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# This Machine Kills Fascists: Music, Speech and War

Robert J. Crisler

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, [rjcrisler@gmail.com](mailto:rjcrisler@gmail.com)

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THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS: MUSIC, SPEECH AND WAR

by

Robert J. Crisler

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
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# THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS: MUSIC, SPEECH AND WAR

Robert J. Crisler, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Adviser: John Bender

This thesis examines the history and persuasive power of rhetoric through the mass medium of popular music from Woody Guthrie to the modern era. It focuses on the Vietnam War era as a particularly significant and prolific era of topical (“protest”) music. Through interviews with media observers, historians and veterans of the Vietnam war, it seeks to understand the relevance of rhetorical speech in music within an overall mass media context, both within that era and extending to the present day. Through contemporaneous accounts of the intent of the songwriters and artists, an understanding is gained of the intent to communicate about the major events of the era through song. Through interviews with veterans and others, the essential question of whether or not this form of communication, and the people who operate within it, should be viewed as integral to the mass media and political context, is explored.

*Keywords:* music, politics, protest, vietnam, speech, war

## AUTHOR NOTE

As a boy growing up in the shadow of Vietnam in the latter years of the 1960s and early 70s, I saw several guys a few years older — young men who had just a few short years earlier been boys, like me — disappear from down the street in our little Nebraska version of suburbia, into a world away. Sometimes their disappearance was signaled not with a prayer at church, because we went to different churches; instead by the absence of the yellow GTO or blue Mustang that regularly roared down the street after school, blaring the loudest and biggest rock 'n' roll sounds from its open windows. Instead the car sat, parked to the side of the driveway, month after month, sagging on its springs, marking the time by dripping its oil onto the concrete, into an ever-expanding stain. Every night, the news gave us the latest reports from Vietnam, where these young men had gone. Every night, no one was sure if the ones we knew were among the numbers reported as “casualties.”

All this time, though, the music played. And sometimes, through the music, there was speech. And sometimes, the speech in the music made one wonder if the death and heartache and sacrifice that attended our involvement in Southeast Asia was all worth it.

This thesis is dedicated to the men and women who went “over there,” and left some piece of themselves, or their last breath, in that other world. Some 58,000 of them gave the last full measure of devotion in that foreign land, and are remembered by family and friends, and each by name at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. Of the millions who did come back, many didn't come back whole. Of the ones who came back whole, some part of their soul was left behind.

But don't pity them for that. Instead, respect them. Thank them. Befriend them and honor them. They are the best of us.

Bob Crisler

Ashland, Nebraska

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Scott Camil Marine, Activist Gainesville, FL	Feb. 6, 2016	Robert Martin Soldier, Pharmacist Atlanta, GA	Feb. 26, 2016
Rick Cline Sailor, former BMW/Porsche salesman Dallas, TX	Feb. 20, 2016	“Country” Joe McDonald Sailor (pre-war), Musician Berkeley, CA	March 1, 2016
Paul Critchlow Soldier, Executive Sag Harbor, NY	March 7, 2016	Jacob McMurray Curator, EMP Museum Seattle, WA	Feb. 29, 2016
Jim DeRogatis Musicologist, Lecturer Chicago, IL	Feb. 25, 2016	Jim Schmidt Soldier, Doctor Canoga Park, CA	April 29, 2014
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*Note: many of the veterans acknowledged above were awarded medals for their Vietnam service. Because a full accounting could not be ensured, reference to military decorations is omitted. Not omitted is appreciation for the service to country represented in this list.*

*... any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited. So Damon tells me, and I can quite believe him; he says that when modes of music change, [modes] of the State always change with them.<sup>1</sup>*

— Plato, *The Republic* (Jowett trans.)

*"There's several ways of saying what's on your mind. And in states and counties where it ain't any too healthy to talk too loud, speak your mind, or even to vote like you want to, folks have found other ways of getting the word around.*

*One of the mainest ways is by singing. Drop the word 'folk' and just call it real old honest to god American singing. No matter who makes it up, no matter who sings it and who don't, if it talks the lingo of the people, it's a cinch to catch on, and will be sung here and yonder for a long time after you've cashed in your chips.*

*If the fight gets hot, the songs get hotter. If the going gets tough, the songs get tougher."<sup>2</sup>*

— Woody Guthrie

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<sup>1</sup> Plato (trans. Benjamin Jowett). (360 B.C.). *The Republic*. Retrieved January 22, 2016, from <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.5.iv.html>

<sup>2</sup> Guthrie, W., Marsh, D., & Leventhal, H. (1990). *Pastures of Plenty: A Self-Portrait* (First edition.). New York: HarperCollins. p. 78

## Table of Contents

Author Note	3	
CHAPTER ONE: THIS MACHINE (A DRAMATIZATION)		1
CHAPTER TWO: CULTURE AND INFLUENCE		8
CHAPTER THREE: ESCALATING		11
Masters of War	14	
John Brown	15	
Draft Dodger Rag	16	
We Gotta Get Out of This Place	18	
Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag	19	
CHAPTER FOUR: PROTEST BECOMES POPULAR		23
Eve of Destruction	26	
CHAPTER FIVE: 1968, CRONKITE WAS LATE		30
CHAPTER SIX: BIG BANDS, BIG BUSINESS		38
Data on Fig. 4 from these sources:		42
CHAPTER SEVEN: WOODSTOCK AND BEYOND		43
Star-Spangled Banner	43	
Three Days of Peace and Music, During a War <sup>44</sup>		
Fortunate Son	46	
Machine Gun	47	
War	48	
What's Going On	51	
Ohio	53	
Search and Destroy	54	
CHAPTER EIGHT: HINTS OF RHETORIC		60
Escape	67	
CHAPTER NINE: CRUEL WAR		69
CHAPTER TEN: SURVIVING, AND LISTENING		76
Counterculture arrives	80	
A Letter from Home	82	
CHAPTER ELEVEN: YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION		84
A public square	88	
CHAPTER TWELVE: FORTUNATE SIGNALS		90
CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DOES MUSIC MATTER		95
Framing: Controversy or Content	102	
CHAPTER FOURTEEN: CONCLUSION		112
It'll get around	114	
AFTERWORD	116	

## CHAPTER ONE: THIS MACHINE (A DRAMATIZATION)

The hard plaster walls of Woody Guthrie's quarter-a-night hotel room on Los Angeles' Skid Row<sup>3</sup> in the summer of 1937<sup>4</sup> resonated with the sound of worn metal rubbing on thin, tight mahogany: "scratch-scratch-scratch."

"Scratch-scratch-scratch."

Guthrie, seated on a wooden chair, bent over his mahogany Martin 000-18, flipped face-down on his knees. Depression-era Los Angeles was a bit of a struggle, but Guthrie was beginning to catch on, becoming widely known through his daily 15-minute KVFD Radio show as a spokesman for the Okies flooding westward out of the parched plains, and for the dispossessed everywhere.<sup>5</sup> Guthrie was coming to be understood by others, and by himself, as a political force.

In his hand was a well-used repoussé liner<sup>6</sup> – Guthrie was a genuine Okie, yes, from Okemah, and an accomplished artist as well. The art tool, made of hard steel and meant to leave an impression in sheets of copper, had no trouble with the mahogany.

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<sup>3</sup> Dreier, P. (2012). Woody Guthrie's Los Angeles. para. 5. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/woody-guthries-los-angele\\_b\\_1413661.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-dreier/woody-guthries-los-angele_b_1413661.html)

<sup>4</sup> Kaufman, W. (2011). Woody Guthrie, American Radical. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press. p. 3

<sup>5</sup> Holter, D. (KCET). (2016). Woody Guthrie and Skid Row in Los Angeles. Retrieved January 29, 2016, from <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/woody-guthrie-and-skid-row-in-los-angeles>

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Kate Blalack, archivist, Guthrie Center, Tulsa. Author's supposition of tool used is based on Guthrie's possession of repoussé tools, and is not suggested by source.





Fig. 1: Guthrie guitar in collection of EMP Museum, Seattle, bearing inscription “this machine kills fascists” along its lower bout. ca. 1938.

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Guthrie chose the back side of the guitar, along its lower bout, to leave a message, a message that only he would see, a whisper to himself that would remind him of his power and his responsibility as a leader in the long struggle for social justice. He rubbed the nib of the tool in his neat lowercase, back and forth along the arcs and points of each letter to deepen the impression.

First, a ‘t.’ Then the “t” became

“this.”

Followed by “machine.”

And then,

“kills.” “fascists.”

Today, the guitar, given by Guthrie to his friend, the actor Eddie Albert,<sup>7</sup> in 1938, hangs in the gallery of the Experience Music Project Museum in Seattle, silently bearing testimony to a musician’s growing self-assurance in the power of his own music, his own voice – his own words.<sup>8</sup>

Later, Guthrie would make another leap of confidence. Alone again a few years later, this time in his Manhattan walk-up apartment on West 101st just off Central Park, Guthrie’s bravado was soaring. In one of his most prolific songwriting periods, he had recently composed a new tune, “Talkin’ Hitler’s Head off Blues.”<sup>9</sup>

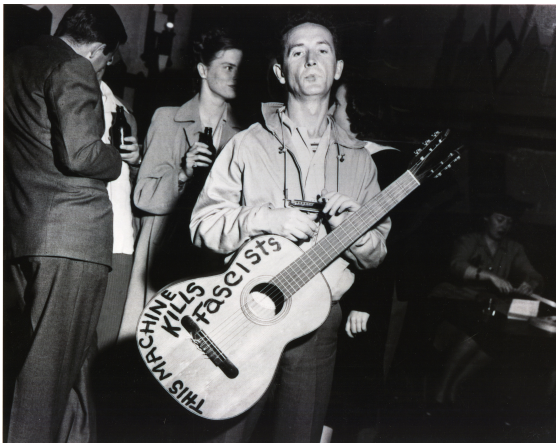


Fig. 2: Guthrie with painted “THIS MACHINE KILLS Fascists” guitar. Photo: Lester Balog, 1941.

On seeing his lyrics printed in the *Daily Worker* newspaper, Guthrie became convinced

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<sup>7</sup> Creative Worx. (2001). Eddie Albert’s last interview. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs\\_Dupdkhcg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs_Dupdkhcg); the musician and actor Will Geer introduced him to Guthrie while Guthrie was living in a boxcar in Los Angeles. Guthrie lived with Albert in 1937 and 1938.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Jacob McMurray, Curator, EMP Museum, Seattle; provenance provided through email re. Guthrie guitar in EMP Museum collection, Seattle.

<sup>9</sup> Neimark, Anne E. *There Ain’t Nobody That Can Sing Like Me: The Life of Woody Guthrie*. New York: Atheneum, 2002. p. 66.

anew of the power of his words and artistry, in the certain glow of patriotism and pride, went back to his art kit, this time for a wide brush and blue paint.<sup>10 11</sup>

He flipped his guitar on his lap, this time front-side up, and beginning along the lower bout near the centerline, began to paint. This time, he went all-in, for all the world to see: “THIS MACHINE KILLS up and around the bridge, and finally, in upper and lower case, “Fascists” from the bridge carrying all the way to the top of the guitar body.

*(The preceding relies on several suppositions to construct a narrative; these are: that Guthrie was alone when marking his guitars; that he used a repoussé tool for marking a guitar; that he sat in a chair, working on his lap. Please refer to footnotes for factual references.)*

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Guthrie would go on to scrawl, paint and label the phrase on a series of instruments throughout his career; the phrase “This machine kills fascists” has become a staple of American counterculture to the present day, adorning songs, albums, books and a film, many, even, in the new millennium.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Klein, J. (1980). Woody Guthrie: a life. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. p. 235



Fig. 3: 2014 Woody Guthrie Prize awarded to Pete Seeger

Guthrie’s namesake museum, the Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa, in 2013 created the Woody Guthrie Prize to be awarded at the GRAMMY Awards each year “to the artist who best exemplifies the spirit and life work of Woody Guthrie by speaking for the less fortunate through music, film, literature, dance or other art forms and serving as a positive force for social change in America.”<sup>12</sup> The Woody Guthrie Prize itself is a bronze “This Machine Kills Fascists” guitar.

In an interview, Kate Blalack, archivist at the Guthrie Center, and an authority on Guthrie and folk music in general, put “This Machine Kills Fascists” in perspective.

I think that for Woody, what he was doing was inseparable from the belief in the power of the proletariat of the time. That you had an ideological belief that the masses really did hold power that was to some extent historically dictated. So there was a sense of confidence in Woody that would be very, very difficult to duplicate today. Mass culture didn’t

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<sup>12</sup> The Woody Guthrie Center Presents Woody Guthrie Prize Honoring Mavis Staples. (2015). Retrieved March 2, 2016, from <http://www.grammymuseum.org/events/detail/the-woody-guthrie-center-presents-woody-guthrie-prize-honoring-mavis-staples>

have the presence it does now. And so for Woody, music was a way of organizing and giving clarity to the historical forces that were present in everyday life. It made perfectly good sense to think that the singer was also an organizer in a very, very direct way, and that was the power which, brought together, could be an effective response to fascism.

Reached at his home in Berkeley, the singer and countercultural figure “Country Joe” McDonald sees Guthrie’s slogan as “a joke with sociopolitical implications, a way of walking a middle-of-the-road line so that you don’t get trapped by the people saying ‘what do you mean by that.’” But it’s more than that, McDonald continued. “It is also a statement about his music and about how he felt about his music. He wasn’t writing love songs to make money. He was writing songs about the real world and the injustices that he thought you needed to be speaking about. He was speaking for the voiceless.”

Surely, Guthrie was a man of the people. “He didn’t like bullies and he didn’t like people profiting off the poor and he didn’t like discrimination,” said Blalack. “In ‘Deportees,’ he’s singing about the migrant workers who have come in and are just being shipped out, and are just kind of these people that help our economy and may help the system, but they’re not recognized and they’re almost just thrown out as trash. That’s the underlying theme in all of his music. He did not like people being exploited, any people.”

The idea reflected in Guthrie’s belief that to get the word around, “one of the mainest ways is by singing” sentiment are found in many places in popular culture. Yip Harburg, the lyricist behind “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” also noted the effect of music on social movements:

Songs have been the not-so-secret weapon behind every fight for freedom, every struggle against injustice and bigotry: “The Marseillaise,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “We Shall Overcome,” and many more. Give me the makers of the songs of the nation and I care not who makes the laws.<sup>13</sup>

Later, author and media critic Dorian Lynskey, in his 2011 book *33 Revolutions Per Minute: a History of Protest Songs from Billie Holiday to Green Day*, said of protest songs:

The essential, inevitable difficulty of contorting a serious message to meet the demands of entertainment is the grit that makes the pearl. In songs such as “Strange Fruit,” “Ohio,” “A Change is Gonna Come,” or “Ghost Town,” the political content is not an obstacle to greatness but the source of it. They open a door and the world outside rushes in.<sup>14</sup>

John Zutz, a soldier in Vietnam in 1969 and 1970 and a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, recalls protest music’s effect on the culture: “When big names, popular stars, performed, people listened. Musicians, no matter the genre, were probably the loudest anti-war voices in the U.S.”

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<sup>13</sup> Meyerson, H., & Harburg, E. (1993). *Who put the rainbow in the Wizard of Oz?: Yip Harburg, lyricist*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

<sup>14</sup> Lynskey, D. (2011.) *33 revolutions per minute: A history of protest songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day* (First edition.). New York: Ecco. p. xiv

## CHAPTER TWO: CULTURE AND INFLUENCE

Meanwhile, uptown, institutional journalism imagines itself as the center and bulwark of opinion and influence. Or, perhaps it did. Ever since the news-consuming audience began fragmenting at the advent of the Internet, along with a new profusion of outlets for news, journalism as we knew it has been under attack. The new realities to be dealt with: first, the twin notions of “gate keeping” and “agenda setting” were at best questionable in this new reality.<sup>15</sup> And, while it’s true that journalism had certainly played a central role in the political and rhetorical life of the nation, it is abundantly clear that the press was never more than a part — albeit a major, indispensable part — of the informational tapestry that constituted what we perceive of as “reality” or any individual’s version of that reality.

The central conceit of the journalism industry’s understanding of its own influence can be found in a phrase coined in 1972 by the researchers Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, in a seminal research paper of communications studies: “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media.”

Perhaps the institutional press wielded such power in the period under study, the presidential campaign of 1968. But much as competition from the proliferation of sources brought about by the invention of the Internet has today diminished the power of institutional journalism to set agendas, the media landscape of the time may have been

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<sup>15</sup> Williams, B. A., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2004). Monica and Bill All the Time and Everywhere: The Collapse of Gatekeeping and Agenda Setting in the New Media Environment. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47 (9), 1208–1230.

considerably more complicated than the television, newspapers and news magazines that were the whole of the definition of the “mass media” in that influential paper. Perhaps most conspicuously absent in McCombs and Shaw’s work was any consideration of radio as a source of opinion or news. Of course, rhetorical music that may have been playing on the radio was not considered as part of anything that might set an “agenda.”<sup>16</sup>

While the power and might of the newspaper editorial, at least among a significant and elite demographic segment, cannot be denied, it might also be worth looking elsewhere for other mass communications influencers to gain a better insight on the full tapestry of speakers that surround all of us in the mass culture, whether we’re attending to them or not.

It may be heretical to describe the effects of *mass* media in *individual* terms, but the fact remains that each individual’s set of perceptions — their reality — is as individual as a fingerprint, as unique as a snowflake. Audience members are constructing their reality from their own set of inputs. Mass media form part of that tapestry, and popular music operates within the broad definition of “mass media.” Sometimes, popular music and rhetoric combine to form significant statements of opinion or persuasion to audiences of significant size.

There exists some investment in the idea that what musicians say matters as discourse in the culture. Perhaps the hyperbolic standard set forth by Guthrie’s “this machine” slogan can’t be met, but these voices, in the words of the Guthrie museum, can

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<sup>16</sup> McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), pp. 176–187.



“serve as a positive force for social change.” It is the aim of this thesis to examine that idea through the lens, the crucible, of the Vietnam experience.

Dorian Lynskey, author of *33 Revolutions*, and a music writer for London’s *The Guardian*, in an email correspondence, sees a testimony for the power of music in the way that other art forms employ songs. “It’s obvious from the way countless movies and documentaries use music as easy shorthand for a political theme or moment in history that songs shape the culture. Whether they actually bring about change is more debatable — no piece of art can do that in isolation — but songs are undeniably part of the cultural conversation and, subsequently, collective memory.”

In an interview for this thesis, Jim DeRogatis, co-host of the syndicated radio program *Sound Opinions*, former rock critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and a current faculty member at Columbia College Chicago, puts the effect of music this way: “I think music has the power not necessarily to change the world — I’m not one of these Beatles-made-everything-different people — but the music has the power to change the individual. And of course individuals can change the world.”

## CHAPTER THREE: ESCALATING

In July of 1959, in the town of Bien Hoa, Vietnam, eight American military advisers were settling down at the end of the day. Communists had for several months been infiltrating into South Vietnam, inflicting terrorism through a campaign of random murder.

Within minutes, in a coordinated attack, two of the eight Americans in the Bien Hoa compound would be dead, and several more wounded. Master Sergeant Chester Ovand and Major Dale Buis were the first two of the 58,220 Americans who would die in the Vietnam War.<sup>17 18</sup>

But for that moment in the summer of 1959, Bien Hoa amounted to a minor incident, half a world away.

One month later, Robert Zimmerman, of Hibbing, Minnesota, enrolled at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. In the bohemian enclave of Dinkytown, just to the north of the campus, Zimmerman acquired a record, and upon hearing it, quickly resolved to emulate its singer, Woody Guthrie. “All these songs together, one after another made my head spin. It made me want to gasp. It was like the land parted,” he

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<sup>17</sup> Bates, M. J., & Just, W. (1998). *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism, 1959-1975*. New York: Library of America. p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Vietnam War Fast Facts. (n.d.). Retrieved March 2, 2016, from <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/01/world/vietnam-war-fast-facts/index.html>

recalled.<sup>19</sup> Robert Zimmerman invented an inflection and style, and became a new character, with a new name: Bob Dylan.

Shortly, Dylan dropped out of school and headed east to New York, where he promptly ventured to see his idol, Guthrie. Guthrie was by that time ill with Huntington's disease, so Dylan found him in his room at the Greystone Hospital in Morristown, New Jersey, and began an acquaintance that served to deepen Dylan's significance as Guthrie's heir and topical music's torch-bearer.<sup>20</sup>

It might be said that the sixties and the Vietnam era represent a high point for youth culture and youth involvement in the broader American culture. The unusually fraught era for American youth, from the emergence of Vietnam as a significant presence in the conscience of the nation in the early sixties through the humbling American withdrawal in the early seventies, spawned thousands of protest songs, which varied in significance and reach from minor-market and regional releases to full-blown hits, some of which remain radio standards — classics — nearly fifty years later.<sup>21</sup>

It is not the aim of this thesis to construct any all-inclusive discography of the protest music of the era. The songs discussed most in-depth herein are those that surfaced most consistently in interviews with veterans and observers about Vietnam-era protest

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<sup>19</sup> Sawyers, J. S. (2011). *Bob Dylan*: New York. Roaring Forties Press.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Newseum. (2015). *Songs From the Vietnam War Era*. In *Inside Media*. Audio source, no transcript available. Retrieved from <http://www.newseum.org/event/inside-media-songs-from-the-vietnam-war-era/>

music (with one notable exception, which is called out for its influence on a later musical movement).

It is difficult to overestimate the presence of the youth movement of the era and its associated musical soundtrack. As one shorthand measure, *Time Magazine* in 2010 published a “Top 10” list of protest songs. Six of the ten were from the years 1963 to 1973.<sup>22</sup>

The earliest 60s song on that list is Dylan’s “Blowin’ In the Wind.” The last, John Fogerty’s “Fortunate Son.”

Years later, in an interview published in *Rolling Stone*, Fogerty looked back on the era, the “cultural spirit in the air,” and credited Dylan. “Hey, we got rid of that guy (Nixon) and the war’s over,” Fogerty said. “If you really want to hang it on one guy, you could say that Bob Dylan ended the war and got Nixon kicked out. Bob Dylan turned a lot of heads by writing politically ... He certainly turned John Lennon’s head. He turned my head.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps Dylan was consequential within the culture. Perhaps Fogerty’s regard for the power of rhetoric in music, however, is overinflated. Perhaps, in substance, it’s not that different from the bravado of “This Machine Kills Fascists.”

By the early sixties, at about the time the U.S. started sending advisers to assist the South Vietnamese Army in prosecuting its conflict with the North, artists such as Phil

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<sup>22</sup> Webley, K. (2010). Top 10 Protest Songs. Retrieved March 24, 2016, from <http://entertainment.time.com/2010/05/04/kent-state-40-years-later-top-10-protest-songs/>

<sup>23</sup> Goldberg, M. (1986). John Fogerty: On The Road Again. *Rolling Stone*. para. 6. Retrieved from <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/john-fogerty-on-the-road-again>

Ochs and Dylan were working the clubs of Greenwich Village, performing folk songs, with lyrics that were meant to be heard.

### Masters of War

Dylan, perhaps the most important songwriter of the period, issued several pointed works in this early period before the Vietnam adventure developed into a war (arguably after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and the subsequent Gulf of Tonkin Resolution). The most specific and literal of these as a protest message was “Masters of War.” “Masters” took on the military-industrial complex and as such was more an anti-

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#### MASTERS OF WAR

You fasten all the triggers  
For the others to fire  
Then you set back and watch  
When the death count gets higher  
You hide in your mansion  
As young people's blood  
Flows out of their bodies  
And is buried in the mud

Cold War song than it was a Vietnam War song.

Still, perhaps because the “hot war” of Vietnam became real and present in a way that the Cold War never did, with the draft and returning bodies and disfigured vets, it became part of the Vietnam War songbook.

In his typically acerbic, inscrutable style, Dylan

himself explained “Masters” in a 2001 *USA Today* interview. “Unfortunately, people have been led down the wrong path by quasi-intellectuals who never really get the cultural spirit in the air when these songs are performed,” he began. Describing “Masters,” Dylan continued:

(It) is supposed to be a pacifistic song against war. It’s not an anti-war song. It’s speaking against what Eisenhower was calling a military

industrial complex as he was making his exit from the presidency. That spirit was in the air, and I picked it up.<sup>24</sup>

Dylan engaged with that “cultural spirit in the air,” and made his contribution to it through song. Despite Dylan’s assertion that it addresses not the Vietnam War but the Cold War, it was part of the cultural spirit when Vietnam came along, and many of its themes — of a military industrial complex on the loose — could be as easily applied to the new “hot” war as to the old one.

The song addresses both “big bombs,” in a reference to nuclear war, and small arms, which made its applicability to Vietnam all the more natural.

In its words, “You put a gun in my hand / And you hide from my eyes / And you turn and run farther / When the fast bullets fly,” and “You hide in your mansion / As young people’s blood / Flows out of their bodies / And is buried in the mud,” it describes most presciently the plight of the Vietnam soldier, and lays bare the politics of class and privilege that were taken up so effectively at the end of the decade by John Fogerty in “Fortunate Son.” Whether it was explicitly and specifically written with an emerging Vietnam conflict in mind mattered little. It fit.

#### John Brown

Dylan’s songwriting was so prolific during this period that some of his work was not released until years later. Dylan’s song most directly addressed at the Vietnam

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<sup>24</sup> Gunderson, E. (2001). Dylan is positively on top of his game. Retrieved March 24, 2016, from <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/music/2001-09-10-bob-dylan.htm#more>

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**JOHN BROWN**

Don't you remember, Ma, when I went off to war

You thought it was the best thing I could do?

I was on the battleground, you were home . . . acting proud

You wasn't there standing in my shoes

Oh, and I thought when I was there, God, what am I doing here?

I'm a-tryin' to kill somebody or die tryin'

But the thing that scared me most was when my enemy came close

And I saw that his face looked just like mine

conflict was the

1963

composition

"John Brown,"

which tells the

story of a proud

mother and her

son, who's heading off to fight "on a foreign shore." He returns a shadow of himself, badly disfigured and all but unrecognizable.

"John Brown" might have had great effect, joining "Masters" and his more abstract antiauthority compositions such as "With God on Our Side," "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'," but with the added effect of its direct criticism of U.S. jingoism and its unhappy results in wounded and dead young men. But "John Brown" does not appear on any official Dylan studio album; the song was released on a 1963 compilation for the folk magazine *Broadside*; however Dylan did not claim it directly, instead crediting it to "Blind Boy Grunt."<sup>25</sup>

### Draft Dodger Rag

Phil Ochs, Dylan's Greenwich Village folk contemporary, composed the acerbic "Draft Dodger Rag" in 1964 and played it at that summer's Newport Folk Festival.

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<sup>25</sup> *Broadside Ballads*, Vol. 1. (1963). Smithsonian Folkways. Retrieved from <http://www.folkways.si.edu/broadside-ballads-vol-1/american-folk-struggle-protest/music/album/smithsonian>

Released in 1965 on his album *I Ain't Marching Anymore*, it was arguably the first significant song that, in its context and time, was a direct comment on Vietnam, though it

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DRAFT DODGER RAG

Ooh, I hate Chou En Lai, and I hope he dies,

One thing you gotta see

That someone's gotta go over there

And that someone isn't me

So I wish you well, Sarge, give 'em Hell!

Kill me a thousand or so

And if you ever get a war without blood and gore

I'll be the first to go

never explicitly mentioned

Vietnam by name in its lyrics.

Delivered in a thin production,

with a bouncing, singsong folk

lyric over a strummed acoustic, it

was tailor-made for playing in

Village coffeehouses and for the

record collections of antiwar students and activists.

Ochs, a journalist by training, never liked the “protest” label, preferring to be called a “topical” singer.<sup>26</sup>

The folk movement of Greenwich Village, in large part a direct descendant of Woody Guthrie,<sup>27</sup> had written, in the early years of the Vietnam conflict, from within a long tradition of protest music while the adventure was still broadly approved of in the United States. The criticism was rarely direct, and as in the example of “John Brown,” it seems that some of the most direct criticism was perhaps withheld from circulation.

Perhaps feeling he'd said all he had to say with “Masters,” Dylan never again addressed the subject of the war while it raged. It is often said that he abandoned protest

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<sup>26</sup> Lynskey, D. (2011). *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day*. HarperCollins. p. 59

<sup>27</sup> Petrus, S., & Cohen, R. D. (2015). *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 17-30.



music altogether, though that may not be an accurate reading; he continued to touch on issues in his music throughout his life.<sup>28</sup> But never were the issues as starkly and pointedly rendered as on “Masters of War.” DeRogatis sees his turn away from protest as one of his reinventions. “I think he pulls back from the precipice, he doesn’t want to become what he’s condemning, the demagogue. Nobody wants to be the ‘voice of a generation.’ It’s a tremendous responsibility.”

Phil Ochs continued to write and perform topical songs. In late 1965, after not praising Dylan’s latest release — a song called “Can You Please Crawl Out of Your Window” — fulsomely enough, Ochs was ejected from Dylan’s car, as Dylan famously sneered “You’re not a folk singer. You’re a *journalist*.”<sup>29</sup> Ochs never achieved a large measure of fame, and took his own life in 1976; his body of work has joined Guthrie’s at the Guthrie Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma.<sup>30</sup>

### We Gotta Get Out of This Place

“We Gotta Get Out of This Place,” one of the most, if not the most, important song in the Vietnam canon, was not written about war at all. The song itself, an anti-poverty song by the Brill Building hitmakers Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, and intended for the Righteous Brothers, made its way instead to Eric Burdon and the Animals, who

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<sup>28</sup> Dreier, P. (2011). The Political Bob Dylan. Retrieved March 24, 2016, from [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/the-political-bob-dylan](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-political-bob-dylan)

<sup>29</sup> Schumacher, M. (1996). *There But for Fortune: The Life of Phil Ochs*. New York: Hyperion. p. 106.

<sup>30</sup> The Phil Ochs Papers - Woody Guthrie Center. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://woodyguthriecenter.org/archives/collection/the-phil-ochs-papers/>

from their Newcastle, England, perch may have seen in it a quest to escape the grit of working class England, “this dirty old part of the city, where the sun refused to shine.”

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WE GOTTA GET OUT OF THIS PLACE

We gotta get out of this place

If it's the last thing we ever do

We gotta get out of this place

Girl, there's a better life for me and you

Somewhere baby, somehow I know it

Their record became a hit and

subsequently the theme song of the

soldiers in Vietnam.<sup>31</sup>

*We Gotta Get Out of this Place* is the

title of one of most thorough compendia

of Vietnam War music and remembrances, a 2015 book by Doug Bradley and Craig

Werner, where it is referred to as “The Vietnam Veterans’ National Anthem.”<sup>32</sup>

### Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag

One of the more unlikely rhetoricians of the Vietnam era was Joe McDonald, who wrote the witty and sardonic “Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag” in 1965. McDonald described his creation moment as a rhetorician:

I was putting out a little magazine. We were selling tiny numbers of this magazine if we sold any at all — you know 50 or something like that — and we had no copy for the magazine. It was a biweekly and it published schedules. But we had not contacted the clubs to see who is performing or the square dance people to see where their meetings were, which we were supposed to do because that was the format of the magazine. We had no essays for the magazine. So I decided to make a talking issue of the magazine, and it just so happened that there was one

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<sup>31</sup> We Gotta Get Out Of This Place by The Animals. (n.d.). Retrieved April 3, 2016, from <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=3999>

<sup>32</sup> Bradley, D., & Werner, C. (2015). *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. p. 1.

person on the magazine that had a small record label and he knew another person that had a small record label. And we went to somebody's living room and we recorded the song and we put it on an extended play record and then sold it, but I mean we only made about 100 copies of that record and sold maybe ten. (Laughs.) I think my mother bought one. And then when Dylan went electric in '66 this little group that we had went electric. We invented the name Country Joe and the Fish for that record and I was the only Joe in the group so they started calling me Country Joe. So these things are all ... fate or an accident or whatever.

Woodstock, for Country Joe McDonald, was where his incisive little composition demonstrated an unambiguous rhetorical power. But the band's appearance there was almost as unlikely as what led up to it. For many people with more than a passing interest in the period, what happened next is one of the highlights of the concert documentary "Woodstock." McDonald continues:

And then Country Joe and the Fish, the rock 'n' roll band, was hired at the last minute to go to Woodstock and play. And I was on the stage and Santana was late and so they said, "Will you just fill in some time because the audience, we needed the audience to hear something."

They gave me a guitar and kind of pushed me out there, really, and I did some some stuff that nobody paid any attention to.

It turned out that in Manhattan a radio station had been playing the "Fixin' to Die Rag" from the little EP every day. They somehow got a copy of this little EP which historically almost no one even knows existed. There was an electric EP that came afterwards that everyone recognizes as the first Country Joe and the Fish record because it was electric. The one that had "Fixin' to Die Rag" on it was a jug band, a skiffle band. So the people in Manhattan were familiar with the lyrics and most of the audience at Woodstock came from Manhattan.

So I walked offstage and I asked my partner “Would it be OK if I did ‘Fixin’ to Die Rag’?” And he said “nobody’s paying any attention to you so what the hell? It doesn’t matter what you do.”

So I went out there and I did the cheer and I did the song and it was recorded. And the response was incredible. I could actually see that people were standing up and getting excited about it. Much to my amazement. And that’s why I yelled at them “come on, let’s go, how do you stop the war?”

Of course what McDonald describes is more than a song going out. It’s an audience taking it in and making it theirs, a simultaneous sharing, ownership and sharing again of a message. Notably, as McDonald recalls his partner saying, nobody was paying any attention prior to the performance of “Fixin’ to Die.”

The song had been memorized in some significant part of the audience by repeated playing on a Manhattan radio station, and was in their heads when McDonald strummed the first note. Because of other mass media effects, in this case both physical media distribution and radio airplay, they knew the song and its rhetoric, and brought it with them to the concert.

Viewing the “Fixin’ to Die” performance footage from the Woodstock film<sup>33</sup> provides ample evidence of the significance of musical rhetoric. McDonald, himself ex-military, dressed in Army fatigues and strumming an acoustic guitar alone on the stage, instructs the massive crowd to “Sing it!”

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<sup>33</sup> Country Joe McDonald live at Woodstock. (1970). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jk68D91hTXw>

First, McDonald gets a halfhearted reaction, to which he responds, “Listen people, I don’t know how you expect to ever stop the war if you can’t sing any better than that.” After noting the size of the crowd, he ends his mid-song exhortation with “I want you to start singing. Come on.” At this point, the song continues to its chorus.

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FEEL-LIKE-I’M-FIXIN’-TO-DIE RAG

And it’s one, two, three,  
 What are we fighting for?  
 Don’t ask me, I don’t give a damn,  
 Next stop is Vietnam;  
 And it’s five, six, seven,  
 Open up the pearly gates,  
 Well there ain’t no time to wonder why  
 Whoopee! we’re all gonna die.

It is difficult to imagine a response to a speech or other oratory of similar passion to that which attends the last minute of the performance of “Fixin’ to Die” at Woodstock. The hillside of young people rises to its feet and loudly sings the song back toward the stage, ending in

deafening applause, as if to say “Amen.”

And that is of course, one of the principal differences between rhetorical music in mass media and other forms of speech. Performances form a kind of communal bond within the audience, synchronized to a rhythm, that can culminate in an ecstatic response. Within this milieu, a rhetorical message can receive nearly undivided attention. Further, the audience members’ act of singing the song, either in the crowd at a live event or along to a recording, is unique in all media. Readers of an editorial don’t make it their own by simultaneously writing it back; moviegoers don’t perform the scenes they’re viewing. Perhaps the closest analogy lies in another live event, this in evangelical churches, where boisterous preachers engage in call-and-response with their congregants.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PROTEST BECOMES POPULAR

Most of the time, music is a mass medium that conveys messages about love and heartache, or in Johnny Cash's shorthand (the title of his career box set), "Love, God, Murder."

Sometimes, though, as we've seen, musicians stride to the microphone with bigger ideas on their minds. One of the complications of examining music as rhetoric is that there are no easy devices to separate out music that functions as rhetoric from music that functions as rebellion, romance, etc.

Rhetorical print journalism is labeled, published under the heading of "Editorial" or "Opinion." Walter Cronkite's famous post-Tet commentary on the Vietnam War was introduced from a news broadcast, by the anchor changing perspective, announcing that he was abandoning objectivity: "Tonight, back in more familiar surroundings in New York, we'd like to sum up our findings in Vietnam, an analysis that must be speculative, personal, subjective."<sup>34</sup>

In contrast, there are no pointers to focus a listener's attention on a particular pop song; no pre-announcement tells the listener to pay attention, that the songwriter has something important to say. Rhetorical songs are intermingled, on radio and on album releases, with songs about love and relationships, and with songs whose rhetorical content is only imputed by the listener.

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<sup>34</sup> Reporting Vietnam: Part One: American Journalism 1959-1969 (1998), pp. 581-582

Perhaps it is just that characteristic of rhetoric in music — the conscious shift that might occur when a listener, accustomed to a diet of “Good Vibrations,” realizes that the singer of the song playing at the moment is making a statement about a topic of some importance, that might account for some of the power and resonance of rhetorical music.

Recorded music, and its ancillary businesses such as concert promotion, radio, and record sales, is a business, and taken together, a mass communications medium of unique character.

There are very few political speeches, even great ones, that are committed to memory by any substantial proportion of the populace. Music, however, has a quality that can — with repeated listening — embed a song and a lyric so deeply in the memory that it can be recalled effortlessly years later. This unique quality, demonstrated en masse by the Woodstock crowd singing along to “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag,” may make music a uniquely effective carrier of messages, be they about war, injustice or puppy love.

It has been noted by others that protest songs, taken as a genre, have never been particularly popular<sup>35</sup>; there have been breakthrough hits in the protest genre, but taken as a whole, “protest songs” are certainly not as popular as “love songs.”

It wasn’t for lack of trying. But commercial success as measured by chart position was perhaps not the artistic intent. One of the most comprehensive compendia of the

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<sup>35</sup> Bindas, K. J., & Houston, C. (1989). “Takin’ Care of Business”: Rock Music, Vietnam and the Protest Myth. *The Historian*, 52(1), 1–23. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6563.1989.tb00771.x

music of the Vietnam War, Lee Andresen's *Battle Notes*, lists over 300 songs written about or referring to the war.<sup>36</sup> Only a few ever broke through on a national level.

This lack of chart position and sales when compared to the most popular songs of the era has been used as a proxy, or a measuring stick, for protest music's relevance. One example of this point of view is a 1989 article by Kenneth Bindas and Craig Houston in *The Historian*, "Takin' Care of Business: Rock Music, Vietnam and the Protest Myth."<sup>37</sup>

Correlating chart position with political influence, a central device of Bindas and Houston's *Historian* article, is a logical stretch given how messages move through culture, though it is certainly true that any broader dissemination of any message can enhance its political effect, and that the rhetorical effect of a song played in front of a crowded bar is magnified if the same song is performed in a stadium or is recorded and sold, or streamed, to millions of listeners.

Art (particularly controversial art) and commerce are uneasy associates. While the war was, in its early years, broadly supported by the American public<sup>38</sup>, hit songs directly about the war were few and far between. In late 1965 and early 1966, though, two war-themed songs made the top of the charts. First up, surprisingly, was an anti-war song.

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<sup>36</sup> Andresen, L. (2003). *Battle Notes*. Superior, WI: Savage Press. pp. 319-344.

<sup>37</sup> Bindas, K. J., & Houston, C. (1989). "Takin' Care of Business": Rock Music, Vietnam and the Protest Myth. *The Historian*, 52(1), 1-23.

<sup>38</sup> University of Houston. (n.d.). Digital History | Support for Vietnam War. Retrieved from [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam\\_pubopinion.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam_pubopinion.cfm)



## Eve of Destruction

“Eve of Destruction” was written by a 19-year-old record-label staff writer, P.F. Sloan, in the middle of the night in the middle of 1965, and recorded by Barry McGuire (a member of the New Christy Minstrels folk singing group). It was a hit, topping Billboard’s September 25 Hot 100 chart<sup>39</sup>, even though originally released as a B-side, and though it thematically addresses the Cold War and nuclear annihilation at least as much as Vietnam (though it did include the couplet “you’re old enough to kill/but not for votin’”), it became an anthem of the anti-war movement.<sup>40</sup>

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### EVE OF DESTRUCTION

The eastern world it is exploding  
 Violence flarin,’ bullets loadin’  
 You’re old enough to kill but not for votin’  
 You don’t believe in war but whats that gun you’re totin’?  
 And even the Jordan River has bodies floatin’  
 But you tell me  
 Over and over and over again my friend  
 Ah, you don’t believe  
 We’re on the eve of destruction

The experience of “Eve of Destruction” may provide useful context in considering why major rock groups of the sixties generally avoided reference to the war, or only made such

references obliquely. P.F. Sloan, on his website, writes of the reaction to the song:

The media frenzy over the song tore me up and seemed to tear the country apart. I was an enemy of the people to some and a hero to others, but I was still only 20 years old and nobody really was looking. I have felt

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<sup>39</sup> The Hot 100 - 1965 Archive | Billboard Charts Archive. Billboard. Retrieved April 1, 2016, from <http://www.billboard.com/archive/charts/1965/hot-100>

<sup>40</sup> Sloan, P. F. (1999). Stories Behind The Songs. Retrieved April 22, 2014, from <http://www2.gol.com/users/davidr/sloan/aboutsongs.html>

it was a love song and written as a prayer because, to cure an ill you need to know what is sick. In my youthful zeal I hadn't realized that this would be taken as an attack on The System!

Examples: The media headlined the song as everything that is wrong with the youth culture. First, show the song is just a hack song to make money and therefore no reason to deal with its questions. Prove the 19-year-old writer is a communist dupe. Attack the singer as a parrot for the writers word. The media claimed that the song would frighten little children. I had hoped thru this song to open a dialogue with Congress and the people. The media banned me from all national television shows. Oddly enough they didn't ban Barry.

The United States felt under threat. So any positive press on me or Barry was considered un-patriotic. A great deal of madness, as I remember it! I told the press it was a love song. A love song to and for humanity, that's all. It ruined Barry's career as an artist and in a year I would be driven out of the music business too.<sup>41</sup>

Soon after "Eve," Vietnam veteran Barry Sadler's "Ballad of the Green Berets"

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#### BALLAD OF THE GREEN BERETS

Fighting soldiers from the sky  
Fearless men who jump and die  
Men who mean just what they say  
The brave men of the Green Beret  
Silver wings upon their chest  
These are men, America's best  
One hundred men we'll test today  
But only three win the Green Beret

became one of 1966's top hits, leading the chart for five weeks in the spring.<sup>42</sup> Over a martial drumbeat, Sadler delivers the simple words in a spare arrangement. The result is a ballad, not rock 'n' roll, but it was an overwhelming popular hit on Top 40 radio.

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<sup>41</sup> Sloan, P. F. Stories Behind The Songs. Retrieved April 22, 2014, from <http://www2.gol.com/users/davidr/sloan/aboutsongs.html>

<sup>42</sup> The Hot 100 - 1966 Archive | Billboard Charts Archive. Billboard. Retrieved May 02, 2014, from <http://www.billboard.com/archive/charts/1966/hot-100>

Bindas and Houston find a correlation between the prevailing public opinion and the music industry's courage (or timidity) in releasing songs critical of Vietnam.

Only when the American public altered its opinion toward the war did the record industry and prominent musicians redirect their music by marketing songs with antiwar themes. While a few antiwar rock songs became popular hits, when placed in the broad context of rock music's anti-Establishment stance from 1965 to 1974, the attention given to the Vietnam War by the rock'n'roll industry was minimal.<sup>43</sup>

By 1966, about midway between the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and the Tet Offensive, seven in ten Americans identified Vietnam as the nation's top problem.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps emblematic of the turbulent decade, that 1966 reading on the "top problem" question was the highest recorded for Vietnam or the war, despite the escalations that followed. Perhaps, though, the battle of Barry McGuire and Barry Sadler in the fall of '65 and spring of '66 is emblematic: 1966 was the year when support for the war first slipped below 50 percent of those surveyed.<sup>45</sup>

Musicologist Simon Frith, professor of music at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland and a former rock critic for *The Village Voice* and other publications, whose academic specialty is the sociology of music culture, contextualizes the power of rhetoric in popular music in his book *Sound Effects*:

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<sup>43</sup> Bindas, K. J., & Houston, C. (1989). p.1.

<sup>44</sup> Newport, F., & Carroll, J. (2005). Iraq Versus Vietnam: A Comparison of Public Opinion. Gallup. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/18097/iraq-versus-vietnam-comparison-public-opinion.aspx#2>

<sup>45</sup> University of Houston. (n.d.). Digital History | Support for Vietnam War. Retrieved from [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam\\_pubopinion.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam_pubopinion.cfm)

The ideological power of popular music comes from its popularity. Music becomes a mass culture by entering a mass consciousness, by being heard simultaneously on people's radios and record players, on bar and café jukeboxes, at discos and dances. Mass music is recorded music and – whatever their particular artistic claims, their authenticity and interest as music – records which don't sell, which don't become popular, don't enter mass consciousness. Because rock is a mass medium, attempts to claim its products, records, as for music or works of art, as we have seen, miss the point: a record's ideological influence is determined by what happens to it in the marketplace.<sup>46</sup>

Frith, of course, echoes Bindas and Houston in this contention; but he's less precise, not attempting to draw direct correlations, or to assign the idea of the rhetorical effect of popular music to the dustbin of "mythology." Instead, Frith observes that if no one hears a song, if it doesn't enter mass consciousness, it follows that its ideological influence is limited, or nonexistent.

Still, popular music had been making statements about the war to ever-larger audiences; by 1966, two songs, representing opposite rhetorical positions, had topped the charts as the most popular songs in the nation.

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<sup>46</sup> Frith, S. (1981). *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll*. New York: Pantheon Books.

## CHAPTER FIVE: 1968, CRONKITE WAS LATE

America, at the height of the Vietnam War in 1968, was a young country. 1968, in fact, was the year that America, in its postwar history, was its demographically-youngest. The Sixties were the decade when America took a detour from its otherwise-steady demographic march to ever-older median age (driven mostly by better health and medicine), and got younger — a lot younger, as a result of the postwar Baby Boom.<sup>47</sup>

John Ketwig, veteran and author of *And a Hard Rain Fell*, puts it another way: “We were born to a generation of very, very horny people at the end of World War II. Boy, the guys came home from the most destructive and deadly war in history and babies were made. And that was us.”

1968 was in many ways the most remarkable year of a remarkable decade. America was fully involved in the war in Southeast Asia. Half a million American men were deployed to Vietnam. Casualties peaked that year, with 14,000 troops making their way home in a flag-draped casket.<sup>48</sup> That sadness was punctuated in April by the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis, and in June, by the killing of Bobby Kennedy in Los Angeles.

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<sup>47</sup> Kisung, Kim, “U.S. aggregate demand for clothing and shoes, 1929-1994: Effects of changes in price, nondurables expenditures, and demographics.” Dissertation, Virginia Tech, 1998, p. 25. Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-12098-13236/>

<sup>48</sup> The Vietnam War: Military Statistics | The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/seventies/resources/vietnam-war-military-statistics>

Amid all this despair, American optimism and ingenuity was on display as well. The Apollo missions would resume their march toward the moon that JFK had promised.

1968 also held several cataclysms that directly altered the course of the war. The first started on Jan. 31. In the Tet Offensive of '68, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong fighters rose up against targets throughout South Vietnam; if it wasn't a military victory by the time it was put down several weeks later, it was certainly a symbolic one, a demonstration that North Vietnamese communists had infiltrated areas throughout South Vietnam.

If Tet itself didn't provide convincing evidence of the futility of the war, Walter Cronkite put an exclamation point on the episode, with his Feb. 27 commentary urging a negotiated settlement and withdrawal from Vietnam. In the length of time a pop song might play, Cronkite expressed deep reservations about the Vietnam adventure, saying "it seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate."<sup>49</sup>

On March 31, 1968, a couple of months after Tet, President Lyndon Johnson appeared on the television screens of the nation from the White House in one of the most consequential speeches by any U.S. President in history. In the address, after lamenting the tremendous suffering and loss of life in the country, Johnson announced a unilateral deescalation of bombing in the North, created an opening for negotiations by appointing Ambassador Averill Harriman to engage in talks "at Geneva or any other suitable place –

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<sup>49</sup> Reporting Vietnam: Part One: American Journalism 1959-1969 (1998), pp. 581-582

just as soon as Hanoi agrees to a conference,” and as he had, up to that point, been considered the leading Democratic candidate for 1968 election, effectively resigned the Presidency with the statement “Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”<sup>50</sup>

Bob Kerrey, later a Navy SEAL and U.S. Senator from Nebraska, remembers the mood of the time. Watching LBJ’s address to the nation at home, Kerrey, who would enter the war a year later, was stunned.

“After President Johnson announced that he was going to negotiate with the North Vietnamese, it was over. Everything after that, after that March ’68 decision and announcement was, in a lot of ways, just wasted lives and wasted money.”

Such was the futility of the post-Tet Vietnam War. But the first three months of 1968 was only the first chapter in that uniquely awful year.

In an interview, Craig Werner, co-author of *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, said “Tet’s one of the dividing points, not the only one. I would argue really seriously that the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King is every bit as important to what happened there.” Werner said. “What that did was it took a lot of black people into a position where they were out of that public square. They just said ‘fuck it.’”

The King assassination was on April 4, just four days after LBJ’s speech. The assassination of Bobby Kennedy two months later had a similar effect on youth. Cronkite’s commentary, influential as it was, was only a large drop in the stew of

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<sup>50</sup>*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968-69*. Volume I, entry 170, pp. 469-476. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1970.

thoughts and ideas to which engaged members of the culture regularly attend. Still it was a *large* drop: President Lyndon Johnson, on viewing the commentary, is said to have remarked to aides: “It’s all over.”<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Cronkite commentary was that it was so remarkable, that it was so out of character for a significant media person to directly question the administration’s military strategy. David Halberstam, in his book *The Powers That Be*, quipped “It was the first time in American history a war had been declared over by an anchorman.”<sup>52</sup>

But as influential as Cronkite’s commentary was, it was late. By then, musicians had been speaking out against the war in popular songs for nearly five years. Institutional media, by contrast, had been largely supportive of the American involvement in Southeast Asia. As the author and media observer Daniel Hallin put it,

The data suggests a dramatic shift from one-sidedly favorable coverage of U.S. policy in the early years — before the 1968 Tet Offensive — to substantially more critical coverage after Tet. This change, moreover, cannot be dismissed as a mere reflection of the actual course of events. In some cases the increase in negative content clearly has no relation to changes actually taking place in Vietnam. So one must conclude that the media were indeed applying different journalistic standards in the latter part of the war.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Seib, P. M. (1997). *Headline Diplomacy: How News Coverage Affects Foreign Policy*. Praeger. p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> Halberstam, D. (2000). *The Powers That Be*. University of Illinois Press. p. 514.

<sup>53</sup> Hallin, D. C. (1984). *The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media*. *The Journal of Politics*, 46(1), p. 6. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2130432>



In a specific example of the institutional news media's passive approach to approaching war, Hallin comments on Tom Wicker's reporting in the *New York Times* regarding the Gulf of Tonkin incident of August 1964. In his book *The Uncensored War*, Hallin takes journalism's bedrock notion of "objectivity" to task in his criticism of Wicker: "He is exercising 'news judgment' according to several of the basic conventions of objective journalism, conventions which here make the *New York Times* essentially an instrument of the state."<sup>54</sup>

DeRogatis sees a special value for musical rhetoric in this difference, this reluctance of the institutional media to take a skeptical perspective in the early stages of war, first focusing on the Iraq buildup before taking on Vietnam. "I don't think the media ever protests," he said. "The unconscionable march toward the invasion of Iraq and Judith Miller and the WMDs ... I mean the mainstream media was snowed by the Gulf of Tonkin and it took 10 years for the media to turn against Vietnam."

Still, the music industry as a whole was less than heroic. Recalling Dylan's release of "John Brown" under an alias, and the difficulty P.F. Sloan faced with the reaction to "Eve of Destruction," it can be said that the music industry was tentative at best and at worst repressive in its approach to popular protest music.

Addressing Bindas and Houston's criticism of musicians and the music industry generally, it is important to emphasize the word "prominent" in their critique. There were rock 'n' roll and folk music voices all along criticizing the war. Those voices did not,

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<sup>54</sup> Hallin, D. C. (1986). *The Uncensored War: The Media and the Vietnam*. Oxford University Press. p. 71.

however, tend to be successful, multi-million-dollar businesses such as the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. Instead, other singers and bands, perhaps with less to lose, approached their microphones carrying something to say about the war.

After Tet, though, the national mood had shifted, and there was money to be made. Even the record labels came along, some explicitly identifying themselves with the voices of protest.

In early December 1968, some ten months after Tet, Columbia Records made a particularly ham-handed corporate attempt to align itself with the “revolution” in an advertisement displaying a group of detained protesters.<sup>55</sup> Tone-deaf as advertising, it nevertheless signaled a new corporate willingness to side with the anti-war movement. Columbia published the full-page ad in underground newspapers. Under the headline “But the Man can’t bust our music,” ran a large photo of young people in a holding cell, sitting on a floor littered with protest signs. The signs of protest were meaningless, with slogans like “Grab Hold!” “Wake Up!” and “Music is Love.” Under the photo, the ad featured a grid of album covers, ostensibly of “revolution,” a collection of neoclassical LPs including “Switched-On Bach.” Still, it was a sign that the record bigwigs had been watching the polls. At that point, the percentage of Americans reporting support for the war in the Gallup tracking poll had dropped to the mid-thirties from its reading in the upper fifties just two-and-a-half years earlier.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Doggett, P. (2009). There’s a Riot Going On: Revolutionaries, Rock Stars, and the Rise and Fall of the ‘60s. (e-book) Canongate Books. ch. 4, para. 3-6.

<sup>56</sup> University of Houston. Digital History | Support for Vietnam War. Retrieved from [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam\\_pubopinion.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam_pubopinion.cfm)

Peter Doggett, in his *There's a Riot Going On: Revolutionaries, Rock Stars, and the Rise and Fall of the '60s*, sets the scene for the Columbia about-face:

Who owns the music? This question burned through the global rock community in the year between Chicago and Woodstock. In the wake of “Revolution” and “Street Fighting Man,” dissidence seemed to have replaced the acid trip as the defining motif of the counterculture. Yet both of these apparently subversive statements were the products of multinational corporations, whose activities ranged from broadcasting to the manufacture of weapons.

Advertising agencies and entertainment conglomerates joined forces in October 1968 to stage a conference about selling the American youth market. For their \$300 admission fee, delegates learned how to capitalize on the bewilderingly rapid changes witnessed over the previous year. Two months later, Columbia Records launched a campaign that perfectly illustrated the conference’s theme. Columbia had already borrowed the magic word “revolutionaries” for a March 1968 rock compilation. Now they proposed to extend the conceit. All of the company’s rock or “underground” releases during January through March 1969 were branded under the slogan: “The Revolutionaries are on Columbia.”<sup>57</sup>

The corporate side of the music equation flipped sides along with the public sentiment in post-Tet 1968. Any general change in posture from the other major participants in this dance of art and commerce — the musicians themselves — is perhaps less obvious.

What seems more obvious is a change in the tenor of the songs. Prior to Tet, songs addressing the war, including “Draft Dodger Rag,” “Eve of Destruction” and “I-Feel-

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<sup>57</sup> Doggett, P. (2009). *There's a Riot Going On: Revolutionaries, Rock Stars, and the Rise and Fall of the '60s*. (e-book) Canongate Books. ch. 4, para. 3-6.

Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag” had been delivered at mid-tempo, with a vocal quality that might be described as resigned, or wistful, or even humorous. This persisted for a moment more with the release of Eric Burdon and the Animals’ “Sky Pilot,” a pointed takedown of pious Army chaplaincy, and uncharacteristically for Burdon, without vocal grit or growl. The benefit to Burdon’s delivery was that every word was well-enunciated; its rhetoric got through.

““Sky Pilot’ was a favorite of mine in ’68, overtly a song about war,” Paul Critchlow, a soldier in-country ‘68 and ’69, said. ““Sky Pilot’ really grabbed me and I didn’t even know why, but the message of it was that here’s a chaplain sending troops out to fight, clearly in Vietnam, and yet the chaplain to my way of thinking was a stand-in for all the older men, all the authority figures who sent the young guys out to actually do the fighting and get killed or hurt.”

Jim Schmidt, in-country as part of the 101st Airborne for all of 1971, was also struck by the song. “Eric Burdon manages to condense our feelings about the war, with the hypocrisy of organized religion actually supporting the carnage. The bagpipes playing in the chaotic battle scene is a masterstroke.”

Interestingly, this song, perhaps the last of its kind, was released in the UK on January 26, 1968.<sup>58</sup> The Tet Offensive would begin just five days later.

The going was about to get tougher. And like Guthrie had predicted, the songs were about to get tougher, too.

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<sup>58</sup> 45cat - Eric Burdon And The Animals - Sky Pilot (Part 1) / Sky Pilot (Part 2) - MGM - UK - MGM 1373. Retrieved from <http://www.45cat.com/record/mgm1373>

## CHAPTER SIX: BIG BANDS, BIG BUSINESS

No discussion of the Sixties, particularly one concerned with the music of the period, would be complete without mention of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

Where Vietnam is concerned, however, the story of both of these rock 'n' roll institutions is one of some dissociation. In February of 1968, as the Tet Offensive still smoldered in Hue, John, Paul, George and Ringo boarded a plane, not bound for a Vietnam protest but for a trip of a different kind, heading to India to study transcendental meditation with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, President of the Academy of Transcendental Meditation.<sup>59</sup> David Cate, in *Sixty-Eight*, encapsulates the band and the time:

The Beatles ... remind us that 1968 did not belong to war, napalm, insurrection, barricades and teargas alone; nor did the young necessarily embrace the doctrinaire idealism of the New Left. The year 1968 was also the heyday of hedonism, of private pleasures gift-wrapped in permissiveness, of an alternative revolution of the Spirit and senses with a wider useful constituency than the New Left — and scarcely less outrageous the middle-aged guardians of order.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, John Lennon, the most political of the Beatles with 1969's "Give Peace a Chance" and 1971's "Imagine," recalled the era shortly before his death in December 1980, and in doing so disavowed any responsibility as a political actor.

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<sup>59</sup> Kozinn, A. (2008). Meditation on the man who saved the Beatles. The New York Times. para. 8. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/07/arts/07iht-07yogi.9826732.html?\\_r=3&](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/07/arts/07iht-07yogi.9826732.html?_r=3&)

<sup>60</sup> Cate, D. (1988). *Sixty-Eight: The Year of the Barricade*. London: Hamilton. p. 35.

I dabbled in so-called politics in the late 1960s and 1970s more out of guilt than anything. Guilt for being rich and guilt thinking that perhaps love and peace isn't enough and you have to go and get shot or something, or get punched in the face, to prove I'm one of the people. I was doing it against my instincts.<sup>61</sup>

Compared to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones had always been considered more rebellious, darker, less pretty. But the Stones were a big business by the time Vietnam became an issue that concerned their audience. As creatures of commerce, the Stones, most especially their frontman Mick Jagger, also — like the Beatles — perhaps had too much to lose.

On March 17, 1968, Grosvenor Square in London was the site of a demonstration against the American involvement in Vietnam. Jagger, swept up in the excitement, joined the protest, but fled after he was recognized and reporters approached for an interview. Given an opportunity to be a political actor, he instead disappeared.<sup>62</sup>

The conclusion is unmistakable. The collision between art and commerce often becomes collusion; the once-revolutionary “mop-tops” and their rivals, the Stones, were — by the time the war heated up — multi-million-dollar businesses; corporations in themselves. They had much to lose by saying too much, and may have shrunk from the challenge. The Beatles, perhaps completing things, were headed to a breakup.

Still, these and other major artists did not ignore political rhetoric entirely in their music. The Stones would not exit the decade without saying something about the central

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<sup>61</sup> Golson, G. B. (1981). *The Playboy Interviews with John Lennon & Yoko Ono*. New York: Berkley. pp. 224-225.

<sup>62</sup> Caute, D. (1988). *Sixty-Eight : The Year of the Barricade*. London: Hamilton. p. 39.

issue of the time in their “Gimme Shelter.” The Beatles would question protest itself with “Revolution.”

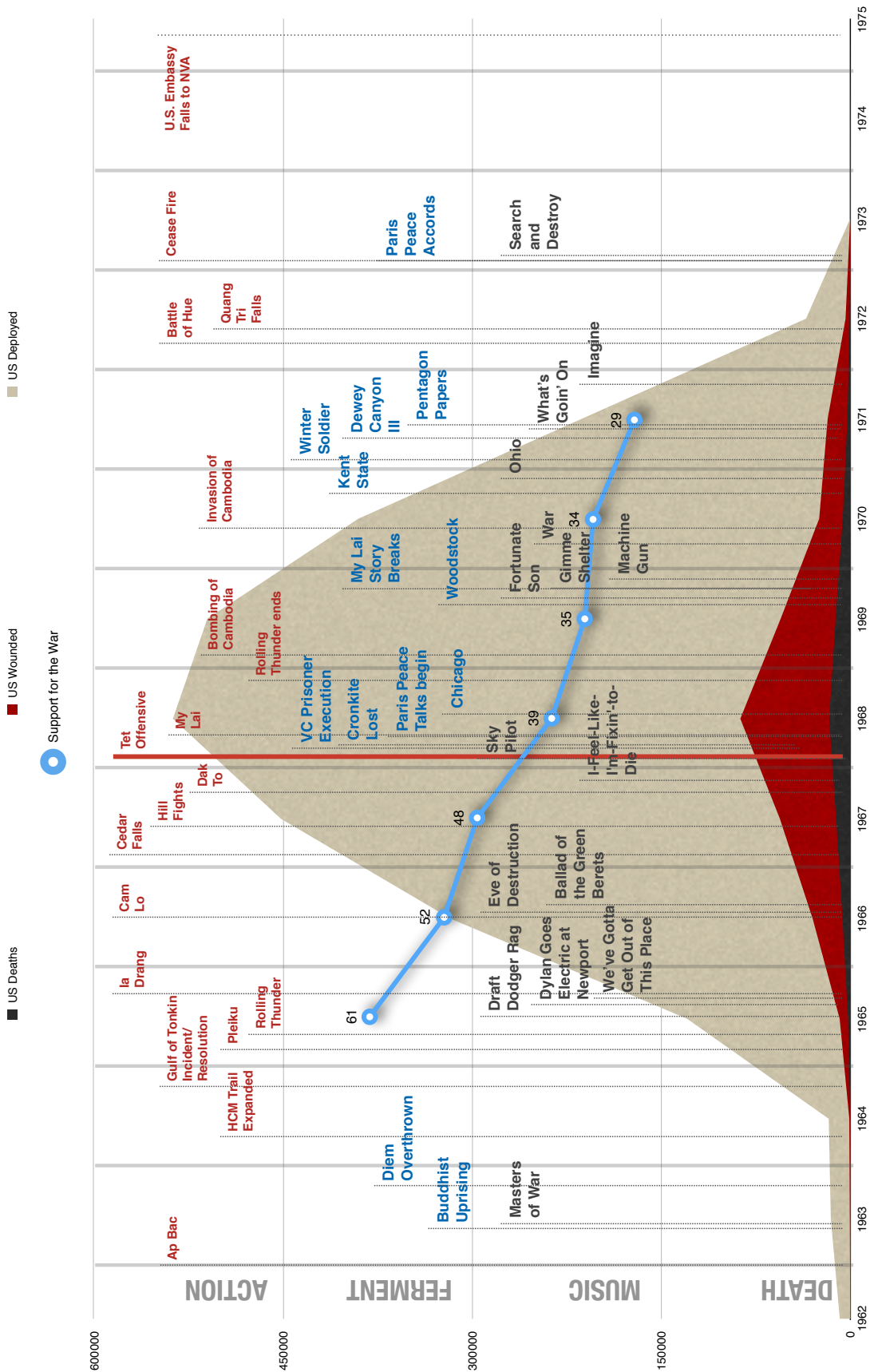
In later interviews, John Lennon revealed the reason for the Beatles’ reluctance to confront the subject of Vietnam. In an interview in *Playboy Magazine* just a few months before his death, Lennon responded in this way about the difficulty of bringing the Beatles into the political theater with the song “Revolution”:

We recorded the song twice. The Beatles were getting really tense with one another. I did the slow version and I wanted it out as a single: as a statement of the Beatles’ position on Vietnam and the Beatles’ position on revolution. For years, on the Beatle tours, Epstein had stopped us from saying anything about Vietnam or the war. And he wouldn’t allow questions about it. But on one tour, I said, “I am going to answer about the war. We can’t ignore it.” I absolutely wanted the Beatles to say something.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Sheff, D. (1981). Playboy Interview: John Lennon and Yoko Ono. *Playboy Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.beatlesinterviews.org/dbjyph.int3.html>

Fig. 4: Vietnam | Death, Music, Ferment, Action





Data on Fig. 4 from these sources:

Data represented in this graph from various sources.

**U.S. Deaths data:**

Statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam War. (2008). National Archives and Records Administration. Retrieved April 23, 2014, from <http://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html#date>

**U.S. Wounded Data:**

Smith, R. J. (n.d.). Casualties - US vs NVA/VC. Retrieved April 23, 2014, from [http://www.rjsmith.com/kia\\_tbl.html](http://www.rjsmith.com/kia_tbl.html); Figures from 1962-65 and 1973 derived from calculated ratio of 4.46 WIA to 1 KIA for 1966-72.

**U.S. Deployment Data:**

Kane, T. (2004). Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950-2003. The Heritage Foundation. Retrieved April 22, 2014, from <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2004/10/global-us-troop-deployment-1950-2003>

**Support for War data:**

University of Houston. (n.d.). Digital History | Support for Vietnam War. Retrieved April 26, 2014, from [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam\\_pubopinion.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam_pubopinion.cfm); because polling intervals were irregular, multiple poll results for same year averaged to provide single yearly result. As measured by “no” responses to: “In view of developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?”

**Vietnam War Data (Action/Ferment):** Battlefield: Vietnam | Timeline. (n.d.). Retrieved January 21, 2016, from <http://www.pbs.org/battlefieldvietnam/timeline/index.html>

Music release dates are taken from the Newseum’s “Reporting Vietnam” website. <http://www.newseum.org/?s=vietnam+music+monday>

## CHAPTER SEVEN: WOODSTOCK AND BEYOND

All through 1968 and 1969, the environment was changing.

Despite its dominant aura of sex and drugs, in summer 1969, the Woodstock festival featured at least two extraordinary anti-war moments, one explicit, by Country Joe McDonald in his performance of “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-To-Die Rag” and one implicit, by Jimi Hendrix in his searing rendition of the national anthem. As Danny Goldberg put it a few weeks later in *Billboard*, Woodstock “has to be taken as a political event. Political without the fear, clichés, and martyrdom of other political events. Its candidate was music and peace.”<sup>64</sup>

### Star-Spangled Banner

Hendrix’s searing coda delivered on the last day of Woodstock, in the form of a ragged, angry, and martial “Star Spangled Banner,” cannot be considered *literally* anti-war, as it was delivered without words. But according to Richie Unterberger in *The Rough Guide to Jimi Hendrix*,

He summons up a maelstrom that skirts the border between heavy rock and white noise, re-creating bursting bombs and fireworks with industrial-strength volume. The chaotic violence of some of those passages, however, seem not so much a celebration of American military

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<sup>64</sup> Goldberg, D. (1969). Woodstock: Peace Mecca. *Billboard*. Retrieved from <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/woodstock-peace-mecca>

glory as a condemnation of the random, meaningless havoc it wreaked, particularly on Vietnam.<sup>65</sup>

Jacob McMurray, who has, in his career with the Experience Music Project Museum in Seattle, curated several Hendrix exhibitions, echoes Unterberger's take on the national anthem. "I don't think that's just interpretation of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' that the sounds he's making sound like fighter planes and bombs falling and things like that. That was definitely very purposeful."

Asked why the "Star-Spangled Banner" was part of his set, Hendrix responded, "We don't play it to take away all this greatness America is supposed to have. We play it the way the air is in America today. The air is slightly static, isn't it?"<sup>66</sup>

### Three Days of Peace and Music, During a War

The air was static, indeed. Perhaps because of his own suffering, Critchlow's recollections about Woodstock are deep and painful.

I loved listening to this stuff and when we were in base camp I would hear all this stuff. I was wounded on August 19, 1969. It was the third day of the Woodstock concert. I did not know at the time the Woodstock concert was going on. This is something I only learned, you know, read about probably two months later. At the time it infuriated me that there were supposedly hundreds of thousands of young people at this field, listening to all this music. Even though I liked the music. I just

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<sup>65</sup> Unterberger, R. (2009). *The Rough Guide to Jimi Hendrix*. London: Rough Guides. Page number unavailable. Retrieved from [https://books.google.com/books?id=pXi\\_8WFhRkwC](https://books.google.com/books?id=pXi_8WFhRkwC)

<sup>66</sup> Roby, S. (2012). *Hendrix on Hendrix: Interviews and Encounters with Jimi Hendrix*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press. p. 217.

thought “these fuckers. There’s a war on, don’t they know?” And of course they did know. It was clearly a giant protest kind of thing.

And I think I later saw an article, and I get worked up when I think about this. And yet I listen to Woodstock, I watched the concert on TV, and I really liked it, but it still stirs up great anger in me, because during the three days of the Woodstock concert, something like 125 or 130 American soldiers were killed. And the press was full of anxiety and concern about these kids. “Oh they don’t have water, they don’t have food, oh they don’t have proper medical attention, oh, someone’s gonna get hurt.” The attention given on Page One of all the newspapers and the worry about these kids and their health and their safety, you know, it just really galled me.

Hendrix, in a 1970 interview in *Melody Maker*, referred to the power of music, echoing Plato’s contention that when modes of music change, those of the state change with them. “Music doesn’t lie. I agree it can be misinterpreted, but it cannot lie,” Hendrix said. “When there are vast changes in the way the world goes, it’s usually something like art and music that changes it. Music is going to change the world next time.”<sup>67</sup>

Hendrix would follow Woodstock within months with an explicit exploration of the inhumanity of war in his “Machine Gun.” The song joined several others in the fall of 1969 and spring of 1970; the aforementioned “Gimme Shelter,” and Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son.”

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<sup>67</sup> Hollingworth, R. (1970). Hendrix Today. para. 9, 10. Retrieved from <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/hendrix-today>

## Fortunate Son

In the canon of Vietnam war music, it may be John Fogerty's "Fortunate Son" that resonates most loudly.

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### FORTUNATE SON

Some folks are born, made to wave the flag  
 Oooh, they're red, white and blue  
 And when the band plays "Hail to the Chief"  
 Oooh, they point the cannon at you, Lord  
 It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no senator's son, son  
 It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate one, no

John Zutz, of Madison, Wisconsin, was a dump truck driver with the 585th Engineering Company, moving frequently from Dak To in the Central Highlands to Phan Rang south of

Cam Ranh. In-country from December 1969 to November 1970, he recalls that "Creedence and 'Fortunate Son' had a great impact, especially among those who were drafted."

Over a galloping beat, and a simple, declarative guitar cadence, the clearly-enunciated lyrics of "Fortunate Son" speak directly at the problem of inequity in the draft.

Bob Kerrey, in-country leading a unit of the Navy SEALs, informally known as "Kerrey's Raiders," from March '69 to May '70, recalls the song as well, not as an anti-war song but as a song that brought out the inequity inherent in the way troops were assigned to combat.

"Fortunate Son" was about class culture ... "I ain't no senator's son." That story, that song, it's much more of a class-based song than it is a song that divides people based upon their support or their lack of support for the war. In a lot of ways it was a class-based war. In some ways it

wasn't, because the draft picked everybody up. Except for those who were going to college ... they basically had an opportunity to get out for at least four years, and if they got the girlfriend pregnant and got married they could get out. In some ways even with the draft it was class-based.

After Tet and all of the other calamities of 1968, the character of the music had changed. These new songs were a declaration of sorts that musicians and songwriters were not only going to be a political force, but they were going to be a confrontational political force. Perhaps not coincidentally, money could now be made in protest, as Columbia Records had predicted. But the nexus of politics and the music industry remained fraught with difficulty.

### Machine Gun

Jimi Hendrix's "Machine Gun" was just what it sounded like, opening with a guitar lick synchronized with a rattling drum, a mimic of the staccato rap of a machine

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MACHINE GUN

Machine gun, tearin' my body all apart

Evil man make me kill you, evil man make you kill me

Evil man make me kill you, even though we're only families apart

Well, I pick up my axe and fight like a farmer

But your bullets still knock me down to the ground

gun. Though it

was never

recorded in

studio, the band

performed an

early version on the *Dick Cavett Show* in September of 1969 (just weeks after

Woodstock),<sup>68</sup> and the song was released on the *Band of Gypsys* live album in early 1970.

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<sup>68</sup> The Dick Cavett Show, 9/69, Jimi Hendrix. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zElAYXooppM>

Hendrix took the brave step, in his lyrics to “Machine Gun,” of empathizing with the people of Vietnam, even those fighting on the other side. The “evil man” in his song refers, perhaps, to the governments that placed the combatants within the murderous drama of war. Notice, the song’s protagonist makes no distinction in his application of the term “evil.” Hendrix, in the fall of ’69 and throughout 1970, would introduce the song in his live performances; one such introduction was in Copenhagen in September, 1970; as rhetoric, it was characteristically, for Hendrix, anti-war and pro-humanity; even his mention of Vietnam is followed by a statement that could apply just as well to the Vietnamese from the North:

I’d like to do this one dedicated to all the people fighting for their own cause, and their own rights, fighting those problems up ahead, those mental blocks ... oh, yes and the cats in Vietnam. And all the brothers who are fighting this and that, fighting for freedom.<sup>69</sup>

Zutz, the Vietnam truck driver, finds particular resonance in this and other songs performed by people with military experience. “I guess I tend to divide the music into 2 groups – music done by veterans, and music done about the war by others,” he said. “Hendrix served in the 101st Airborne – he knew all about that ‘Machine Gun.’”

## War

Meanwhile, in Detroit, Berry Gordy still had to be convinced to give voice to other African-American views of the war.

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<sup>69</sup> Jimi Hendrix, Copenhagen, Sept. 3, 1970. (1970). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qc2gZmcCAEk>

As noted previously, revolution and commerce are strange, and uneasy, bedfellows. Perhaps that strange relationship is no better exemplified than in the halls of Motown Records. There, Gordy, president of the label, kept a serene distance from the subject of Vietnam, but when he, like his competitors at Columbia, belatedly realized there was money to be made from a new American attitude about the war, Gordy found creative ways to do business without jeopardizing his cash-cow Motown label. African-

WAR	Americans had been making significant
War, huh, good God y'all	contributions in Vietnam, yet the predominant
What is it good for?	label of black artists had been silent on the
Absolutely nothing, say it again	war. <sup>70</sup>
War, whoa, Lord	
What is it good for?	That changed in a shout with 1970's startling
Absolutely nothing, listen to me	"War" by Edwin Starr. Perhaps the most
War, it ain't nothin' but a heartbreaker	definitive, unambiguous denunciation of the
War, friend only to the undertaker	

idea of armed conflict ever recorded, "War" begins with a drum roll, and gets right down to business: "War! What is it good for? Absolutely nothin'."

How it got out of Motown Records is a story of corporate cleverness, if not courage. "War" was initially released as an LP track by one of Motown's biggest acts, the Temptations. It soon created a buzz, but Gordy did not want to risk either the big-name Temptations or the Motown label by releasing it in single form.

<sup>70</sup> Andresen, L. (2003). *Battle Notes* (p. 157). Superior, WI: Savage Press.



Gordy had acquired the services of R&B artist Edwin Starr several years earlier in the acquisition of the smaller Ric Tic Records label. In baseball terms, Starr had been “riding the pine” since.<sup>71</sup>

Like the Beatles before their two versions of “Revolution” (a song not nearly as direct as “War”), the intersection between art, protest and commerce again resulted in an established group avoiding significant risk with potentially-controversial material. Also like the two “Revolutions,” there was a milder version, and Starr’s version. According to Starr,

“War” was originally recorded by the Temptations. It was buried on one of their albums. But then a lot of mail came in, mostly from students, asking why they didn’t release it on a 45. Well, that was a touchy time, and that song had some implications. It was a message record, an opinion record, and stepped beyond being sheer entertainment. It could become a smash record, and that was fine, but if it went the other way, it could kill the career of whoever the artist was.<sup>72</sup>

Gordy matched up the sought-after material with the underutilized artist, and Starr responded with a strident version unlike the softer take recorded earlier by his labelmates. It was released, perhaps to avoid risk to the parent Motown record label, on the smaller Gordy imprint.<sup>73</sup> “War” was a smash hit, spending 15 weeks on the Billboard singles

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<sup>71</sup> Abbey, J. (1976). Edwin Starr. Retrieved April 5, 2016, from <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/edwin-starr>

<sup>72</sup> “War” - Edwin Starr. (n.d.). Superseventies Rocksite. Retrieved from [http://www.superseventies.com/1970\\_10singles.html](http://www.superseventies.com/1970_10singles.html)

<sup>73</sup> Andresen, L. (2003). Battle Notes. Superior, WI: Savage Press. pp. 160-161

chart and hitting Number One on Aug. 29, 1970.<sup>74</sup> “War” was likely the most succinct denunciation of armed conflict ever recorded or spoken, and it was at the top of the charts, hinting at a ready appetite in the music-consuming public for songs that addressed the issues of the day.

### What’s Going On

Also at Motown was Marvin Gaye. He had been thinking about his own topical project since the prior year, when the Four Tops shared a song with him that they’d been working on.

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#### WHAT’S GOING ON

Mother, mother

There’s too many of you crying

Brother, brother, brother

There’s far too many of you dying

You know we’ve got to find a way

To bring some lovin’ here today

The Four Tops had been on tour in May of 1969 in

California. Singer Renaldo Benson was on the

group’s bus as it passed People’s Park in Berkeley

as police were brutally breaking up a protest.

Inspired by what he and the others saw, Benson

and several other Four Tops members put a song

together, but ultimately chose not to record it. They later shared the song with Gaye, who rewrote it and renamed it “What’s Going On.” The result was one of the most soulful and

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<sup>74</sup> Top 100 Songs | Aug. 29, 1970. (1970). Retrieved March 25, 2016, from <http://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/1970-08-29>

painful protest songs of the era, and one of its most commercially and artistically successful.<sup>75 76</sup>

“What’s Going On” was released as the featured single from the album of the same name. As an album, Gaye’s “What’s Going On” is considered one of the greatest of all time.<sup>77</sup> To the seed planted by Benson’s chance witnessing of police brutality stateside, Gaye added elements from his own experience, leading to a work of art directly inspired by the war.

“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.”<sup>78</sup>

Note that Gaye saw it as his role to urge his listeners to “take a look at what was happening in the world.” It was lyrical and poetic, perhaps, but Gaye was presenting news and editorial; the world’s smoothest journalist.

In a replay of the saga around the release of the song “War,” Gaye initially had trouble convincing Gordy to release the record, as the label president again considered it

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<sup>75</sup> Waller, D. Obituary: Renaldo “Obie” Benson. 2005. Retrieved from <http://www2.metrotimes.com/music/story.asp?id=8456>

<sup>76</sup> Lynskey, Dorian (2011). *33 Revolutions per Minute: A History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day*. New York: HarperCollins.

<sup>77</sup> Rolling Stone. (n.d.). *500 Greatest Albums of All Time: Marvin Gaye, “What’s Going On”* | Rolling Stone. Retrieved from <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-20120531/marvin-gaye-whats-going-on-20120524>

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

too risky, even though “What’s Going On” was significantly less strident in its musical approach than the earlier “War.” Here, though, was one of his franchise stars going “topical.” At least this time, Gordy did not give the song to a less-well-known artist to “protect” the career of Marvin Gaye.<sup>79</sup>

“That song was one of the most beautiful testimonies to what was happening to blacks in Vietnam,” said Lee Andresen, the author of the Vietnam-music compendium *Battle Notes*.

## Ohio

In May 1970, the Kent State shootings of four unarmed college students by the Ohio National Guard inspired Neil Young to write, and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young to

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### OHIO

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?

record, “Ohio,” a song that couldn’t be mistaken for anything but what it was: an angry retelling of the incident as if it had been ripped from a magazine. And indeed it was. Appearing at a book industry event in 2012 with the singer and author Patti Smith, Young

recalled the moment of inspiration for “Ohio.” Visiting friends in Northern California, he happened on a newsmagazine, either *Time* or *Newsweek*, with a photo from the Kent State

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<sup>79</sup> Andresen, L. (2003). *Battle Notes* (p. 162). Superior, WI: Savage Press.

event on the cover. Young saw “the photo of the girl bent over a dead student. It was unbelievable. I still get chills just thinking about it.”<sup>80</sup>

As we’ve seen, the music business and political rhetoric make strange bedfellows. Money and political rhetoric do, too; Young became uncomfortable with the idea that he was profiting off of the killing of the four college students. Of “Ohio,” he said “I didn’t want to do it anymore. I didn’t want to take advantage. I didn’t want to make money from something like that. It gets complicated on a consciousness level.”<sup>81</sup>

Of the song on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Kent State tragedy, pop-culture historian and Rowan University faculty member David Bianculli said, “It was the quickest and best reaction to Kent State, with Neil Young acting as 50 percent songwriter and 50 percent journalist.”<sup>82</sup>

### Search and Destroy

Detroit was an active rock ’n’ roll scene in the late sixties, with the MC-5 probably best known. Iggy and the Stooges were part of the scene as well, and today, their contributions to musical culture are seen as seminal to the punk movement that would rise later with the Ramones, Sex Pistols and the Clash.

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<sup>80</sup> Minzesheimer, B. (2012). Neil Young’s book is more a diary than a memoir, he says. USA Today. Retrieved April 4, 2016, from <http://www.therecord.com/whatson-story/2604099-neil-young-s-book-is-more-a-diary-than-a-memoir-he-says/>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Dawidziak, M. (2010). Neil Young’s “Ohio” evokes strong images of May 4, 1970 shootings at Kent State. Retrieved from [http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2010/05/neil\\_youngs\\_ohio\\_evokes\\_strong.html](http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2010/05/neil_youngs_ohio_evokes_strong.html)

In 1973, they released the lyrically-deft “Search and Destroy” as the lead track on the album *Raw Power*. The song is an imagined first-person account of a soldier, alone on a search and destroy mission in the paddies and jungles of Vietnam. But while the songwriters, in this case Iggy Pop and James Williamson, were able to paint a lurid, lonely, adrenaline-fueled and sexualized approximation of that experience, it appears that very few noticed. The song is unremarked upon, even in thorough examinations of the music of the war era such as Bradley and Werner’s *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: A Soundtrack of the Vietnam War*, and Lee Andresen’s *Battle Notes*.

It can be difficult to separate the *influence* from the *influenced* in any mass dialogue like the one that swirled around the Vietnam War. Perhaps Iggy Pop (real name Jim Osterberg) had something to say about Vietnam and domestic unrest in obtuse references in his earlier “1969,” and its lyric “Well it’s 1969, OK, war across the USA,” but the seed for the explicit “Search and Destroy” was planted with a war-influenced strum in a practice session by Stooges guitarist James Williamson, who had been recruited into the David Bowie-orchestrated second incarnation of the band. “The genesis of ‘Search and Destroy’ ... it was during the Vietnam War time. And one day at band practice, I started goofing around just kind of going ... (strums aggressively) ... like a machine gun, you know, from the Vietnam War.”<sup>83</sup>

Asked later if the Vietnam War had any effect on the band’s music in an interview by former Black Flag frontman Henry Rollins on his talk show, Iggy responded

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<sup>83</sup> James Williamson, deconstructing “Search & Destroy.” (2013). In YouTube; C2SV Conference. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aG6lEH-jjzk>

affirmatively: “Yeah, especially the words. ‘Search and Destroy’ was a chapter heading in one of those ridiculous *Time Magazine* articles. About how we were going to beat the shit out of these guys. So was ‘Raw Power.’ Those are both lifted from Pentagon rhetoric.”<sup>84</sup>

Recalls Ron Asheton, the late Stooges guitarist: “It was interesting times. There just was a powerful vibe. And it was us against them; in a way that was a kind of tribal thing that made it unique and interesting. And that helped with making some music.”<sup>85</sup>

In a separate interview, Iggy Pop said “I used to read *Time* obsessively, because they were the representatives of the ultimate establishment to me. They were giving the party line that represented the power people and the powers that be. So I kinda liked to look in there and see what they were talking about, and then I’d use that inventory in other ways. That’s what I was doing in that song.”

“And the thing about ‘forgotten boy’ was basically a way to express my disgust. It’s kinda like the kid in *Catcher In The Rye* — once you find out how the people at the top of politics or at the top of the music industry or at the top of anything, how they begin to overvalue things and think that they can push any shit down the throats of the youth, and they just don’t care if it’s something that kids would like or not. They just don’t fuckin’ care.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> The Henry Rollins Show (Iggy Pop and the Stooges). (May 4, 2007). IFC. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URn5pE9c7Fk>

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> The Stooges: Iggy Pop Interview. (2010). Clash Magazine. Retrieved from <http://www.clashmusic.com/feature/the-stooges-iggy-pop-interview>

From there, the song developed atop Williamson's furious guitar licks, as Iggy Pop took up the challenge to write one of the more empathetic songs of the era, taking the listener into the mind of a soldier lost in bravado and loneliness in five quick lines.

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SEARCH AND DESTROY

I'm a street walking cheetah

with a heart full of napalm

I'm a runaway son of the nuclear A-bomb

I am a world's forgotten boy

The one who searches and destroys

While the Stooges never achieved huge

success as measured in sales or hits, their

particular encapsulation of the anger and

resentment of youth in the post-Tet

Vietnam era became the template on

which the punk era was born. The truth is, the Stooges may have been a bit too raucous, a bit too punk, for the tastes of the day. And by the release of "Search and Destroy" in 1973, the war was all but over.

But as punk later informed much of the biggest and most influential artists of rock and roll, indeed up to the current day, it is not too far a reach to say that rock 'n' roll is still living, musically, in an echo of those last awful, disillusioned years of Vietnam.

As demonstrated by Green Day frontman Billy Joe Armstrong's almost breathless incantation at the 2010 Stooges' induction ceremony at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, the legion of bands who cite the Stooges as an influence is almost too long to recite.<sup>87</sup> And this one song, "Search and Destroy," is the metaphorical touchstone.

Indeed, Black Flag's Rollins has the phrase tattooed across his back.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. (2010). Billie Joe Armstrong of Green Day Inducts the Stooges into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Retrieved from <http://rockhall.com/inductees/the-stooges/video/9593/>

<sup>88</sup> Parker, J. (2000). Turned on: A Biography of Henry Rollins. Cooper Square Press.



The corporate nexus with artistry became part of Iggy Pop's short acceptance speech at the Rock Hall. After speaking for a few moments about being "in the belly of the beast," Pop opined "Music is life. And life is not a business."<sup>89</sup>

Fittingly, at the induction ceremony, when the talking was done and the band took the stage, the first sounds to ring out were the raucous, sharp drums and metallic riffs of "Search and Destroy."<sup>90</sup>

But music, as Columbia and Gordy had demonstrated, the nonexclusive Venn diagram of Pop's construct notwithstanding, was a business and remains a business.

Today, "Search and Destroy" is gaining new life and new relevance within the culture, perhaps with more "airplay" than it ever had in its time; it goes unmentioned by veterans, though *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* co-author Craig Werner finds the omission puzzling. "Nobody mentioned him. Of all the guys we talked to in the book nobody mentioned Iggy, and at best we got a passing reference to the MC-5," he said. "But that Detroit scene, for all of that, that was a great political, musical scene." Echoing Bindas and Houston, and Frith, Werner provides the reason for the Stooges' lack of recognition: "It didn't get any airplay, it just didn't get any airplay."

In a repeat of Werner's experience researching *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, no one interviewed for this thesis mentioned "Search and Destroy," either. It is included

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<sup>89</sup> Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. (2010). Billie Joe Armstrong of Green Day Inducts the Stooges into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Retrieved from <http://rockhall.com/inductees/the-stooges/video/9593/>

<sup>90</sup> Gold, M., & Lewis, R. (2010). Iggy Pop and the Stooges add life to the Hall of Fame induction ceremony. Los Angeles Times. Retrieved from <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/16/entertainment/la-et-rock-induction16-2010mar16>

here to recognize its relevance to later musical developments, as it can be fairly said that “Search and Destroy,” encapsulating the fury of the Vietnam era, is a direct and highly influential ancestor of the punk rock movement that swept England and America several years later.

In a curious reversal of the idea of the mutability of musical rhetoric, as seen earlier in GIs’ use of “We Gotta Get Out of This Place,” a song *not* written about war, as an anthem about surviving their Vietnam tours, “Search and Destroy” — a song written specifically about Vietnam — was, in the spring of 2016, employed to sell cars.

The song was appropriated by the advertising firm Venables Bell & Partners for a campaign introducing a new, technology-heavy, Audi A4. Its propulsive rhythm, and its key lyric “look out honey, ’cause I’m usin’ technology,” were heard in heavy rotation through television sets across the nation. (In the ads, the song’s reference to napalm was omitted.) Perhaps since most Vietnam veterans do not recognize it as a Vietnam song, its use for advertising is relatively non-controversial.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Coffee, P. (n.d.). Iggy Pop, VB&P and Audi Explain How Tech Is the New Punk | AgencySpy. Retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com/agencyspy/iggy-pop-vbp-and-audi-explain-how-tech-is-the-new-punk/104540>

## CHAPTER EIGHT: HINTS OF RHETORIC

For this thesis, I spoke with a number of veterans of the Vietnam War; many through online appeals posted by the Vietnam Veterans of America and Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and several more from references.

Some of those interviewed had significant combat experience deep in the jungles and paddies of South Vietnam. Others were assigned to support roles. All were consumers of the music of the era.

But prior to their entry into the war, these were simply young American men. Prior to their entry into the war, many were conflicted, and their favorite songs reflected that conflict.

The music was in the air throughout the war in Vietnam. What was also ever-present was the reality of the war itself. The music of the time, perhaps even more than now, was infused in the cultural fabric.

Given the ubiquity of audio devices today, it's easy to forget that at the onset of the Vietnam war, personal audio was a fairly recent innovation. "One of the great memories I have of my childhood was — I was about 10 or 11 years old so I was born in '48 — in '58 or '59 I got a portable radio, a little bigger maybe than a pack of cigarettes," remembers John Ketwig. "A pocket radio. You put batteries in, it had an earphone and wherever I went during the day I could listen to music. It was the most incredible thing I'd ever imagined. And to a certain degree it set us free."

With that radio came, for Ketwig, a new appreciation for what songwriters were saying.

About that same time, music got very, very interesting. I'll point to a couple of songs. Tennessee Ernie Ford's "Sixteen Tons." "You load sixteen tons and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt." That to me was a protest song. It was a commentary on the state of America. And the other one was "Big John," about a man who got killed in a coalmine accident. Early in our lives, when we were far from being political people, we began to hear the faintest hints of political messages through music.

In any mass communication, the communicators themselves represent the narrow end of the bullhorn. Writers seek unknown readers, broadcasters seek unknown audience members, and musicians seek to communicate with unknown listeners. In the mass medium of popular music, one performer or one band may reach an audience in the millions or tens of millions, through performances, purchase of media, and radio airplay.

Clearly, many musicians have engaged in political or topical rhetoric. In the Vietnam era, perhaps no group of audience members were more engaged, more focused, on the central issue of the time than those who were draft-eligible, in uniform, or back "in the world" as veterans of that war. How did the topical music of the time communicate with them? How did they engage with the music of their generation while they were dealing with the prospect of war, the realities of war, or the traumas exacted by war?

Before any of that, the first part is the listening. Scott Camil, a Marine in-country from April '66 to November '67, remembers when, as a veteran newly arrived back

home, he realized that there was more to music than “teeny-weenie yellow polka-dot bikinis.”

My hearing was so bad from all the explosions and stuff, and sometimes I could hear the music but I couldn't really tell what the words were. I didn't really start thinking about the music until I came home. I got out of the Marine Corps in 1969 and it was right after Woodstock ... and I start paying attention to music and it was people like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Holly Near. I'm just, just listening to music and some of that was antiwar music, some of it wasn't. I think a lot of it was really music about our rights, and music about the stuff that was going on and things that we should be aware of. And I remember one day, it was a Beatles song, and I said to my parents “There's messages in music! There's messages in music.” And I was really excited. They looked at me and smiled at me, like it was something new that I understood.

Others heard the same faint hints of rhetoric elsewhere. In the fall of 1967, Paul Critchlow, then a promising halfback on Bob Devaney's late-sixties Husker team, had broken his leg in practice, an injury which would turn out to end his football career. Critchlow's experience with music at that time represents an amalgam — perhaps a dissonant chorus — of voices being listened to, overlaid with a budding awareness on Critchlow's part of something emotional or political emerging in the songs.

Up to that point I was kind of focused on the category of music that is really more about youthful rebellion, like the Rolling Stones and things like that. I was very into the Doors' “Light my Fire,” I was into the Four Tops, you know, the Supremes and of course, yes, I was very much into the Beatles. But that was all sort of happy, you know, love stuff. There didn't seem to be, there was no real huge political message in anything that I was paying attention to except for the Stones. And then when the

Doors came along. I felt there was a political message, or at least an emotional message in what they were singing. I did start to get into Jimi Hendrix, “Purple Haze.” As I sort of emotionally got darker I got really into Eric Burdon. “San Franciscan Nights” really had a grip on me, and I still listen it, I listen to all these songs, still.

Many experiences with war-era protest music are vague, perhaps ethereal. As Critchlow puts it, “I don’t necessarily remember all the lyrics, but I remember certain phrases. So it was more an emotional, intuitive thing. The tunes, a few keywords took on certain meanings.” And there were other songs that, for Critchlow, were informing his worldview. “‘Mrs. Robinson,’ that was a big piece of angst too. I remember that one really sticking in my head, and that was a little bit more about loss of innocence, you know, and rebelling against the system.”

In a similar vein, Ketwig recalled Ray Davies and the Kinks’ 1965 “Well Respected Man,” about a straight-arrow life lived according to the rules, as the lyric goes, “doing the best things so conservatively.” “We were young, we were adolescent, we were feelin’ our oats,” Ketwig remembered. “We were in school or had just graduated from school, we were looking forward to ... ‘what is my place in the world going to be?’ And here was *input*,” he said.

Recalling the Vietnam-themed music he was listening to prior to deployment, Critchlow remembered, first, a pro-war song. “‘Ballad of the Green Berets,’ I loved it. I think that was 1966. That’s a very kind of a patriotic song. It just thrilled me and I wanted to be a Green Beret, like I’m sure a lot of young guys did.” But then Critchlow recalls a very different song. “Barry McGuire had ‘Eve of Destruction.’ That’s a powerful song,

too.” Critchlow recognizes the dissonance. “So I’m flipping back and forth between patriotic songs that sort of stir me up and make me feel there’s some romance to going into war, to protest songs that made me kind of think ... I can’t say that I just disagree with that either.”

Scott Camil, later to become famous providing searing testimony to the Vietnam Veterans Against the War’s Winter Soldier Investigation — even inspiring Graham Nash to write his anti-war song, “Oh, Camil” — enlisted in the Marines in 1966 as Vietnam was ramping up and fully capturing the attention of the nation.

At the time, American involvement in Vietnam was still supported by half of the population.<sup>92</sup>

Camil, now a committed pacifist, recalls his feelings in the spring of 1966, immediately prior to his deployment:

I believed firmly that the Communists were trying to take over the world and it was better for us to go over there and get them over there, rather than fight them on our own streets. So I was very anti-Communist. I really believed that this was my duty. I enlisted in the Marine Corps, and I wanted to go to Vietnam because during that time in my life being a man was really important. And being macho was really important. I have different ideas about what a man is today, but back then a man would be someone who didn’t show their feelings, didn’t cry, wouldn’t have problems taking the lives of the enemy of our country. And I wanted to prove that I was brave and I was a man and so I looked forward to going to Vietnam. I really wanted to win medals and come home and be a hero, and be looked upon as a man. And the first song that I can really think of

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<sup>92</sup> University of Houston. (n.d.). Digital History | Support for Vietnam War. Retrieved from [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam\\_pubopinion.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam_pubopinion.cfm); multiple poll results for same year averaged to provide single yearly result.

from that time was Nancy Sinatra's song "These Boots are Made for Walkin'." I remember driving my grandfather's car listening to that song. It had a little decal on the window: USMC, because I was going into the Marine Corps and I felt so positive about myself. I really felt special. I felt like people were gonna to look up to me. And that song ... (sings) "These boots are made for walkin'. That's just what they'll do. One of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you."

I felt that we were wearing the boots, and that we were gonna walk all over those damn communists, and that we'd be home in six months.

For Bob Kerrey, too, "Boots" is an indelible part of a nearly 50-year-old memory.

I remember that song was playing in the bar I was in with some friends the day that I drove up to Omaha and flew to Rhode Island to start officer candidate school. I was about to be drafted. I'm not sure I would've volunteered for the Navy had I not known with certainty that I was about to get an induction notice from the Army. These friends of mine, we were in a bar in Lincoln, going from there to Omaha to fly to report for duty to report for OCS in Newport, Rhode Island. I was the only one going in. We were just hitting tunes on the jukebox is what we were doing. I do remember that song.

Despite the persistence in memory of a song, Kerrey doesn't remember being persuaded one way or another by any rhetoric in music. "I don't think the music I was listening to at the time had much of an impact on my view of the war," he said. Still, like Camil, the persistence of a soundtrack for an old memory, the detail of a certain song playing at a critical juncture in life, speaks for a quality of music that, as Critchlow testified, is "ethereal. It gets under our skin."



In his “Boots” story, Camil hints at a central problem that confounds study of the music of the Vietnam War as rhetoric. Quite simply, “Boots” is simply breakup song told from a strong woman’s point of view. It is not a war song.

“Boots,” and to a greater extent the Animals’ “We Gotta Get Out of this Place” (the latter of which is nearly universally regarded as the anthem of the Vietnam soldier; their “We Shall Overcome”<sup>93</sup>), in their lyrics, reveal no allusions to war in general, much less anything specific to Vietnam. But the choruses were both adaptable to many circumstances, and in that context — the context of the warrior — they became possessions of the listener. In these cases, lyrics not intended as rhetoric become rhetoric nevertheless. Demonstrating the mutability of musical rhetoric, listeners imprint their own point of view on a song, they make it their own.

Michael Herr’s new-journalism book *Dispatches* explores this phenomenon in the way that the Beatles’ “Magical Mystery Tour” was perceived by the soldiers in Vietnam. In the midst of the intense experience that was the siege of Khe Sanh, the lyrics “The Magical Mystery Tour is waiting to take you away. Dy-ing to take you away” are perceived by Herr as “incredibly sinister,” and he concludes that the Beatles song about a psychedelic bus tour was instead “a song about Khe Sanh; we knew it then, and it still seems so.”<sup>94</sup> In this case the Magical Mystery Tour represented the war, and it was waiting, and dying, “to take you away.”

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<sup>93</sup> Bradley, D. (2015). A Veteran’s Playlist: The Top 10 Vietnam War Songs – Next Avenue. Retrieved from <http://www.nextavenue.org/a-veterans-playlist-the-top-10-songs-of-vietnam/>

<sup>94</sup> Herr, M. (2009). *Dispatches*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. p. 100.

In these examples, the canvas sparsely painted by a song's chorus became a vehicle that allowed those involved in the war to project their own meanings, in some cases, to sing those lyrics out loud while thoughts specific to their situation danced in their heads.

Critchlow, speaking about "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," says "at the time I just thought it was an anthem of the soldiers. I never really listened to the words, except for 'we gotta get out of here,' you know what I mean?"

Anthems take on their own life, their own meaning. The song was a communal shout. Indeed, soldier Leroy Tecube recalled his experience with the Animals' song: "When the chorus began, singing ability didn't matter; drunk or sober, everyone joined in as loud as he could."<sup>95</sup>

Still, in 2006, Doug Bradley, in country in '70 and '71 and today co-author of the book *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, said, "We had absolute unanimity in this song being the touchstone. This was the Vietnam anthem. Every bad band that ever played in an armed forces club had to play this song."<sup>96</sup>

### Escape

Robert Martin, a Georgian who trained in artillery prior to being deployed to Vietnam in July of 1969, six days after the birth of his son, instead spent his tour in the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Mattmiller, B. (2006). "We Gotta Get Out of this Place:" Music, memory and the Vietnam War. Retrieved from <http://news.wisc.edu/we-gotta-get-out-of-this-place-music-memory-and-the-vietnam-war/>

rear as Headquarters Battery Clerk at Camp Eagle with Northern I Corps. Martin recalled music as a powerful presence.

The music defined our generation. Woodstock happened while I was in Vietnam. Country Joe McDonald's "Fish Cheer" and the "what are we fighting for?" song were very, very popular. Of course, the Vietnam anthem was The Animals' "We Gotta Get Outta This Place." My favorite band was Creedence Clearwater Revival. They had a couple of songs that we especially liked. "Favorite Son" and "Run Through the Jungle." Another song I listened to a lot was Edwin Starr's, "War (Good God what is it Good For?)." It may have been a coincidence, but it seemed that as protest music increased, so did the lack of respect for authority.

As one measure of that lack of respect, Martin recalls, "A lot of the music did refer to the war, but it was still an escape," he said. "It helped make being in a stinking, shitty, place bearable. It was against Army regulations to protest the war, so we played the music, and we played it loud."

Critchlow recalls listening "to Scott McKenzie's song 'Going to San Francisco,' which is beautiful antiwar anthem. In the year 2002 I gave the keynote address at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Veterans Day, and Scott McKenzie was there and he sang that song. He had a habit of showing up at all the Vietnam veterans events, and he'd show up and sing, for free. That song, it was just such a longing for normalcy and just to escape what I was starting to come up against."

## CHAPTER NINE: CRUEL WAR

1968, and the tone of frustration and futility it set, would not let up. Bob Kerrey, who entered the war a year after Tet, the Cronkite commentary and LBJ's fateful speech, remembered that "Kent State had a big impact, that was May of '70. The Cambodia invasion had a big impact. Things got angrier. Because it was by that point, even the guys who had been there like myself, realized this thing is not going to end in a happy way. You're not going to persuade the Vietnamese to accept a two-nation solution. That wasn't gonna happen."

Ketwig, by that time a veteran back in "The World," agreed.

Everybody was a lot angrier. You know Marvin Gaye, "What's Goin' On;" it's like when Walter Cronkite says "what's going on here?;" the whole country followed suit and said "what *is* going on here?" Nobody questioned it more than some guy that said "jeez I got 30 days left and the whole world is blowin' up. I want to go home." There were an awful lot of questions and no clear answers."

As LBJ had said, it was all over.

Except for the fighting. While no war is without its atrocities, American involvement in Vietnam became defined in many eyes by one singular event: My Lai, itself in turn the product of callous military policy, the fog of war and a basic inability on the part of the American soldier to know who was friend and who was foe. The massacre at My Lai was emblematic of the insanity of the situation the United States sent its soldiers into in Southeast Asia, the grim game of kill or be killed, of "free fire zones," of

“kill everything that moves,” which was, in fact, the instruction given to the men of Charlie Company by their commanding officer, Captain Ernest Medina, on the eve of the operation.<sup>97</sup>

But the trauma of My Lai wasn't unique. There were plenty of disturbing incidents. John Ketwig can't get one particular event out of his mind. “I saw a young Vietnamese civilian lose her life and her body was exploded and the spray splashed across my face, and 47 years later after washing my face multiple times a day I still can't get rid of that stain of that,” he said. “Trying to explain, that you see that shit in the middle of the night. Sometimes you feel ashamed to be a human being.”

It is striking, when interviewing veterans of the war, just how different an experience Vietnam was from a frontal, land-controlling conflict like World War II. While a World War II soldier's material possessions amounted to what he could carry on his back, in Vietnam, combat mobility was provided by helicopter, and soldiers were typically inserted on patrol in a hot zone and a few days or weeks later, withdrawn to their hooches. Hills were taken, then abandoned. The strategy wasn't directed at controlling land but instead at inflicting maximum casualties. As Scott Camil put it, “the official measure of success was how many dead people could you stack up.” With that as the goal, Camil recalls what flowed from it with a sense of bewilderment and loss.

There were no friendlies as far as I was concerned. So when you're on an operation and you take let's say Hill No. 1 and you lose several men taking that hill, and then the next week you go and take Hill No. 2, and

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<sup>97</sup> Turse, N. (2013). *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. p. 2.

you lose people taking that hill. And the next week you take Hill No. 3, and you lose people taking that hill. And then the next week you're back on No. 1, and you're losing people taking that hill. So we continually lost people taking the same ground over and over and over. And our only objective was to kill more of them than they killed of us. And that gets pretty old pretty quickly and it's pretty easy to see that we're not accomplishing shit. It didn't matter what your perspective was to start with. It was pretty easy to learn what the hell was going on and we weren't accomplishing anything.

Vietnam was not the type of war that America was accustomed to fighting. A 1970 CBS News report by Richard Threlkeld follows "American soldiers hiking through the sweaty jungles of South Vietnam, searching for an elusive enemy." Threlkeld continues in his narration, "The going is slow. There could be a North Vietnamese regiment hiding a few yards away and no one would see it." In the report, NVA regulars open fire, a firefight ensues and the sergeant walking point is hit and quickly rescued. Threlkeld then summarizes: "Tomorrow the military communique will read 'one American was wounded in an engagement with an unknown-size enemy force. Enemy casualties are unknown.' But you've seen how it really was. Heroism, danger, fear, all rolled into one. Words don't describe it."<sup>98</sup>

While on a 30-day leave just prior to deploying to Vietnam, John Zutz, who would serve in country from December 1969 to November 1970, began to read in newspapers about the incident at My Lai, where Lt. William Calley, Jr. had, 18 months earlier, led a search and destroy mission into a Viet Cong-supporting village known to the

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<sup>98</sup> Threlkeld, R. (1970). Vietnam War, 1970: CBS camera rolls as platoon comes under fire. CBS Evening News. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89\\_3DgW\\_7mg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89_3DgW_7mg)

troops as “Pinkville.” Calley and the troops under his command had killed indiscriminately, wiping out the village. An Army investigation had followed, and the reporter Seymour Hersh, working for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, broke the story on Nov. 13 under the headline “Lieutenant Accused of Murdering 109 Civilians.” Hersh would later receive a Pulitzer Prize for his My Lai reporting.<sup>99</sup>

In an interview, Zutz recalled how that reporting affected him. “I was on my way to Vietnam. It was just at the time the My Lai pictures were coming out. And that started changing things. It was the My Lai stuff that started getting my attention. And you looked at that and you said ‘Hey, exactly what are we doing there? Why are we doing this? What’s going on?’ And I started questioning the whole thing right then. In fact at the end of my 30 days I got on the plane to Seattle and I went AWOL six days in Seattle. I almost went to Canada.”

Finally, after weighing the prospect of leaving family and friends behind, Zutz headed back toward his future in Southeast Asia. “In the end I was chicken – it was easier to go to Vietnam.”

My Lai, though, represented more. It represented free-fire zones and the inhumanity of a policy that dropped very young men into kill-or-be-killed scenarios. And then, took them out to rest, only to do it all over again a few days later.

Sergeant Ken Leland, who led a Marine platoon in the DMZ in ’66 and ’67, recalls the youth of the men under his command, and a song. “Fixin’ to Die” ... it’s not a

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<sup>99</sup> The My Lai Massacre: Seymour Hersh’s Complete and Unabridged Reporting for the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, November 1969. (1969). Retrieved March 23, 2016, from <http://www.pierretristam.com/Bobst/library/wf-200.htm>

very good song for a combat zone. I was an old man at 22. The kids I had were 18, 19. I still can't get over to this day how young they were, and how naïve, and how they thought that there's no way anybody could kill them or do away with them. They just didn't stop to think they could ever lose their lives."

"We had a lot of disagreement," Leland said. "We were not naïve about the war, we would talk about the war, and this song had a lot to do with our feelings, more or less."

For many, if not most, their tour in Vietnam boiled down to self-preservation.

John Ketwig, who also served in '66 and '67, recalled, "They had what they called the 'Mere Gook Rule.' That they're just a mere gook, they don't matter. Kill 'em all let God sort 'em out." Ketwig recalls with a chill a particular scene at a camp garbage pit involving a hungry young man and a South Vietnamese soldier.

To be there and to see what's going on and to see, at the landfill, where you unload your truck into the big pit ... and there's all these Vietnamese people down there just scrounging for anything they can find to eat. And I saw a kid, I don't know, maybe 18, 19, 20 years old ... he found 2 gallon cans, I had no idea what they were, anything from tomato sauce to, I don't know, but anyway he put one under each arm and headed toward the fence and the Vietnamese guard told him to stop, and then shot him in the back. He kept goin'. How can you say we're trying to make these people's lives better? They were there looking for a way to feed their family and we were looking to conquer the world and make the military-industrial complex rich and famous. Oh my God, it was cruel.



Dehumanization of the enemy, of course, is at the heart of transforming a young man into a soldier, of preparing for war, of preparing one to maintain sanity in insane circumstances.

Some viewed war as no different than a game. Scott Camil recalls, “I have to tell you that at the time I was having fun. And that sounds really sick, but it’s kind of like when you’re bowling and you bowl a strike, you feel good inside. When you’re shooting pool and when you get that ball in the pocket, you feel good inside.” Turning to killing the enemy, Camil said, “Well, when I would shoot someone and they’d fall down, I felt good inside. The same way, when I called in artillery and airstrikes and blew up bunches of people, I felt good inside. I was getting scores for my team.”

The team was everything. “We didn’t have enough people and so what it was really all about was protecting the guy next to you,” Camil said. “When I’m asleep, I’m sleeping because I have faith that this person is guarding my ass and when he’s asleep I’m gonna guard his ass. Our lives depend on each other, and we want to come home alive and that’s all that matters anymore.”

Though Camil was out of the country by the end of ’67, his testimony is echoed by John Klimek, who was in-country with the 173rd Airborne four years later; the difference was, by the time of Klimek’s tour, the imperative of survival was joined by a sense that all of it was for nothing. “This is 1971, things weren’t good — the futility was everywhere, sort of ‘what are we doin’?’ It’s just basically about, really, survival. It’s not about ‘we’re here to win,’ or anything.”

Patrick Surrena, a naval aviator in-country in 1970, was a communications technician who flew in sophisticated eavesdropping spy planes to monitor Viet Cong and North Vietnamese communications. As he recalls the darkly nuanced mood, “I think there was always a feeling of optimism, but I don’t think it was a feeling that ‘we’re gonna win.’ While you continued to hope, you didn’t have the conviction that it’s actually gonna happen.”

Zutz, who served most of 1970, had a view into the detritus of war, owing to his access as a truck driver to the mundane evidence of the military-industrial complex in action.

I was there for maybe a month and a half before I realized — you didn’t have to be a general to figure out that we couldn’t win that stupid war. Because I was a truck driver, I got into a lot of places maybe a lot of guys maybe didn’t get into. I got into some of the storage yards and supply depots. The mountains and mountains of brass from firing the artillery. You looked at this and said “what a waste.”

John Ketwig remembers that dissent was not hard to find. A slogan, “from ‘Feel the Adventure,’ some corny military commercial trying to get you to enlist, they immediately took it to be ‘Fuck the Army,’ which was everywhere,” Ketwig said. “If there was a wooden surface, somebody had carved ‘FTA’ in it. If there was a can of spray paint with the tiniest amount left in the bottom, somebody used it to spray paint ‘FTA’ somewhere.”

## CHAPTER TEN: SURVIVING, AND LISTENING

Music was a significant part of the in-country experience for most Vietnam vets interviewed. Because of the stealth required while on patrol, music was confined almost exclusively to the rear, in camp, where a blaring speaker was of no great disadvantage in revealing location.

The Pacific Exchange was the Armed Forces' multimillion-dollar network of retail stores in Southeast Asia, where the troops went to outfit their hooches, their rough homes-away-from-home. In the three years of 1969, 1970 and 1971, the PX sold over 200,000 reel-to-reel tape players and 45,000 record players, to be joined by 220,000 cassette players purchased in the single year of 1971.<sup>100</sup>

And they didn't just have the equipment. They used their ingenuity to power their hooches so they could use it. According to John Zutz, "Music was almost nightly. You couldn't get away from it. One of the company guys was leaving, he was going home. He had an 8-track player. And I bought that from him. And then I went out and bought some really huge Sansui speakers. You could buy 'em at the PX. You could buy the reel-to-reel tape decks, and the big speakers, you could get some fancy stuff."

"Being an engineer, I knew enough about electricity that I could wire the thing up," Zutz continued. "They didn't have outlets. They had lights in the hooch but they

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<sup>100</sup> Lair, M. H. (2011). *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War*. University of North Carolina Press. p. 59.

didn't have outlets. But being a good engineer I found my materials and I hooked up. We listened to music pretty much every night.”

The purchasing of electronics and stereo equipment became so pervasive that an editorial cartoonist working for the 4th Infantry Division's *Esprit* magazine lampooned it by drawing a soldier gripping a field rifle, absurdly weighed down by a mountain of cameras, stereo equipment and a television strapped to his back.<sup>101</sup>

Radio was largely controlled by the military. Armed Forces Radio in Vietnam (AFVN) censored both news (e.g. about the antiwar movement, drugs, etc), Paul Harvey broadcasts (Harvey was critical of the involvement), and the music played; one song on the do-not-play list was “We Gotta Get Out of This Place,” though that was in deference to the South Vietnamese government.<sup>102 103</sup> Other songs were banned by the network, including Freda Payne's “Bring the Boys Home,” which was disallowed for fear it would bring aid and comfort to the enemy.<sup>104</sup>

This censorship afforded an opening for clandestine stations operated by GIs. One such “pirate radio” program was “Radio First Termer,” which was in part introduced with the words, “Radio First Termer operates under no Air Force regulations or manuals.”

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<sup>101</sup> Lair, M. H. (2011). *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War*. University of North Carolina Press. p. 160.

<sup>102</sup> Bottoms, P. (2013). News Censorship at AFVN during the Vietnam War. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykRfAZTBSCs>

<sup>103</sup> Tucker, S. C. (2011). *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, 2nd Edition [4 volumes]: A Political, Social, and Military History. ABC-CLIO. p. 783.

<sup>104</sup> Vietnam Music Monday: “Bring the Boys Home” | Newseum. (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.newseum.org/2016/01/25/vietnam-music-monday-bring-the-boys-home/>

Devoted to “hard acid rock,” First Termer was political only in the sense that it was anti-authoritarian, talking openly about drug use, using bathroom humor and hurling insults at the professional military from its broadcast perch in a Saigon brothel. In one representative voiceover criticizing career military men, the DJ, “Dave Rabbit,” intones: “Lifers are like flies. They both eat shit and bother people.”<sup>105</sup>

It was radio of disillusion by and for young men in a war zone. First Termer was later revealed to be C. David DeLay, Jr., who served in the Air Force in 1970 and ’71.<sup>106</sup> Because these clandestine stations were operating with cobbled-together equipment, their broadcast areas, and audiences, were small.

As Robert Martin recalls, echoing Zutz on the prevalence of heavy-duty stereo equipment,

While in Vietnam I listened to music every day. We only had one radio station, AFVN. The Army attempted to censor AFVN, but it really made no difference because in almost every hooch, someone had a stereo reel-to-reel tape deck. First class equipment – TEAC, Sansui, Sony, Pioneer – could be ordered through PACEX (Pacific Exchange). We could buy tapes in the PX, family and friends mailed tapes to us, and you could even join the Columbia Tape Club. We had all, and any of, the music we wanted. Protest (anti-war) music became more and more common over my thirteen months in Vietnam.

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<sup>105</sup> DeLay, C. D. (n.d.). Radio First Termer (Audio). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LX7eFkffzlw>

<sup>106</sup> Simmacher, J. (2012). David DeLay, pirate-radio DJ who entertained Vietnam troops, dies. Retrieved from <http://www.dallasnews.com/obituary-headlines/20120124-david-delay-pirate-radio-dj-who-entertained-vietnam-troops-dies.ece>

John Ketwig remembers the records coming in care packages from home. “Guys got records. Our folks would send a box of cookies and there’d be a new Doors record in there or something. They were padded and they’d make it. We had a couple of little, really small record players. And then guys would record stuff off of Armed Forces radio or the brother would send them a reel to reel tape of what’s happening on the radio station back home.

Michael Herr, in *Dispatches*, remembers that, “Whenever one of us came back from R&R we’d bring records, sounds were as precious as water.”<sup>107</sup>

Most bases had a small club for relaxation and warm beer. According to Rick Cline, in-country with the Navy in ’66 and ’67, refrigeration was not a luxury available to these establishments. “All the beer was hot and of course you had to use a churchkey to open them, too, there were no lift tabs in those days. And the beer spurting up in this club, mixed with cigarette smoke, and here you have all this great music playing in there. It was just, it was kind of a refuge. I know it doesn’t sound too attractive, but it was kind of a refuge and it was a good break from the action.

Ken Leland, a Marine sergeant and platoon leader, rarely got any rest from patrolling the DMZ, but recalls platoon members receiving material in the mail that questioned the war.

We tried to overlook a lot of the protest songs. Myself, as a sergeant, a squad leader, later on a platoon sergeant, we had a problem when we received these sort of things in the mail. We knew what was going on. We were not naïve. We received a lot of articles, a lot of talk in

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<sup>107</sup> Herr, M. (2009). *Dispatches*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. p. 219.

letters from home from family and friends about what was going on, and that sort of tied in with it. Anything to do with protest, Marines hate the word to begin with. Because when we were fighting, we knew we didn't have the complete support of the people back home.

### Counterculture arrives

Toward the middle part of the war, another aspect of Sixties culture landed among the American troops.

John Ketwig, deployed to Vietnam in 1966, remembers when the first winds of the hippie movement started flowering while he was there. "We were transplanted from that hot rod, surfin', sexual revolution, whatever it was culture, that was exploding all around us, they cut off our hair, they put us in funny clothes and sent us to the other side of the world," he said. But the music kept him connected to what was happening at home. "It was like nothing we'd ever seen before. But when we heard the music, the message was clear that, you know, things are still going on. I don't know how active a lot of guys were in the counterculture, but it was all around us."

"We were worried about the drug use in America and then it started to come overseas. The guys that were coming in '69 brought their LSD with them, for Chrissakes," Ketwig said. "It's a little carried away. I don't think I want to go that far. There were guys, 'oh man, they got the greatest opium here.' Are you kidding me, you really want to do that here?"

John Zutz remembers the ubiquitous availability of heroin and other hard drugs creeping in before he left Vietnam in the fall of 1970. Marijuana was available throughout his tour, but “by the time I was leaving you could get something the size of a pencil eraser, a little tube like that, and it’d be heroin. Pure, or damned near pure, heroin. There were pharmacies on the street in town. You could walk into the pharmacy and buy amphetamines, you could buy anything.”

By 1971, the counterculture had fully taken up a position in Vietnam. John Klimek recalled the culture shock of arriving in Vietnam.

I went through training in Fort Dix and Fort Polk, Louisiana, which is the first time I had been really out of home, and ended up at Fort Benning in jump school. When you have any free time, which is very little, you’re listening to music. You’re in a military installation, pretty traditional pop music. Then when you get there, it’s “wow.” Drug use was really a huge issue and the traditional military thing is everybody dresses the same and looks the same, and here’s guys wearing, you know, peace symbols and African-American guys wearing black, like protest bands. All kinds of stuff. It was real interesting. You’re sort of conditioned to, like, “well, we’re a traditional military unit and we’re supposed to have these high standards and expectations and stuff.” And then when you’re actually in it, it’s like “well, no.” It’s about survival, so guys are really tuned into, into kind of a counter-military mindset.

“I remember the first patrol that I went on,” Klimek continued.

First I remember getting on the helicopter and it’s the classic, you’re all geared up and get on the helicopter but you’re sitting on the edge of the helicopter there with your legs dangling over the side. “Okay, here we go.” Flying out, we dropped into this place, this valley, and I’m here hyper-focused and then my point man and the slack man, the second man in our squad, lit up joints. The helicopter had just gone outside of



hearing range. It's dead quiet, I'm thinking okay any moment I'm gonna die, right? Here I am. We're goin' along and they're up there smokin' joints. I'm like "whoa."

### A Letter from Home

Many of the men the United States sent to Vietnam were of the age of a college freshman; most at that age had yet to move out on their own, out of their parents' house. One of the most poignant and commonplace refrains in conversations with many veterans is how the music reminded them of, and connected them to, home.

John Ketwig remembers that "Simon and Garfunkel 'Homeward Bound' was always kind of a tearjerker."

John Klimek remembers going to a little bar on base and feeling like it was a little bar back home. "When we got resupplied they'd bring out, usually Budweiser beer. It was hot so it was good to have anything, you know, any refreshment," he recalls. "I went in there with my friend Torres. I was 18. In the States you couldn't drink at 18, you had to be 21. The guy had a big boombox and he was playing James Brown, 'Sex Machine,' that's another one that I'll never forget. Here I am, hey I'm in the war, kicked back and drinkin' a beer, listening to 'Sex Machine' ... it's just that, that connection with home."

According to Rick Cline, the music was one of the foundations of the experience. "We were way off in Southeast Asia and most of us, 18, 19 years old for the most part, music was a very important part of our lives and also a connection to home. And you tended to hang on to this music. Of course it was a great time for music as well but if you

were put into that type of situation in that environment music becomes even more important. It's almost akin to getting a letter from home."

John Zutz remembers it as a double-edged sword. "It was good that it reminded you of home, but it was bad that it reminded you of home. But it also gives you that sense of belonging, that you're still part of society."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION

1968 formed an inflection point in the tone of the music of the Vietnam era. Prior to '68, the music had been, for want of a word, wistful. Certainly less angry. After '68, the sense of the music itself was louder, more cutting, more rock'n'roll. Lyrics, generally, became perhaps no less biting, but the topical songs tended to drop any pretense of comedy or safe harbor of vagueness and became simply confrontational.

One way to gauge the difference is by looking at the tempo in a sampling of songs through the war era. Tempo, typically recorded as "beats per minute," varies tremendously through the songbook of the war. Dylan's "Masters of War" clocks in at a leisurely 62 b.p.m.; the comparatively furious "Fortunate Son," at 133. But some songs were intended to be played slowly, to emphasize the lyrics.

John Lennon, in a 1980 interview in *Playboy* magazine, described the process of creating and recording the song "Revolution," which commented on the Vietnam-era phenomenon of anti-authoritarian street protests. "I did the slow version and I wanted it out as a single: as a statement of the Beatles' position on Vietnam and the Beatles' position on revolution." But the band, entering its fractious late period, had a basic disagreement on the value of tempo; was it better to record it slow and enunciate well so the lyrics could be discerned, or record a faster, angrier version? "The first take of "Revolution" ... well, George and Paul were resentful and said it wasn't fast enough, Lennon continued. "Now, if you go into details of what a hit record is and isn't ... maybe.

But the Beatles could have afforded to put out the slow, understandable version of “Revolution” as a single. Whether it was a gold record or a wooden record.”<sup>108</sup>

Revolution 1, the slow version, released on the White Album, clocks in at 96 b.p.m. “Revolution,” the faster version that became a hit, was recorded at 120 b.p.m., opening with a famously strident and sharp guitar attack and Lennon’s back-of-throat scream.

Ketwig carries a line from “Revolution” in his head at all times. “When you talk about destruction, don’t you know that you can count me out” has been a phrase that has stuck with me all these years. It’s kind of the way I live my life,” he said. “I saw destruction on such a scale. I don’t want anything to do with that. You do not win hearts and minds by destroying everything that a man and his family have built throughout however many lifetimes. He will not appreciate that in the long term. That makes him real angry.”

The difference between, or the interrelationship between, lyrics and the music that carries them is a complex one which certainly contributes to the overall effect of the communication, the song. The whole is more than the sum of the parts. Asked about that dynamic, Werner said “It complicates it is what I’d say. One of the things I learned from my friend Dave Marsh is really that music is not poetry, even Dylan. I never give my students lyrics. I will not let them turn the song into a poem. I will not let them do literary analysis with it. Of course, that doesn’t mean it’s less rhetorical, it’s just differently rhetorical.”

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<sup>108</sup> Sheff, D. (1981). Playboy Interview: John Lennon and Yoko Ono. Playboy Magazine.

Continuing, Werner gives a specific example: “‘I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die’ is a very different song when you see Joe singing it with the guitar at Woodstock and when you hear the carnival music with it.”

Emphasizing the point, Werner points to differing interpretations of the same song by different artists. “You listen to Dylan transform his songs over the years ... it’s reworking those. Particularly when you listen to people do versions of Dylan. The three versions of ‘Blowin’ in the Wind,’ Dylan’s version, Peter, Paul and Mary’s version and Stevie Wonder’s version ... totally different song with different focuses. And that’s all about the music. The lyrics are the same.” Werner continues:

Dylan is Guthrie on the original “Blowin’ in the Wind,” quite consciously. Peter, Paul and Mary are a commercial entity, and that’s not bad, they sang the thing at the March on Washington, and that matters. That version is going to work better there than Dylan’s version. But the one that moves me is Stevie’s. Because he understands where it comes from, man, and he’s got the call and response. Dylan is singing as the isolated white man, that voice like Woody’s, he’s the troubadour, and that is a very European approach to the world. Whereas Stevie has to have the echoing piano, he has to have Clarence Ball doing the calls and responses with him. And it becomes communal organizing in a very different way.

As Werner illustrates, the music; the tune and the way it’s performed, becomes a critical component not only to the art of the communication, but to the perception of the song in the listener’s mind, and its rhetorical value.

According to Dorian Lynskey, “Whether the music helps or hinders depends on how good and appropriate it is. A powerful sound and a memorable melody can make a message indelible. When I think of the 60s antiwar movement I immediately think of

lines from John Lennon and Edwin Starr. When I think of racial politics in the 80s I think of Public Enemy,” he said. “The way our brain remembers songs and earworms is enormously effective at embedding slogans in our consciousness.”

Rock music is a fusion of forms and influences, and may be thought of as a liberating influence on a culture. Indeed, as Werner and DeRogatis attest, its influence may transcend anything said explicitly in its lyrics. Referring to “Fortunate Son,” DeRogatis said “Fogerty’s anger is palpable and it helps to foster a sense of community, I think in a way that a political pamphlet or an essay or a poem or any writing, any written word, or any film, can’t.”

DeRogatis puts it colorfully: “I think that the ineffable ‘fuck you’ of the best rock ‘n’ roll is really important. I think that there is a ‘don’t follow leaders, question authority’ kind of message that, even if it isn’t explicit in the lyrics, is there in the music. You don’t buy what you’re being sold.”

While Lennon was questioning revolutions, wanting to “see the plan,” in his song, Vaclav Havel was a Western-influenced dissident, in the Soviet-bloc state of Czechoslovakia. Aided by the pervasiveness of recorded media, Havel was a fan of the legendary New York band the Velvet Underground, which operated as the musical arm of Andy Warhol’s Factory in the late 1960s.

While the Cold War still quietly raged, Havel sensed a liberating pulse in the Velvets’ music. From *The Encyclopedia of the Cold War*:

Thus did American popular culture find its way across the globe, helping to create the postwar international youth culture, including behind

the Iron Curtain. This in turn helped to stoke anti-authoritarianism within the Soviet bloc – the youthful Czech rebels of the 1968 “Prague Spring” were similar in appearance and tastes to their contemporaries in Western Europe; and the exuberance of rock music would influence at least one signatory of the later Czechoslovak “Charter 77” dissident human rights declaration, Václav Havel, a fan of the New York proto-punk cult band The Velvet Underground – which in turn gave its name to the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989. Indeed, in 1990, Havel, by now Czechoslovakia’s wildly popular leader, would ask the Velvet Underground’s lead singer Lou Reed, “Did you know that I am president because of you?”<sup>109</sup>

In the example of the Velvet Revolution, it was not the *words* that inspired a political movement, but the *implication of personal liberty* carried by the music.

#### A public square

Bob Kerrey does not view the Sixties in the warm glow of nostalgia. “That era was terrible. And it wasn’t just the war. It was the civil rights movement and the counterculture movement. And all three of those were powerful and hotly debated. Families were divided,” Kerrey remembered. “The great expression of the time was the generational divide between men and women in their 20s and men and women in their 40s and 50s. That political divide and that generational divide was real, particularly on cultural issues, and Vietnam in some ways expressed that. Civil rights did as well. And music unified.”

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<sup>109</sup> Van Dijk, R., Gray, W. G., Savranskaya, S., Suri, J., & Zhai, Q. (2013). Encyclopedia of the Cold War. Taylor & Francis. p. 369

Werner described that unification in powerful terms; describing a music that was creating opportunity for discussion.

“The interesting thing is that when you play those songs it becomes very clear that they provided a focal point for discussions within the public square. People could go to a song, and they could connect it with their own experience, make it into what they’re thinking,” he said. “So you get a song like ‘I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag,’ which is every bit as biting as ‘Masters of War.’ You get everybody from Bo Gritz, Green Beret colonel, to the hippies I was growing up with in Colorado Springs, who had no clue that Joe was a veteran, using it for their own purposes. Then a conversation of sorts developed around that. Sometimes angry, sometimes incoherent, but still it’s there.”

Echoing Werner, Kerrey said “When they’re in their cars, and they don’t think anybody’s watching them, and they turn on the radio ... General Whiplash is listening to Country Joe McDonald and he’s singing along to “Fixin’ to Die Rag.” He doesn’t want anybody else to know that he likes “Fixin’ to Die Rag.”

Certainly, any music, any song that people share across a long stretch of geography, it tends to unite them even if they are opposed to each other politically,” Kerrey continued. “If you have an audience of 500 people, that was the day of radio, when we were getting most of our stuff on AM radio. You listen to a song on the radio ... you could have 500 people driving their car, 200 of which were pro-war, 200 against the war, 100 didn’t care, and they’re all singing the damn song as they drive down the street. Music is a unifying experience.”



## CHAPTER TWELVE: FORTUNATE SIGNALS

The resonance of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son," "Run Through the Jungle" and "Who'll Stop the Rain" are well-noted within the literature on the topical music of the period. (Though the latter two songs are not explicit antiwar songs.) "Fortunate Son," particularly, seems to carry special rhetorical meaning.

In 2014, 45 years after its release, Dave Grohl, Bruce Springsteen and Zac Brown performed a feverish "Fortunate Son" at the 2014 Concert for Valor on the National Mall in Washington. The song, resonating still, seemed to fully engage the crowd, but it demonstrated its power in following days as the reaction echoed through the media.<sup>110 111</sup>

Cline and Kerrey demonstrate the opposite poles of response to the performance at a celebration for veterans. "I think it was the wrong venue to probably do that in. After all it's just a song and it's not a bad song, I just I think that was the wrong venue for it," Cline said. Kerrey demurred. "I think it was completely appropriate. It was a unifying song."

Critchlow recalls the Concert for Valor performance. "I remember when it came up. I didn't mind it at all. I liked it because it was such a part of the time, and it sharpens

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<sup>110</sup> Anti-Military Anthem Played at "Concert for Valor" | The Weekly Standard. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.weeklystandard.com/article/anti-military-anthem-played-concert-valor/818921#.VGLbRHQIJU.twitter>

<sup>111</sup> Bruce Springsteen Was Right to Play "Fortunate Son" on Veterans Day - US News. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/susan-milligan/2014/11/13/bruce-springsteen-was-right-to-play-fortunate-son-on-veterans-day>

my definition of myself as someone who went, versus many who didn't. As I aged, I'd say I never even talked about Vietnam for 10, 15 years. I mean I just didn't because nobody did, you know?" For Critchlow, being a vet was a painful experience. "When I went to Columbia I never told anyone I was in Vietnam for the entire school year. I kept it quiet. I was ashamed of it, and I was also afraid that my classmates would look down on me, you know? Every goddamned one of them was a fortunate son."

For Lt. Gen. Chester B. Puller's son, Lewis, John Fogerty's song perhaps played loudest. Puller's father was, and remains, one of the most decorated Marines in history. Regard for the elder Puller in Marine Corps lore is so high that the Corps' mascot, an English Bulldog, is always named "Chesty Pullerton."<sup>112</sup>

These connections were the younger Puller's burden to bear in Vietnam. First, to live up to his father's legacy, second to prove to others in his Marine company that there was no special treatment, no protection, no advantage to being Chesty Puller's son.<sup>113</sup>

Bob Kerrey became acquainted with the younger Puller when both rehabilitated at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital in 1969 after suffering grievous injuries in Vietnam.

On March 14, 1969, Lt. (j.g.) Kerrey led a Navy SEAL team against a Viet Cong installation on an island in the bay of Nha Trang. In the fight that ensued, Kerrey was badly injured by a grenade. Kerrey's injuries were serious enough to earn the Navy SEAL

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<sup>112</sup> Killen, J. (2016). #VeteranOfTheDay New Years Day 2016 - Lewis "Chesty" Puller. Retrieved from <http://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/25037/veteranoftheday-chesty-puller/>

<sup>113</sup> Puller, L. B. (2000). *Fortunate Son: The Autobiography of Lewis B. Puller, Jr.* Grove Weidenfeld.

an early exit from the war; he left most of his right leg below the knee in Vietnam; his actions during that battle would earn him a Congressional Medal of Honor.<sup>114</sup>

He would join Lewis Puller in Philadelphia soon after. Puller had lost his entire right leg, his left leg below the knee, his left hand and most of the fingers of his right when he tripped a booby-trapped howitzer round during an engagement with NVA troops. He would earn the Silver Star for his service, but was a shattered man.<sup>115</sup> Still, there was a lot left to Lewis Puller, Jr.

Kerrey, himself a skeptic on the significance of the rhetorical content of topical songs, recalled Lewis's affinity for the song "Fortunate Son." "You know, Lewis Puller played that ... Lewis Puller was a very, very good friend of mine, he wrote a book called 'Fortunate Son.' He was the son of probably the most famous Marine ever, Chesty Puller, five Navy Crosses all of which could've been the Medal of Honor ... he was the son of Chesty Puller — he was a general's son. So he writes his book called 'Fortunate Son' — the challenges that he had being Chesty's boy."

The book, which on its own page in the front matter displays lyrics of the John Fogerty song, the lyrics including "I ain't no military son," won the Pulitzer Prize for biography/autobiography in 1992.<sup>116</sup> But the lot of the Vietnam vet, for many at least, is

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<sup>114</sup> Lieutenant, Junior Grade Kerrey, Joseph R., U.S. Navy. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.cmoah.org/recipient-detail/3329/kerrey-joseph-r.php>

<sup>115</sup> Puller, L. B. (2000). *Fortunate Son: The Autobiography of Lewis B. Puller, Jr.* New York: Grove Weidenfeld. pp. 156-159.

<sup>116</sup> Lewis Puller Jr., Vietnam Hero And Biographer, Is Dead at 48. (1994). *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/12/obituaries/lewis-puller-jr-vietnam-hero-and-biographer-is-dead-at-48.html>

one of internal conflict. Puller's, certainly, was not to bask in the glory of literary accomplishment. Only a few short years after the outstanding success of his autobiography, 48-year-old Lewis Puller, in a state of alcoholism and depression, amid the impending dissolution of his marriage, decided he'd had enough.

Details of the police report are scarce, but even at the moment of his death, Lewis Puller, Jr. was surrounded by Fogerty's insistent and angry song. As a solemn Kerrey described it, Puller prepared for his death as meticulously as he had lived his life. He attended to details. For just a moment, Kerrey's throat caught describing one detail of Puller's death scene. Haltingly, he continued.

"And he, he put 'Fortunate Son' on and killed himself," said Kerrey.

Reprinted below are the lyrics from that song that Puller prominently set apart in his autobiography.

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#### FORTUNATE SON

Some folks inherit star spangled eyes  
 Ooh, they send you down to war, Lord  
 And when you ask 'em, "How much should we give?"  
 Ooh, they only answer "More! More! More!"  
 It ain't me, it ain't me!  
 I ain't no military son.  
 It ain't me! It ain't me!  
 I ain't no fortunate one.

Down in Florida, the song "Fortunate Son" and Puller are inextricably linked in another veteran's memory. Ken Leland thinks of Puller whenever he hears the song.

"'Fortunate Son' just reminds me a lot about Lewis Puller. He was one of the few

bigwigs' sons who did serve. Later on he committed suicide, and every time I hear that song I think about him," Leland said. "And again I think about a lot of fortunate sons who never had to go to Vietnam. Who fled the draft, fled the country. They were fortunate in a sense, but they have to live with their decisions. But it resonates; my feelings, more or less about serving in Vietnam."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: DOES MUSIC MATTER

The canon of anti-Vietnam War songs was vast and, while many individual works did not gain the radio airplay or record sales by which we could begin referring to them as “mass communication,” some did. And some have gone on to become significant and influential as part of the evolution of rock music well after the time in which they were recorded.

What’s unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable, is not the question of “does music matter” to political discourse — it does — but *how much* does it matter. If each anti-war song is like a raindrop falling on a pond, intermingling its ripples with the ripples of all other speech of all kinds being made about the war, how does one separate out that one song, or the collection of songs that comprise the grouping “Anti-war Songs of the Vietnam Era” to judge the effect of *political rhetoric in recorded music* within the whole milieu of anti-war rhetoric and dialogue? We know from talking to people that songs are important as rhetoric. What we don’t know is *how* important, how persuasive they are.

One aspect of musical rhetoric that may increase its power is that we listen to it, in some cases, repeatedly. Recall the use of the 45-year-old “Fortunate Son” at the 2014 Concert for Valor. After 45 years, the song, and the rhetoric within, spoke with enough relevance to ignite a controversy about whether it was appropriate to be played at a concert celebrating veterans. In the same way, and in some sense, many of these songs

rarely venture out of memory in the way a great piece of oratory might. Perhaps because of the tune, we can recall the words.

Camil illustrates the phenomenon: “As soon as I hear that music, it’s like, that’s our music. That music takes me right back to those days.”

“One could theorize that rhetorical contribution is greatly strengthened by repetition. How many times have I heard “Fortunate Son,” for instance? Hundreds!” Critchlow said. “And how many times have I heard ‘Ask Not...,’ ‘I Have a Dream’ or Cronkite’s commentary? I’d guess ten each, and I’m probably being generous.”

Scott Camil says of protest music and musicians,

I think that they have a larger following than an orator. And they spread a message and they legitimize that message. That legitimization when you’re young ... I used to remember when I was young I would talk about “them.” “The establishment.” “The system.” When I went to Vietnam, my parents thought it was a good idea, my schoolteachers thought it was a good idea, my Rabbi thought it was a good idea, my country thought it was a good idea. All of those authority figures who you look up to when you’re young. Now you start having ideas that they’re not right about stuff. The music helps legitimize those ideas because you see you’re not the only one thinking that way.

From earliest age, music is used as a device for learning. When we’re young, one of our first memories is learning our alphabet, set to a tune. The same phenomenon allows us to easily memorize rhetoric as well. As Camil puts it, “If I gave you several paragraphs to read and then I asked you to recite those paragraphs to me, you’d have a hard time doing that. But if we put a little music to it, you would remember that paragraph, those several paragraphs. You’d be able remember it because of the music.”

Since the Vietnam era heyday of protest music, there have been many artists who have approached political topics in their music. In late-seventies England, the Sex Pistols recorded “God Save the Queen,” a broadside aimed squarely at the monarchy. Later, the (English) Beat went after the Tory government with “Stand Down Margaret,” and the Clash decried imperialism in their “Washington Bullets.” The Clash, in particular, created much music in a topical, anti-war vein. Along with the anti-imperialist “Washington Bullets,” they took on conscription with “The Call-Up,” took Ed Harris’s line from *Apocalypse Now* as inspiration for “Charlie Don’t Surf,” and discussed the plight of abandoned Amerasian children in “Straight to Hell.”<sup>117</sup>

Werner, a member of the nominating committee of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, doesn’t think we’ve seen another band like the Clash.

The Clash exemplified something, but I don’t think you can find the Clash today in the punk world. I don’t know who you’d put there. Green Day’s *American Idiot* is a terrific album, but it’s essentially controversy. The Clash had a sense of a process that could lead to transformation. Green Day was pissed off.

The Clash foresaw — in part it’s Bob Marley politics, and that’s Woody Guthrie politics — that it’s the down-pressed rising up and bonding together. What really moved me about the Clash was that they understood how race worked in this. They understood that race was being used to mess with peoples’ heads and to make it impossible to form coalitions without which change wasn’t possible.

The Iraq War inspired a number of anti-war songs despite the lack of a significant peace movement in the United States. In 2006, the post-punk band Pearl Jam returned to

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<sup>117</sup> French, K. (1999). *Apocalypse Now: A Bloomsbury Movie Guide*. Bloomsbury USA. p. 26.



their raw and visceral roots with “World Wide Suicide,” an incendiary rant against “endless war.” As frontman Eddie Vedder said in an interview, responding to a question on alienating a part of the band’s fan base due to his outspoken views, “I think you have to be aware that there is a risk there, and you have to take seriously the idea that music means different things for different people, and that you’re threatening their experience by bringing in some issues that you feel you need to talk about. You best be damned sure that what you’re talking about is important. It only is a testament to how important these issues have been of late that we bring them up.”<sup>118</sup>

The music of the Vietnam era was one part of the maelstrom of societal displacement and youth disaffection that marked the latter half of the 1960s and the early years of the 70s. The protest music of the Vietnam era set the issues of the times to a beat, and represented a high point in the relevance of rock music to sociopolitical discourse.

The constraints on popular music as a truth-telling mass medium are significant and are not easily overlooked. The companies may shy from the material, but we’ve seen that the artists themselves were, and perhaps remain, given Vedder’s comments, tentative with regard to antiwar rhetoric.

It is easy to dismiss popular music, all of it, as simply something akin to wallpaper, as mere decoration to our lives. But as we have seen, there are artists who conceive of themselves, at least occasionally, as rhetoricians, who on these occasions use their music to underscore their orations on subjects of cultural significance. In this respect

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<sup>118</sup> Pastorek, W. (2006). Pearl Essence. EW.com. Retrieved from <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1191078,00.html>

and with this intent, it is worth considering whether musicians should be viewed as serious contributors to the cultural and sociopolitical conversation, much as we study the contributions of editorialists and orators to the cultural zeitgeist.

Music, it seems, can amplify a political message in a way that perhaps no other form of communication can. Then-Senator Barack Obama's 2008 New Hampshire concession speech, which solidified the candidate's relevance as a serious competitor to Senator Hillary Clinton in that campaign for the presidency, is famous for a turn of phrase, "Yes, We Can." The video for the speech, posted on YouTube as "Barack Obama: Yes We Can" by the Obama campaign on Jan. 9 of that year, has accumulated just over 5.5 million views as of March, 2016. The music video built exclusively of passages from the speech, created by the musician will.i.am and posted online less than a month later, has almost five times as many views.<sup>119</sup> In an example of a "virtuous loop," the campaign made use of the song video, even using it as a stand-in for the candidate himself at one early 2008 rally in Los Angeles.<sup>120</sup>

Obama himself, at his victory speech in Chicago's Grant Park in November 2008, paraphrased Sam Cooke's 1964 song "A Change Is Gonna Come," with the following: "It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Will.i.am, et al. (2008). Yes We Can. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcX-mYY>

<sup>120</sup> Alexovich, A. (2008). Obama Supporters Sing, "Yes We Can." New York Times. Retrieved from [http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/04/obama-supporters-sing-yes-we-can/?\\_r=0](http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/04/obama-supporters-sing-yes-we-can/?_r=0)

<sup>121</sup> Jeffery, S. (2008). Barack Obama's debt to Sam Cooke. The Guardian. London, England. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/deadlineusa/2008/nov/05/uselections2008-barackobama>

Obama is not the only president to find meaning in music. In the 1976 campaign season, for instance, the Democratic nominee Jimmy Carter cited Bob Dylan in his convention speech, quoting lines from “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)”: “We have an America that, in Bob Dylan’s phrase, is busy being born, not busy dying.”

In the book Carter had written for that out-of-nowhere campaign, “Why Not The Best,” the future president credited Dylan as “a source for my understanding about what’s right and what’s wrong in this society.”<sup>122</sup>

According to DeRogatis, music is unique among art forms. “There’s that ineffable quality of music to touch our souls in a way that I don’t think any other art form can. Not poetry, not photography, not film, not anything. I think it’s very hard to describe, and I’ve spent my life as a professional rock critic. And I still think that a great song touches us in ways that are very, very hard to describe, that are ethereal. It gets under our skin.”

No one individual rhetorical pronouncement, even one echoed vastly and repeated endlessly within a popular song, has any particular power of its own. Like all mass culture, it must be contextualized as part of an experiential range from direct observation to social acculturation to, finally, engagement in the mass culture. And all people, it might be argued, experience these influences in differing proportions. For Paul Critchlow, the music, particularly of those years, has not stopped.

Music, I think for anybody, at any time, it’s sort of a permanent backdrop to the way you think about everything. In particular for the coming of age years, which are so powerful and so formative. I consider

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<sup>122</sup> Charlesworth, C. (1976). Elected! Rock and US Politics. *Melody Maker*, Nov. 13, 1976. Retrieved from <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/elected-rock-and-us-politics>

coming-of-age going all the way through Vietnam and coming out Vietnam for me. I identify certain events or periods in my life with certain songs and certain words that came out of those songs, and certain tunes. It's just really powerful.

But do these songs matter as political discourse? Craig Werner, author and University of Wisconsin professor, thinks so.

“Yeah they do. I feel a little bit clearer about that now than I would have a year ago. The way that Kendrick Lamar has become a voice for, and a rallying point for, Black Lives Matter is something I haven't seen in a while. There's a strength to that, and a power to that, that really hasn't been there since Public Enemy, and Black Lives Matter provides a forum for political activism that Public Enemy really didn't have to fall back on. Chuck D is very articulate talking about that. He says “I was put out there as a political leader at a time when what we really needed was a political leader. We didn't need a 24-year-old kid.”

What music can do at its best, and I'm really thinking about the sixties here, is it can give voice, it can clarify the vision of a political movement, it can inspire and provide strength to people working within that movement, it can spread the core messages of a movement to a broader audience. “Fortunate Son,” I think, did that. But what it can't do is it can't create that movement. If the movement is not already active, then the music is probably doomed to echo within its own choir box. It can't create it, it can play a very real and a very important role. Music was absolutely crucial to the civil rights movement. “People Get Ready,” by Curtis Mayfield, that was warrior music.

Lynskey also thinks rhetoric in music has power, perhaps unique persuasive power, within the culture. “Even a clumsy song like ‘Eve of Destruction’ can be more effective and reach more people than a brilliantly argued op-ed,” he said.

### Framing: Controversy or Content

It may not be institutional journalism's responsibility to embrace topical music as another form of journalism, to accept songwriters into the journalistic society. But institutional journalism often fails to consider how music operates in popular culture, and how influential artists and their songs can be. Instead, it often misses the point, reducing the rhetorical contribution to a frame of "controversy," rather than dealing with the merit of the ideas presented. For all its occasional influence, rhetoric in popular music is rarely accorded serious engagement.

Certainly the literature of the period, as well as first-person interviews with veterans, demonstrate the centrality of music within the mass media landscape of the war era. But the institutional study of journalism and mass communications devotes very little attention to the subject of topical music in its consideration of wartime mass media. One exhaustive book on the subject of news coverage of Vietnam is the anthology *Reporting Vietnam: American Journalism 1959-1975*.

Documented coverage of antiwar or protest music, or even the counterculture generally, is scant or nonexistent in *Reporting Vietnam* (the exception to the latter being a countercultural "new journalism" excerpt from Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* about the Vietnam Veterans of America's march on the Republican convention in that year), though significant new journalism memoirs such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches* treat it as central to the experience.

*Reporting Vietnam* includes an excerpt from another book, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, by James Michener. Nowhere is there mention of the rhetorical contribution of Crosby, Stills Nash and Young in the Michener excerpt (nor in a full-text search of the book from which it was excerpted), although Michener was later quoted in the *Akron Beacon-Journal*, saying that of all the rhetoric and reporting generated by the event, he was most moved by the song, “Ohio”: “It did what I could not do. It dealt with it on an emotional level.”<sup>123</sup> Implicit in the statement is that Michener, as a journalist, felt and observed a restriction, a limitation, on what information was relevant to report; that reporting on the emotional content of an event like Kent State stood outside of the definition of “journalism.”

Lynskey hears something else in “Ohio;” the song circling back to its inspiration, referencing journalism itself: “Neil Young’s chorus ‘Four dead in Ohio’ is phrased like a newspaper headline,” Lynskey said.

It is notable that the artists’ inspiration stories for both “Ohio” and “Search and Destroy” are built around a chance viewing of a newsmagazine cover. Culture is a conversation, and if the magazine cover was the source of the idea, the song is a kind of commentary. Like a matryoshka doll, Young talks back to journalism by forming his refrain as a headline, within his commentary on the facts of the event.

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<sup>123</sup> Gamboa, G. (2000). Neil Young’s “Ohio” captures gravity of event. *Akron Beacon-Journal*. para. 15, 16. Retrieved from <http://www.ohio.com/news/neil-young-s-ohio-captures-gravity-of-event-1.161768>

Daniel C. Hallin's *The Uncensored War*, another deep analysis of the reportage of the war, delves into the question "Did the media 'Lose Vietnam'?" in the book's final chapter.

In his argument, he concludes that "the collapse of America's 'will' to fight in Vietnam resulted from a political process of which the media were only one part."<sup>124</sup> In Hallin's definition, "the media" denotes a narrow reading that includes institutional journalism and little more. Expand the definition to include popular music, and topical music operating within that "popular music" space, and it might be said that "the media" was a correspondingly larger part of the story of cultural change in America regarding Vietnam.

Ketwig doubts if the media had too much to do with it. "What ended the war really was the Army wouldn't fight anymore. Guys said 'This is crazy. This is crazy. We can't do this. I don't want this on my conscience. I don't want to be the last guy to be killed in Vietnam,' you know, John Kerry said, 'for a mistake.'"

Particularly in the context of war, institutional journalism often will strike a Faustian bargain in exchange for access. The practice of "embedding" reporters in more recent conflicts reduces press freedoms even further. The former *New York Times* reporter Sydney Schanberg sums up the dilemma for journalists: "Embedded means you're there. It also means you're stuck."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Hallin, D. C. (1986). *The Uncensored War: The Media and the Vietnam*. Oxford University Press. p. 211.

<sup>125</sup> Mitchell, G. (2008). *So Wrong for So Long: How the Press, the Pundits-- and the President-- Failed on Iraq*. Union Square Press/Sterling Pub. p. 29.

Moreso, “embedding” denotes a dependency on the part of institutional journalists to their military hosts. This sense of dependency may pervade all of Hallin’s “media;” even those in the journalistic enterprise who will never witness a war zone may display deference to the military.

Extending the argument, after a long paragraph breaking down the question “Should the United States have wanted to persist in Indochina, or to intervene there to begin with,” Hallin continues:

These issues carry us well beyond the scope of this book. What can be said here, however, is that they were never seriously discussed in news coverage of the war, not at any rate, in *New York Times* coverage during the years when the decision was made to intervene, or in television coverage in subsequent years. They were not discussed because the constraints of ideology and of journalistic routines tying news coverage to Washington perspectives excluded them from the news agenda. From this angle the implications of government control over the media looks very different.<sup>126</sup>

To resurrect a phrase from the sixties that has gained new currency in this political season, one might consider whether institutional journalism is in thrall of, or indeed part of, “the Establishment.” Does it report for, and from the perspective of, institutions and halls of power, or does it report for, from, and among the people? Consequently, does it report what is true? Does its point of view in the halls of power rob it of true objectivity? In cases of war coverage, as Hallin and DeRogatis illustrate, there may be significant compromises at play.

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<sup>126</sup> Hallin, D. C. (1986). *The Uncensored War: The Media and the Vietnam*. Oxford University Press. p. 214.



In contrast, perhaps because rock, folk and R&B topical music is instinctively anti-Establishment, skepticism of officialdom comes early and often.

So perhaps we need a new definition of “media.” Too often, we draw a too-restrictive knot around the term and limit it to news media, when it is clear that there are many other voices in the culture whose presence and breadth is greatly magnified by the activity of media, in its broad definition. If we had included and thoughtfully considered all voices within our definition of the term, perhaps we would not have missed signals of despair and anger within our culture.

In more recent years, images of police brutality have emerged from the inner city. The Rodney King beating and subsequent riots may have taken the nation by surprise, but for the listeners of the rap group N.W.A., perhaps less so. Hip hop entrepreneur Russell Simmons, in his 2007 book *Do You!*, observes:

In all the years I’ve been involved in hip-hop, one of the most thrilling moments for me came in 1989 when N.W.A. released their song “Fuck tha Police.” Of course at that time, a lot of people, especially those in police departments, were less than thrilled about that song. In fact they were outraged by what they considered an attempt to incite violence against them. They thought if N.W.A. was allowed to promote that song’s message, it could challenge the police’s authority.

But I heard something different. I heard a group of young people from South Central Los Angeles who had the courage to speak the truth about the police brutality that was a huge issue not only in their city, but in African-American communities all over the nation. N.W.A. wasn’t saying “Fuck tha Police” just to be controversial, or as a call for revenge. Instead of creating more violence, they were trying to end it. They were hoping

that by talking about the problem loudly enough, they would finally provoke someone to do something about it.<sup>127</sup>

“Truth” may be as elusive a construct for anti-Establishment actors as for Establishment actors. However, the deep vein of antiauthoritarian skepticism that pervades the protest genre in popular music is of significant value to journalism, and it is worthy of institutional journalism’s attention and regard. Much as the pace of rail shipments can provide a business journalist an early indicator of economic ups and downs, paying attention to rhetoric in music might provide leading indicators of cultural change for journalists working in the areas of politics, culture and society. But all too often, voices reporting through music on cultural issues seem to go unheard by the news media. McMurray, of the EMP Museum, thinks that there’s a bit of cultural arrogance at play. “Part of that seems to speak to the white mainstream and the people that are in power just basically dismissing any sort of opinions that aren’t part of that mainstream or the people in power,” he said.

DeRogatis observes, “If you listened to N.W.A. before the Rodney King verdict, then what erupted would not have surprised you. This anger was there and it was palpable. These issues were there. And sometimes the music is the only place where they’re talked about.”

More recently, Beyoncé’s halftime performance at the 2016 Super Bowl was notable for its inclusion of her song “Formation,” a forthright message of black pride

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<sup>127</sup> Simmons, R. (2007). *Do You!: 12 Laws to Access the Power in You to Achieve Happiness and Success*. Gotham Books. p. 292.

amid a Black Lives Matter movement that has provided ample evidence of continuing police oppression of African-American communities.

How did the media do in engaging with the content rather than the controversy? A Google News (as of March 25, 2016) search for the keywords “‘black lives matter’ beyoncé super bowl” yielded 48,000 results; a search on “controversial beyoncé super bowl” yielded 137,000 results (notably, several other searches, such as “‘black pride’ beyonce super bowl,” and “‘black panthers’ beyonce super bowl,” yielded only a fraction of the results of the “black lives matter” search, so the latter was employed for analysis). It is notable that the only mainstream American news outlets — defined here as daily print newspapers and news networks — that are listed among the top 20 results for the “content-framed” search were *CNN* and the *Richmond Free Press*.

The top 50 search results for “‘black lives matter’ beyoncé super bowl” and the top 50 results for “controversial beyoncé super bowl” were broken down into the types of journalistic institutions represented, categorized as “U.S. Institutional,” “Non-U.S. Institutional,” and “Non-Institutional.” According to the marketing-statistics firm Chitika, 98 per cent of traffic through Google is represented by the first 50 search results.<sup>128</sup> “Institutional” was operationally-defined, as above, as general-circulation daily newspapers and news networks; major Internet properties such as the *Daily Beast* and the *Huffington Post* were included in this category. “Non-institutional” was, in effect “other;”

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<sup>128</sup> MarketingCharts.com. (2013). Chart/table from: Top 2 Results on Google Net Half of Search Traffic. Retrieved from <http://www.marketingcharts.com/online/top-2-results-on-google-net-half-of-search-traffic-30544/attachment/chitika-percentage-traffic-by-google-search-result-position-page-june2013/>

this category includes publications such as college newspapers and gossip sources such as *The Inquisitr*.

U.S. Institutional sources were evenly split between a framing of Beyoncé’s Super Bowl performance as “content” and one of “controversy.” Non-U.S. Institutional sources were 44 percent more likely to engage with the content of the performance. Non-Institutional sources were more likely to report the performance using a “controversy” frame.

Table 1

**Framing of Media Stories re. Beyoncé Super Bowl performance**

Category of Source	primary framing	
	Content	Controversy
U.S. Institutional	15	15
Non-U.S. Institutional	13	9
Non-Institutional	22	26

*Notes. Huffington Post and Daily Beast included within ‘U.S. Institutional.’ Top 50 search results for “‘black lives matter’ beyoncé super bowl” compared to top 50 search results for “controversial beyoncé super bowl.” Data: Google News search, March 25, 2016.*

Lynskey isn’t surprised by the focus on controversy. “Sadly, controversy is the crack cocaine of media and it’s easier to write about the fuss surrounding a statement than the statement itself,” he said. “However controversy isn’t all bad. It’s a measure of Formation’s success that it angered people and even if a lot of the coverage was pointless

white noise you have to assume that a huge number of listeners and Super Bowl viewers were moved to think about the message of the song and the performance.”

Former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani is one such viewer. In an appearance on *Fox and Friends* the morning following the Super Bowl (within a story frame that included both controversy and content, although dismissive of the Black Lives Matter movement), Giuliani said “This is football, not Hollywood, and I thought it was really outrageous that she used it as a platform to attack police officers who are the people who protect her and protect us, and keep us alive.”<sup>129</sup> Continuing, he made clear his preference for avoiding topical speech in such a public space. “I mean this is a political position, she’s probably going to take advantage of it,” Giuliani said. “You’re talking to middle America when you have the Super Bowl, so you can have entertainment. Let’s have, you know, decent wholesome entertainment, and not use it as a platform to attack the people who, you know, put their lives at risk to save us.”

With old concepts and descriptors like “The Establishment” suddenly in vogue again, it may be that another old, associated concept deserves a fresh look: the “generation gap.” Perhaps there is a gap between Giuliani’s views and those of the primarily young Americans protesting police tactics, much as there was in the Vietnam era.

People have been thinking for a long time about a generation gap. Reading from a rambling Hendrix entry from his 1968 journal, in the collections of the EMP Museum,

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<sup>129</sup> Chokshi, N. (2016). Rudy Giuliani: Beyoncé’s halftime show was an “outrageous” affront to police. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/02/08/rudy-giuliani-beyonces-half-time-show-was-an-outrageous-affront-to-police/>

McMurray finds the artist, seemingly enthused about a positive experience on the day with race relations, musing about conflict between generations. “We could change America, not from white to black but from old to young,”<sup>130</sup> he wrote.

Ketwig recalls the times and, other than sex and drugs and rock music, how the “counterculture” was challenging the broader culture. “The Hippie movement and the Summer of Love, and everything, said we can get along with each other. The powers that be, the establishment, absolutely hated that.” Ketwig then shifts his narrative point of view, imagining himself a spokesman for the dominant culture, the “Establishment.” ““Wait a minute. We built a whole freakin’ economy on our ability to blow other people away,” Ketwig begins. “To kill in new and high-tech ways. It’s never been done before. You can’t give up on that. What are you kids saying? Be nice to each other? We have no place for that in our society.””

Craig Werner wonders if the motivation behind the present-day reaction exemplified by Giuliani is, simply, fear. “The power structure, particularly on the political right, is scared to death that the power of culture is real,” he said. “And so I think when they see something that people are responding to, they’re scared as hell that Guthrie is right and that people have the power.”

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<sup>130</sup> Full diary entry: “August 1. Weather’s beautiful here New Orleans — food’s O.K. Everybody’s on fire but a groovy fire. We could change America, not from white to black but from old to young. The park scene was great. Can you imagine southern police protecting me? The gig was actually great. Turned them on with physical (sic) music. Come back to hotel and get stoned and make love to “Pootsie” — a TALL Southern Blonde.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN: CONCLUSION

So, does this machine — this machine, music — kill fascists? Perhaps not. But when joined with serious speech about serious subjects it is a unique — and some say uniquely powerful — form of rhetoric.

While the subgenre of protest music was never a large proportion of the musical content played on the radio or of the overall output of the music industry, the resonance of some songs, particularly for the veterans who were at the center of the Vietnam War question, remains today. Memories are fixed, vividly in some examples, with particular songs; in a phrase that several veterans and cultural observers used, music “gets under our skin.”

Perhaps it’s not surprising that music makes a compelling vehicle for the transmission of ideas, as music is commonly used in early learning to enhance memorization.

We also observe that musical — lyrical — meaning is mutable. That a line written for one lyrical purpose — “we gotta get outta this place” or “these boots are made for walkin’ — can easily take on an entirely different meaning, depending on context. Sometimes, particularly in the former case, it just doesn’t matter what inspired the lyric to be written; the song was an anthem about getting out of Vietnam because the soldiers said it was, and they sang it loudly.

In the same way, rhetorical music becomes ours. It becomes our speech, as we sing it: “I ain’t no fortunate one.”

Music, however imperfect a medium for the transmission of political rhetoric (and we see that imperfection in missed messages like “Search and Destroy” and imputed messages like “We Gotta Get Out of This Place”), has cultural impact. Performances of some songs, notably “Fortunate Son” at the Concert for Valor in 2014, or Beyoncé’s “Formation” at the 2016 Super Bowl, emphasize the rhetorical import of topical music in the outsized reaction they elicit in the media.

Unfortunately, though the news media pay attention to the controversy swirling around these performances, their level of engagement with their content belies a certain institutional elitism; only two of the top 20 Google News search results with a story frame focusing on the content of the Super Bowl performance were “U.S. Institutional” media outlets.

As is demonstrated in the history of the Vietnam War and the rhetorical music which accompanied it, debate within the culture can be seen within the music long before institutional journalism begins to take a skeptical view of government activity.

But rhetoric in music, if paid attention, can be a valuable asset for journalism, acting as an early indicator. As one observer put it, “If you listened to N.W.A. before the Rodney King verdict, then what erupted would not have surprised you.”

More than ever, journalists are operating in an open arena of discourse on all subjects, from the truly important to the woefully inane. A profusion of media and voices



has led to an environment in which the very meaning of the phrase “mass media” is ever-evolving. One common thread of “mass media” is that the audience needs to be truly large to merit the term “mass.” Music — at least popular music — is one such “mass medium.” Rhetoric within the context of popular music is a unique and powerful voice, a “member” of the mass media, that may best be regarded with due attention, if not sober reflection, by journalists.

Rhetorical music has long been in a conversation with journalism. Several songs are noted to have been inspired directly by headlines. After Tet, the reporting of institutional journalism about the war changed to a more skeptical view. Perhaps responding to the change in mood as much as leading it, rhetorical music became outwardly angry after Tet, such as in “Fortunate Son” or “War.”

Topical and protest music is worthy of thoughtful consideration as an agent within the broad culture and within the discursive landscape surveyed by journalism in its coverage of politics and society, and perhaps within journalism itself. Rhetorical music, like journalism, is part of the tapestry that binds our culture. Rhetorical music, like journalism, is a source of ideas and discourse on the topics of the day.

It'll get around

Perhaps it's best to end where we began, with Woody Guthrie, from his autobiography “Bound for Glory”:

Remember, it's just maybe, someday, sometime, somebody will pick you up and look at your picture and read your message, and carry you

in his pocket, and lay you on his shelf, and burn you in his stove. But he'll have your message in his head and he'll talk it and it'll get around. I'm blowing, and just as wild and whirling as you are, and lots of times I've been picked up, thrown down, and picked up; but my eyes has been my camera taking pictures of the world and my songs has been messages that I tried to scatter across the back sides and along the steps of the fire escapes and on the window sills and through the dark halls.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Guthrie, W. (1968). *Bound for Glory*. New York: E.P. Dutton. p. 394

## AFTERWORD

In the process of research on this topic, which has spanned the better part of a year, including an August 2015 trip to Seattle and a visit to the EMP Museum, an aspect of an early Guthrie guitar may have been discovered, a detail of hitherto-unknown significance. The faint writing of “this machine kills fascists” on the back of the EMP Museum’s Guthrie guitar, verified by Nora Guthrie to be in her father’s hand<sup>132</sup>, may represent the only Guthrie guitar still in existence bearing that iconic phrase.<sup>133</sup> Guthrie historians are researching the instrument and its provenance.

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<sup>132</sup> Forwarded email correspondence.

<sup>133</sup> Conner, T. (2012). Beyond the Archives | This Land Press - Made by You and Me. Retrieved from <http://thislandpress.com/2012/08/08/beyond-the-archives/>

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