ideas to inform the composition and provide a space for community-building with cross-sector collaborations. The inclusive musical events included communal experiences such as learning songs on buses and performing at events throughout Philadelphia to energize, challenge, and inspire audiences in the fight for social justice.

Jafferis and I continue this long lasting work by interviewing organizers (we have interviewed over 50 individuals so far) and leading *Activist Songbook* workshops in various cities throughout the United States. The 53 songs to counteract hate and energize movements are a combination of 26 narrative songs and 26 rally songs. These provide templates for the 53rd song to guide any activist to develop their own song. Symbolically, the number 53 comes from 52 weeks in a year that rolls into the 53rd week that starts a new year. There are also 52 cards in a deck with the 53rd being a joker with orange hair inaugurated into the White House in January 2017. Regenerative material and instructional workshops make an ongoing process for *Activist Songbook* that is long lasting and responsive.

### Little to No Barrier to Participation

In June 2020, Philip Ewell, Associate Professor of Music Theory at Hunter College, published the article "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,"<sup>10</sup> based on a talk he gave at the Society for Music Theory Annual Meeting in 2019. He writes that some individuals become distanced from their love of music in educational settings. Most harmful are the social structures that perpetuate systemic and institutionalized racism. While the songs for *Activist Songbook* are notated primarily using European classical music notation, I always teach workshops orally with sheet music handed out afterwards. Moving online, Music Director Tubiolo created a music learning site for five virtual choir songs that similarly expands participation. Next to each lyric and music is a play button with Tubiolo demonstrating the melody and rhythm.

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<sup>10</sup> Philip A. Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," *Music Theory Online* 26, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.26.2.4>.

The image shows a musical score for the song "There Will Be Joy". It features three staves of music in G major. The first staff is marked "Radiant" with a tempo of 132 and the instruction "divisi". The lyrics "Joy!" are written below the notes. The second staff has the lyrics "Joy! Joy! Joy! Joy!" and includes a section labeled "A" with the instruction "start anywhere go in any order repeat freely overlap and hocket". The third staff has the lyrics "There should be joy!". There are play buttons above and below the staves, and a dashed oval encircles the first two staves.

"There Will Be Joy" music learning excerpt with play buttons

Tubiolo also included written and video instructions for learning and recording the music.<sup>11</sup>

**#1: All parts equal volume**  
A good choice if harmonies don't confuse you, or if you plan to experiment and improvise.



**#2: Melody**  
In this version, the melody is loud throughout--- the least confusing option!



**#3: Melody +**  
In this version, the melody *and* the easiest versions of A are loudest.



Detail of Video Music Learning by Music Director Stephanie Tubiolo at [activistsongbookmusic.org](https://www.activistsongbookmusic.org)

Moreover, she writes about how the construction of the music allows more people to join:

"I really think your model of interweaving notated components, rote-learnable melodies, and opportunities for improvisation could be the key to a more inclusive choral world. So many musical traditions are born out of and embrace interactions between notation-dependent and notation-independent musicians; your model enables these interactions to flourish within the U.S. choral soundscape."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Details at <https://www.activistsongbookmusic.org/>

<sup>12</sup> Personal email correspondence with author, October, 26, 2020.

As the sheet music online may reach individuals and organizations before hearing the music, we worked with Tiffany Lin and Vida Rose to design inviting illustrations around the score.



SURVIVAL SURVIVAL SURVIVAL SURVIVAL SURV  
IS IS IS IS IS  
RESISTANCE RESISTANCE RESISTANCE RESISTANCE RESIS

Inspired by  
Kao Xue and Carol Zou

A and C accompany B  
Arrangement Ideas  
1. establish A and C, then add B  
2. sing B in unison, then add A and C  
3. invent your own arrangement to share

Grounded ♩ = 92

sing notes in any rhythmic pattern repeating freely

start anywhere go in any order repeat freely overlap and hocket

sing notes in any rhythmic pattern repeating freely

sing together at least once for optional section, overlap voices every four bars

Dm F/C B<sup>♭</sup> Am7 Dm F/C  
When a coun-try tries to crush us, de-ny our ex-is-tence,

B<sup>♭</sup> Am7 Dm F/A B<sup>♭</sup> Am7/C  
mu-sic is sur-vi-val. And our sur-vi-val is re-

Dm F/C B<sup>♭</sup> Am7  
sis-tance. Sur-vi-val is re-sis-tance.

clap freely adding to rhythmic pattern

  
Musik by Ryan Au Yong  
Lyrics by Karen Scharif  
activistsongbook.org

“Survival Is Resistance” Sheet Music Detail

Some examples of existing songbooks for justice include *The Little Red Songbook* (1909), *Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Sit-In Songs* (1962), *AIDS Quilt Songbook* (1992), *Justice Choir Songbook* (2017), and *We Rise: A Movement Songbook* (2019). *Activist Songbook* differs from these projects by including all original, rather than arranged, songs that acknowledge the contributions of Asian Pacific Americans, immigrants, and refugees who organize for equity in the United States.

As a composer, I draw inspiration from older song collections from Europe that include the *Chansonnier* and *Illuminated Manuscripts* of the 13th through 15th centuries. From these, I borrow musical ideas and techniques, such as the cantus firmus, hockets, isorhythms, polyphony, and templates/treatises in how the music is constructed. Drawing on experimental, indigeneous, and acoustic ecology, the rally songs allow people to start anywhere in the score, repeat, continue, and overlap singing and percussion *ad libitum* for as long as needed. This allows for melodic fragments to overlap and multiple voices to be heard simultaneously. Moving online, *Illuminated Manuscript* takes on a new meaning as digital screens light up the music.

## Multiple Ways to Access

For the International Festival of Arts & Ideas, *Activist Songbook* included nine events: five virtual choir videos, two panels, one workshop, and the *Illuminated Manuscript*.<sup>13</sup> While access required the ability to connect to the project via the internet, we were able to include more participants than if we were in person. For me, performers are the first audience for any work. With Broadway performances shut down on March 12, 2020 and music venues closing around the world, many actors and musicians lost their jobs.

We were able to hire soloists Jason Chu, Ali Ewoldt, Francis Jue, Christine Toy Johnson, Diane Phelan, and Tobias Wong who were able to participate alongside participants from New Haven and other places in the virtual choir videos. In addition, we were able to invite organizers Lily Tung Crystal, Paul Bryant Hudson, Adrian Huq, Annie Lin, Melissa Li, Kristina Wong, and Kit Yan to be part of two panels: *Songwriting as Radical Imagination* and *Shaping Our Voices Into Movements, Action and Allyship*. A link to the *Illuminated Manuscript* with lyrics and sheet music, plus the closing workshop *There Will Be Joy: Songs for the Revolution*, co-presented with One Village Healing, led by Thema Haida, Hanifa Nayo Washington, and Brianna Chance, complete the online offerings for the Festival.



Screenshot from the International Festival of Arts & Ideas *Activist Songbook* page

This is a pivotal moment in the United States. Hate crime violence has been on the rise. According to *Fox News*, "1 in 4 young Asian Americans have personally experienced

<sup>13</sup> Details at <https://www.artidea.org/activistsongbook>

anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>14</sup> Organizing builds powerful ways to combat despair. From Black Lives Matter to #MeToo to New Sanctuary, people mobilize in meetings, rallies, and direct nonviolent action. I am invigorated by intersectional leadership that invents nimble ways to mobilize for political and social change.

Making *Activist Songbook* virtual has provided opportunities to connect. During this time of immense fear and loss, an activist friend who I have not heard from in awhile reached out to me. She came across the *Activist Songbook* music video “There Will Be Joy” while doom-scrolling through social media alone on her birthday. Her isolation turned to tears as she watched former mentors Roy and PJ Hirabayashi, taiko leaders who Jafferis and I interviewed, sing “Even when we’re angry, there should be joy.” This encouraged my friend to contact me after a long silence with ideas for justice and working together.

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Special thanks to Aaron Jafferis. As collaborators, we often co-write applications for funding and presentation support. Some of the phrases may be attributed to him from our discussions and writing during the research, development, rehearsals, workshops, and performances of *Activist Songbook*.

Thanks also to music director and audio/video editor Stephanie Tubiolo; Bobby Asher, Missy Huber, Aleta Staton, Lara Ehrlich, and the team at the International Festival of Arts & Ideas; Rob Laqui, Ronee Penoi, Bryan Hunt, Victoria Detres, Sophie Blumberg, and Mara Isaacs at Octopus Theatricals; designers Tiffany Lin and Vida Rose; guest moderators, panelists, and workshop leaders Brianna Chance, Lily Tung Crystal, Thema Haida, Paul Bryant Hudson, Adrian Huq, Melissa Li, Annie Lin, Diane Phelan, Hanifa Nayo Washington, Kristina Wong, Kit Yan; and performers Aaron Jafferis, Adrian Huq, Ali Ewoldt, Amelia Allen Sherwood, Amy Gilbertie, Anne Rhodes, Anthony DeQuattro, Anton Kot, Audrey Patterson, Brianna Chance, Brianna Williams, Britney Arias, Christine Toy Johnson, Christopher Thomas Pow, Cliff Schloss, Darnelle Charles, Debbie Elkin, Dezirae Pollard, Diane Phelan, Eden Almasude, Elaine Kolb, Elisabeth Kennedy, Emma Kennedy, Emmanuel Pollard, Fi Schroth-Douma, Florian Testa, Francis Jue, Franco Imperial, Gabriela Diaz, Gloria Yin, Harriett Alfred, Jaminda Blackmon, Jason Chu, Jeffrey Douma, Jennifer Heikkila Diaz, Julia Zhao, Kao Kue, Kaelin Vasseur, Kaitlin Gilbertie, Kimberly Stoner, Kristin Fung, Kristina Gilbertie, Linda Uyechi, Lisa Patterson, Madeleine Woodworth, Magdalena Diaz, Mahima Kumara, Marnielle Charles, Maura Tuffy, Michelle Fujii, Nesta Allen II, NicDaniel Charles, Patrick Smith, Paul Davies, Pheng-Xu Xiong, PJ Hirabayashi, Rheo June Seay Jafferis, Roy Hirabayashi, Saleena Holder, Sara Culver, Sarah Paquet, Shiloh Allen, Sylvia King, Tahj Galberth, Tobias Wong, Toru Watanabe, Will Myers, Will Schroth-Douma, Yuta Kato, and Z Bell.

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<sup>14</sup> Catherine Park, “1 In 4 Young Asian Americans Experienced Anti-Asian Hate amid COVID-19,” *FOX TV*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.fox7austin.com/news/1-in-4-young-asian-americans-experienced-anti-asian-hate-amid-covid-19>.