



The Music and History of Our Times

# The Sixties and Protest Music

by Kerry Candaele

Music has always kept company with American wars. During the Revolutionary War, “Yankee Doodle” and many other songs set to reels and dances were sung to keep spirits alive during dark hours. “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Lincoln’s favorite song during the Civil War, was countered by “Dixie” in the Confederate States. In 1918, in the middle of World War I, Irving Berlin gave us “God Bless America,” considered by many to be the unofficial anthem of the United States. Composers such as Marc Blitzstein and Samuel Barber were enlisted to write upbeat songs for the Office of War Information during World War II.

But wars also create their unique antagonists who transform their empathy, concern, anger, and other emotions into poetry, prose, or in our time, popular music. This was particularly true of the war in Vietnam. Given this era’s unique historical circumstances, the musical soundscape to the Vietnam War was strikingly different from the music that accompanied World War II. While there were patriotic songs that did very well, most notably Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler’s million-selling number-one hit “Ballad of the Green Berets” in 1966 and Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee” in 1969, the vast majority of Vietnam War songs fell into the category of anti- rather than pro-war songs.

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American involvement in Vietnam had evolved through the United States’ support of French colonial rule after World War II. The United States saw the anti-communist Viet Diem and his regime as a “proving ground for Democracy,” in the words of then US senator from Massachusetts John F. Kennedy. After being elected president in 1960, Kennedy increased military aid. By the time of his assassination in November 1963, there were 16,000 American military personnel stationed in Vietnam.

Lyndon Johnson, Kennedy’s vice president and successor, escalated American involvement in Vietnam throughout 1964 and 1965. By early 1968 there were 550,000 combat troops in Vietnam and rising casualties with no end in sight. The anti-war movement, and the anti-war music, that ran parallel to the increasingly large numbers of young men drafted into the Army was also rooted in broader changes that were taking place in America.

The soldiers drafted to fight in Vietnam were born during the massive baby boom that began in 1946, following the victory of World War II. By 1960 the number of undergraduates in colleges and universities had doubled in twenty years to 3.6 million young men and women. And by 1964, seventeen-year-olds were the largest age cohort in the United States.

Rock and roll, fully born in the 1950s, and called “noise” by parents, turned millions of these young people toward this exotic and transformative new art. Along with sexual experimentation and the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement in the South, it created a youth culture that shared the black writer

James Baldwin's insight: "The American equation of success with the big times reveals an awful disrespect for human life and human achievement." [1] Youth "counterculture" carved out new spaces for experimentation and alternative views about what constituted a good society, while a New Left made up of civil rights and anti-war activists developed as the war in Vietnam dragged out and became increasingly bloody, confounding, and ultimately unpopular.

This was the context in which popular music in general, and certainly anti-war music specifically, became a space for cultural and political conflict and dialog, and at times a product and resource for broad movement against the war. The Vietnam War was accompanied every step of the way by an anti-war soundtrack that touched on every tone—melancholy and touching, enraged and sarcastic, fearful and resigned—and that captured the long demoralizing impact of this war. And like the anti-war movement itself, it began without a significant audience in the early sixties, but grew to a critical mass by the war's termination.

Bob Dylan opened up that cultural space for an oppositional voice to the Vietnam War during the first half of the 1960s. Initially connected to a folk music revival that was simultaneously a political and cultural phenomena—an attempt at a kind of singing mass movement as the scholar Richard Flacks described it—Dylan wrote "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Masters of War" in 1962, the latter as venomous, and self-righteous an indictment of militarism as popular music had seen.

You that never done nothin'  
 But build to destroy  
 You play with my world  
 Like it's your little toy  
 You put a gun in my hand  
 And you hide from my eyes  
 And you turn and run farther  
 When the fast bullets fly.[2]

Dylan followed up in 1963 with "With God on Our Side," in which the notion that God plays favorites with countries at war is considered both crude and foolish. None of these early anti-war songs is explicitly about Vietnam, as the war in Southeast Asia was on the minds of only a few Americans in 1963. But Dylan's lyrics combined a revisionist history of what true patriotism meant, opposition to what Eisenhower called the Military Industrial Complex, and an existential angst caused by the prospects of nuclear annihilation. There were other colleagues and competitors in the Greenwich scene in which Dylan blossomed, especially when it came to topical songs with anti-war themes. Phil Ochs wrote a jukebox full of anti-war songs, including "I Ain't Marchin Anymore" and the witty "Draft Dodger Rag."

As the Cold War and the hard reality of death, both in the United States and four thousand miles away in Vietnam, escalated anti-war songs kept the pulse of individual and collective dissent.

Any observer could track the changes in musical attitude by looking at how some artists were transformed during the war years. Bobby Darin began his pop career as a teen idol in 1958 with the million-seller "Splish Splash," an imitation of Jerry Lee Lewis. By 1969 Darin, in a leather jacket with buckskin fringe, was writing songs of political activism and denouncing the war in his "Simple Song of Freedom." Dion Di Mucci (Dion) followed a similar trajectory. In 1960 he had his first hit with "Lonely Teenager," about young love gone astray. But in 1968, after eighteen follow-up hits about the same subject, Dion offered a song-survey of domestic and international violence in "Abraham, Martin, and John."



*Phil Ochs, Newport Folk Festival, 1966. Photograph by Robert Corwin. (Used with permission by Sonny Ochs)*

Yet the music industry's concern for a song's chart location each week, and the fear of upsetting large distributors, made radical anti-war statements in popular music a relatively rare occurrence. Songs by popular musicians were written for the radio and often with a popular audience in mind. This growing and eventually gargantuan record business had its demands. An artist with enough clout or record sales could occasionally get out a song with a political or social message. For example, Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son," a caustic attack on militarism and the class- and race-based unfairness of the draft, was released and sold well.

"Fortunate Son," written in 1969 by Creedence lead singer John Fogerty, was an uncompromising two-minute-and-twenty-one-second manifesto about how those with connections and money avoided the draft while the poor and working class had to go to war. Fogerty understood the emerging anger that this disparity created: "In 1968, the majority of the country thought morale was great among the troops. . . . but to some of us who were watching closely, we just knew we were headed for trouble." [3]

Perhaps the high-water mark of this protest genre came on August 18, 1969, when guitarist Jimi Hendrix stood on stage at Woodstock and played his version of "The Star-Spangled Banner." With this performance, Hendrix put an exclamation point on a decade of protest music aimed at America's military adventures in general, and the Vietnam War in particular. His blistering and ironic version of our country's most cherished musical symbol also showcased a host of changes and contradictions that summarized the anti-war music and movements of the 1960s and beyond. For, unlike the folk tradition that played a part in the movement for civil rights, late-sixties anti-war music did not focus on solidarity and shared risk-taking. Hendrix was not a guitar-strumming troubadour embedded in and at the service of a social movement. He, and his sound—loud, technologically sophisticated and stunning in its virtuosity, avant-garde in its musical language—was by 1969 a very big business. As venues grew larger, the rock performer—now designated a "star"—was increasingly separated from the audience. And while Hendrix himself may have wanted his audience to be transformed into active participants in their own history, the medium could not deliver that message with sincerity. Who could sing along to, or reproduce with an acoustic guitar in a dorm room, his version of "The Star-Spangled Banner"?

Often enough, then, the cultural unity and shared experience the music evoked lasted only the length of the concert. Yet, Hendrix's wordless inversion of our patriotic standard would eventually reach millions when the film *Woodstock* was released in 1970. The song inventoried not just the progress of anti-war music but also the "anti" of the era itself. The "Banner" that Hendrix played that day eviscerated the anthem it parodied. It celebrated not the honor and virtues of the United States, but instead performed an act of exorcism as Hendrix's guitar mimicked with frightening accuracy the screams of those who died in Vietnam. Hendrix pushed the reality of the Vietnam War into the public's face and ears, as if Pablo Picasso had convinced him to put *Guernica* to music for the Vietnam era. And like Picasso's painting, the song was angry and accusatory.

There was no linear path down which anti-war music moved, but as a safe generalization, the more carnage the Vietnam War wrought, the hotter in temper became the songs expressing opposition. On the same stage at Woodstock where Jimi Hendrix performed, Country Joe McDonald delivered perhaps the best-remembered anti-war song of the time. A darkly satirical critique of the war, "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag" added heft because Country Joe had earned military stripes in the Navy.

Come on mothers throughout the land,  
 Pack your boys off to Vietnam.  
 Come on fathers, don't hesitate,  
 Send your sons off before it's too late.  
 Be the first one on your block  
 To have your boy come home in a box.[4]

The song was a savage swipe at what the anti-war movement considered American hypocrisy. "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixing-to-Die" was a long way from "blowing in the wind," Dylan's rueful and elusive answer to the question of how many more would have to die.

The increasing anger within the anti-war movement peaked during the presidency of Richard Nixon. Nixon was elected in 1968 on a platform that included a "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam and a promise to "bring us together"; however, Nixon's Vietnam policy further divided the nation. While Nixon did decrease the number of troops in Vietnam, he also ordered secret bombings of North Vietnamese supply routes that ran through neutral Cambodia.

When, in April of 1970, Nixon decided to send troops into Cambodia, campuses across the country erupted in protests and a strike of hundreds of thousands students on more than 700 campuses. On May 4, four Kent State students were killed and nine were wounded by Ohio National Guardsmen, and ten days later two were killed at Jackson State College.

After seeing photos from the Kent State massacre, singer-songwriter Neil Young wrote "Ohio," recorded with Crosby, Stills, and Nash in two days and distributed as quickly. "Ohio" was a message to America to do something about the deaths, the war, and the breakup of the country:

Gotta get down to it  
 Soldiers are cutting us down  
 Should have been done long ago.  
 What if you knew her  
 And found her dead on the ground  
 How can you run when you know?[5]

It was a call to arms that many AM radio stations, their formats focused on harmless pop hits, refused to play.

As an epic moment of truth, "Ohio" did sound a call to action, but like the vast majority of successful rockers, none of the members of CSNY was truly part of a social movement. They stayed clear of day-to-day organizing and ongoing moral support of activists. The truth didn't last, nor did the "language of showdown, shootout, and face-off," as Todd Gitlin described the discourse of the extreme right and left at the time.[6]

This fact has on occasion prompted historians and others to ask some tough questions of the times. George Lipsitz asks, was the music of the sixties the "product of young people struggling to establish their own artistic visions, or was it the creation of marketing executives eager to cash in on demographic trends by tailoring mass media commodities to the interests of the nation's largest age cohort?"[7] After all, by 1970, records and tapes brought in over \$2 billion, close to 80 percent of the revenue from the ranks of rock and roll.

The questions are important for thinking about youth culture as a whole, but anti-war songs were certainly not the best sellers of the time. In fact the only song to reach anthem-like influence in anti-war

circles—but in no way as influential as “We Shall Overcome” for the Civil Rights Movement—was John Lennon’s “Give Peace a Chance,” which was sung by half a million demonstrators at the Vietnam Moratorium Day protest in Washington, DC, in October 1969.

Recorded at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal as part of Lennon and Yoko Ono’s “bed-in-for-peace,” the song is essentially a one-liner, “All we are saying, is give peace a chance,” chanted over and over. At the time Lennon claimed that he was bored with hearing “We Shall Overcome” all the time, and offered his simple ditty as an alternative. “Our job is to write for the people *now*,” he said. “So the songs that they go and sing on their buses are not just love songs.” But the fact remains, the musicians who wrote the anti-war music that became an organic part of political protest were not themselves riding on those buses with “the people.”[8]

Though white male rockers received most of the attention, both in the streets and on stage, it is important to remember that the anti-war music of the Vietnam era was much wider and more diverse than people now recall. There were other tempos and temperaments on display across barriers of ethnicity and gender, perhaps a love song to a soldier far away, or a meditation on a domestic tragedy when a husband returned a hurt and tormented man, as in the case of country singer Arlene Harden’s bitter “Congratulations.”

African Americans contributed much of this sometimes forgotten anti-war music. Martha Reeves and the Vandellas released “I Should Be Proud” in 1970, the first anti-war song from the Motown label. It was followed a few months later by “War,” recorded first by the Temptations (not released as a single for fear of conservative backlash) and then rerecorded by Edwin Starr. With its simple but memorable refrain—“War, what is it good for? Absolutely nothing!”—the song went to number one on the Billboard Pop Singles chart. More tender and soulful was Marvin Gaye’s plea for peace and love in “What’s Going On,” where “war is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate.” “In 1969 or 1970,” Gaye said, “I began to re-evaluate my whole concept of what I wanted my music to say. I was very much affected by letters my brother was sending me from Vietnam, as well as the social situation here at home. I realized that I had to put my own fantasies behind me if I wanted to write songs that would reach the souls of people. I wanted them to take a look at what was happening in the world.”[9] For a brief moment during the years of the war, millions of young people, and a few oldsters, believed that political music could help make a social revolution, remake a country, and stop a war. As it turned out music did not accomplish these things. What anti-war music did do, as all protest music has done throughout American history, was to raise spirits while doing battle, help define the identities of activists, and turn passive consumption into an active, vibrant, and sometimes liberating culture.

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[1] James Baldwin, “Fifth Avenue Uptown: A Letter from Harlem,” in *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 61.

[2] Bob Dylan, “Masters of War,” *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* (Columbia Records, 1963).

[3] “The Rolling Stone Interview with John Fogerty,” *Rolling Stone*, February 21, 1970.

[4] Joe McDonald, “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag,” Country Joe McDonald and the Fish, *Rag Baby: Songs of Opposition*, EP (1965) and *I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag*, Studio album (Vanguard, 1967).

[5] Neil Young, “Ohio,” Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, single (Atlantic, 1970).

[6] Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, rev. ed. (New York: Bantam, 1993), 287.

- [7] George Lipsitz, "Who'll Stop the Rain? Youth Culture, Rock 'n' Roll, and Social Crises," in David Farber, ed., *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 211.
- [8] Jann S. Wenner, *Lennon Remembers: New Edition* (London and New York: Verso, 2000; orig. 1971), 93.
- [9] "Marvin Gaye: 'What's Goin' On'" in "500 Greatest Albums of All Time," *Rolling Stone* online: <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-20120531/marvin-gaye-whats-going-on-19691231>. Accessed July 7, 2012.

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**Kerry Candaele** has produced and directed several documentary films, including *Iraq for Sale*. He also collaborated with his brother Kelly on the documentary *A League of Their Own*, about his mother's experience in the All American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), which was later turned into a blockbuster movie. He is co-author of *Bound for Glory: From the Great Migration to the Harlem Renaissance, 1910–1930* (1996) and *Journeys with Beethoven: Following the Ninth, and Beyond* (2012).

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Kerry Candaele recommends the following resources for more information:

Flacks, Richard, and Rob Rosenthal. *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements*. Boulder CO: Paradigm, 2011.

Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1987.

Isserman, Maurice and Michael Kazin. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*. New York: Oxford, 2000.

Lipsitz, George. "Who'll Stop the Rain? Youth Culture, Rock 'n' Roll, and Social Crises." In David Farber, ed., *The Sixties: From Memory to History*. New York: Oxford, 1994.

Lynskey, Dorian. *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holliday to Green Day*. New York: Ecco, 2011.

Miller, James. *Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

*Next Stop Is Vietnam: The War on Record 1961–2008* (Bear Family). This boxed set tells its story of the Vietnam War through 14 CDs of music and newscast commentary plus a 300-page book. The nearly half-century time frame includes over 270 artists and 300 songs.

*Woodstock: Three Days of Peace and Music, the 25th Anniversary Collection* (DVD). New York: Atlantic, 1994.

Anti-war music website: <http://www.jwsrockgarden.com/jw02vwaw.htm>