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Ripped from the headlines: 7 songs inspired by current events

by Wendy Hathaway, Community Contributor
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Most songs are somewhat based on reality. From hooking up and breaking up to drugs, depression and death, songwriters are inspired by what's right in front of them. Vast playlists could be crafted purely from protest anthems and political proclamations.

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Often, references to current events are no more than vague allusions. Sometimes, though, a headline seems to capture an artist's attention so profoundly that a hit song is written, recorded, and released before the media has moved on, forever pairing art and real life in our collective memories.

Bob Dylan, R.E.M., and U2 have mastered this genre; a very recent example is Melissa Etheridge's new release, "Pulse," a song that honors the victims of the mass shooting at an Orlando gay nightclub on June 12. It was released a mere three days after the tragedy.

Here are seven songs from the past 50 years based on real events and released in near-real time.*

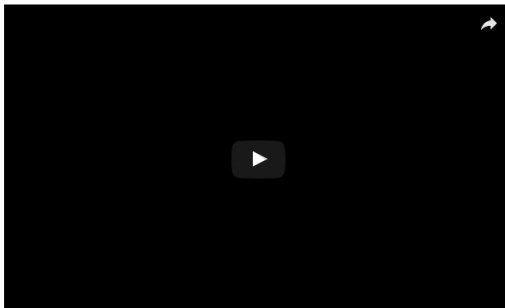
**This list doesn't include songs recorded more than a few years after the fact — like R.E.M.'s "What's the Frequency, Kenneth?" (1986/1994), Sublime's "April 29, 1992 (Miami)" (1992/1996) or Filter's "Hey Man Nice Shot" (1987/1995) — but feel free to share your favorite "based on a true story" songs in the comments below!*

"Mississippi Goddam" | Nina Simone

Medgar Evers murder: June 12, 1963
16th Street Baptist Church bombing: September 15, 1963
Released: Spring 1964

Sample lyrics: "Picket lines/ School boycotts/ They try to say it's a communist plot/ All I want is equality/ For my sister my brother my people and me."

It reportedly took musician and activist Nina Simone less than an hour to compose this response to the 1963 assassination of civil rights leader Medgar Evers and the bombing of an Alabama church that killed four young girls (also the subject of John Coltrane's "Alabama," recorded just one month after the attack). "Mississippi" is a blistering critique of racism in America set to a jaunty bass line that backs lyrics like "This whole country is full of lies/ You're all gonna die and die like flies/ I don't trust nobody anymore."



"Ohio" | Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young

Kent State Massacre: May 4, 1970
Recorded: May 21, 1970
Released: June 1, 1970

Sample lyrics: "Tin soldiers and Nixon coming/ We're finally on our own/ This summer I hear the drumming/ Four dead in Ohio."

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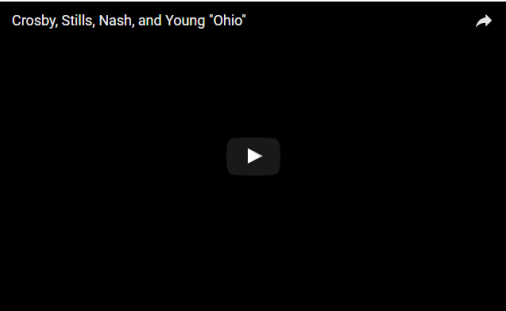
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CSNY's Neil Young wrote the lyrics to "Ohio" days after seeing vivid photos in an issue of *LIFE* magazine depicting the aftermath of the massacre at Kent State University, during which Ohio National Guard members shot and killed four students, and wounded nine others, on the day of a Vietnam War protest. The band recorded the song in only a few takes and it was released less than a month after the tragedy.



"The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" | Gordon Lightfoot

Shipwreck: November 10, 1975
Recorded: December 1975
Released: June 1976

Sample Lyrics: "The legend lives on from the Chippewa on down/ Of the big lake they called Gitche Gumee/ The lake, it is said, never gives up her dead/ When the skies of November turn gloomy."

Lightfoot has said he was inspired to write the folk anthem after reading a magazine article about the maritime disaster. He's since revised the lyrics for live performances to account for new details that have emerged about the events of that stormy November night.



"I Don't Like Mondays" | The Boomtown Rats

Cleveland Elementary School shooting: January 28, 1979
Released: July 21, 1979

Sample Lyrics: "All the playing's stopped in the playground now/ She wants to play with her toys a while/ And school's out early and soon we'll be learning/ And the lesson today is how to die."

Boomtown Rats singer Bob Geldof derived the song's title and chorus from a phrase uttered by teenager Brenda Ann Spencer, when asked by a reporter why she opened fire at an elementary school in San Diego, killing two adults and injuring eight children. (Her response? "I don't like Mondays.")



"Jeremy" | Pearl Jam

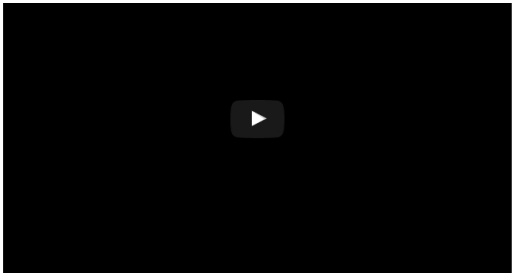
School suicide: January 8, 1991
Recorded: March–April 1991
Released: September 27, 1992

Sample Lyrics: "Try to forget this/ Try to erase this/ From the blackboard/ Jeremy spoke in class today."

In 1991, Jeremy Wade Delle shot and killed himself in front of classmates at his suburban Dallas high school. Pearl Jam lead singer Eddie Vedder later told [Seattle radio station KISW-FM](#) he read about the tragedy in a newspaper and wrote "Jeremy" the same night.

"Jeremy," which appeared on Pearl Jam's debut album, *Ten*, was the first of many topical songs the band would record. "Rival," written by guitarist Stone Gossard is a reflection on the 1999 Columbine massacre.





***The Rising* | Bruce Springsteen**

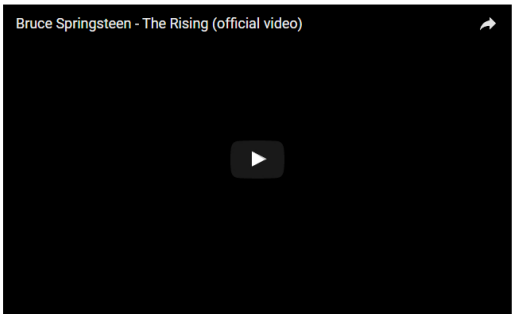
Terror attacks: September 11, 2001

Released: July 30, 2002

Sample lyrics (from "The Rising," the story of an NYFD firefighter): "Can't see nothin' in front of me/ Can't see nothin' coming up behind /Make my way through this darkness/ Lost track of how far I've gone /How far I've gone, how high I've climbed."

Dozens of singers and songwriters — from Neil Young, Paul McCartney and Toby Keith to Sheryl Crow and the Beastie Boys — have expressed their anger, confusion, and grief about 9/11, as well as their affection for the city of New York, through music.

But Springsteen's *The Rising* album, which topped the charts and won a Grammy award for Best Rock Album, has become known as one of the definitive cultural touchstones connected with the September 11 terror attacks, its message of hope still relevant (and still being used in the aftermath of later tragedies, as well).



"Lake Superior" | The Arcs

Steven Avery conviction: July 1985

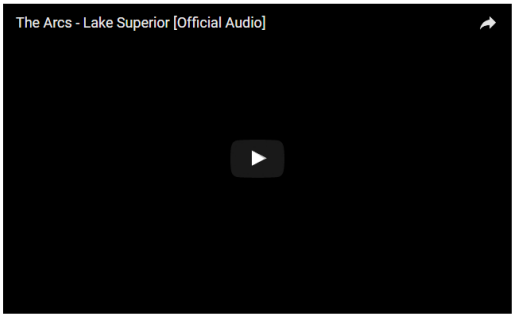
Making a Murderer premiere on Netflix: December 18, 2015

Released: January 7, 2016


Sample lyrics: "Your alibi, will never do/ When the whole town's got it out for you/ Judge Fox, the Great Lake stain/ Got Superior wanting to pull its own drain."

Black Keys frontman Dan Auerbach and his other band, The Arcs, released "Lake Superior" less than three weeks after Netflix premiered "Making a Murderer." The documentary series — about a Wisconsin man who was wrongfully imprisoned for 18 years for a sexual assault he did not commit, and then convicted of the murder of a young woman four years after his release — sparked renewed interest in the innocence movement.

In a statement, the band said about the track, "We got a sneak peek at what goes on behind the curtains of our criminal justice system. A few sleepless nights later, we gathered in the studio and wrote this song."



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