

ERIN POTTS

What thirty-five years working across culture, movements, and social change have taught me about how change happens

Erin Potts draws on decades of firsthand experience in conversations with students about how collective action begins, how artists and movements work together, how cultural moments take shape, and how people find their own place in making change.



In her early twenties, Erin co-founded the Tibetan Freedom Concerts and the Milarepa Fund with Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys. What began with a small group of young activists, artists, Tibetan organizers, and supporters grew into a series of landmark concerts that brought hundreds of thousands of people together and introduced many young people to Tibet, human rights, and nonviolent activism.

She later co-founded Revolutions Per Minute, providing strategy and support to more than 1,300 musicians seeking to make a difference on the causes they cared about, including ways to engage their fans in that work. Since then, her work has expanded beyond music to film, television, literature, visual art, food, comedy, and other forms of cultural expression. She has also helped shape the practice and language of cultural strategy, narrative change, and impact storytelling through writing, research, and field-building work. Those ideas have been used by practitioners, funders, and educators, but Erin is most excited when they help artists, activists, and audiences create change in the world.

In 2026, Erin created and executive produced [*Freedom Needs a Soundtrack*](#), a documentary podcast revisiting the Tibetan Freedom Concerts thirty years later. Revisiting that story raised some of the questions that have followed her through much of her work: How does collective action begin? How do culture and movements shape one another? How do we know what impact we've had? How do we understand what this moment calls for? And what can we learn from something that worked thirty years ago without simply trying to do it again?

Her own path is part of the material: beginning as a teenage Amnesty International organizer, studying Tibetan language and culture, documenting protests inside Tibet, leaving college temporarily to work for the Tibetan movement, and eventually turning a summer on tour into the final credits she needed to graduate and the lessons she needed to actually pull off the Tibetan Freedom Concerts.

AREAS FOR CLASSROOM CONVERSATION

These conversations can connect with courses across social movements, history, music, media, cultural studies, sociology, organizing, civic engagement, politics, and social change.

- **The Tibetan Freedom Concerts as a case study in culture, activism, and collective action:** How did a group of young activists, artists, Tibetan organizers, and supporters

build something that eventually brought hundreds of thousands of people together? Erin takes students behind the scenes of how the concerts came together, the relationships and choices that shaped them, what changed because of them, and what can only be understood thirty years later. This often leads to discussions of how cultural moments take shape, how artists and organizers can work together effectively, and how a campaign's impact can unfold over time.

- **How people begin participating in change:** The million-dollar question for almost any cause is: how do people move from caring to taking action? Drawing on her own path from high school activism through college and into the Tibetan Freedom Concerts, Erin looks at how she has seen that happen in herself and in others. These conversations often explore how people can begin before they feel ready, how relationships and small actions can build into larger efforts, and what people can do before they have expertise, authority, or a formal role. It tends to resonate especially with students who care about something and have absolutely no idea what to do next.
- **What should be the relationship between art and activism?** Artists who speak about politics are often told to “shut up and sing.” At the same time, they are increasingly expected to take a position on every major issue. What do we actually need from artists? What can they do that movements and institutions often cannot? What can movements offer them? And when does involving artists open up new possibilities, versus simply turning art into another communications tool? Having spent decades working with artists across many forms of cultural expression, Erin has plenty of stories about just how inspiring, messy, complicated, and occasionally absurd the relationship between art and activism can be.
- **How does culture shape what feels possible?** Over thirty-five years, Erin has watched ideas move from fringe to mainstream, things that once seemed impossible become ordinary, and supposedly settled norms become unsettled again. Drawing on examples from music, movements, and cultural campaigns, she looks at how stories, art, relationships, and collective behavior change what people see as normal, imaginable, or worth fighting for. The conversation often turns to a deceptively simple question: how much of what feels like “just the way things are” is actually something we are all helping make and remake?

FORMATS

Class visits can be informal conversations, interviews, seminar discussions, facilitated workshops, public campus events, or sessions built around a particular course question or piece of Erin's work. They do not need to be lectures.

CONTACT

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Selected writing: [Spotlight on Impact Storytelling](#), “[A Conversation About Cultural Strategy](#)” and “[Gen X Questioned Power. Now We Hold It. What We Do With It Matters.](#)”

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