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The Vietnam War Years Told Through Music

The time period during the Vietnam War was an incredibly eventful time. Emotions were very high as new presidents came in and out, JFK and MLK were assassinated, there was a counterculture forming, anti-war protest movements, pro-war movements, and many other hot topics. The country was deeply, deeply divided in every corner, which is coincidentally very similar to the political climate we are in now, in 2020. Civil rights, politics, drugs and alcohol, and most importantly to our class, war and music were all themes that we can observe in this time. Music had an incredible impact on not only the nation, but also the world. By digging just a little bit into music during the 1960s and 1970s, it is easy to see just how much music influenced the time just as much as the time influenced the music. In this paper, we will be looking into 5 different songs that did just that during this very chaotic period in our history.

This first song I will be discussing in this paper is the song "I Ain't Marchin' Anymore." It was recorded in 1964 and released in 1965 by Phil Ochs. It was a part of the album "I Ain't Marchin' Anymore" and was definitely the most notable song off the album (Wikipedia, n.d.). This song, in the title and in the lyrics, are inherently a war protest song, there is no way around that. The genre of the song leans towards a folk type of music with its simple melody and single acoustic guitar as the instrumental behind the vocals (Wikipedia, n.d.). The lyrics are criticizing the point of violence and war, not just in the terms of the Vietnam War, but in most of the wars in

American history. For example, in one of the verses, “For I stole California from the Mexican land, Fought in the bloody Civil War. Yes, I even killed my brothers, And so many others. But I ain't marching anymore,” he directly references the Mexican-American War as well as the Civil War. He lists many others in an attempt to show the sheer amount of wars we have fought and the end of every verse ends with “But I ain’t marching anymore” to show that he is done with the conflict and he pleads for Americans to also stop marching with him (Genuis, n.d.).

The instrumentals behind Phil Ochs in “I ain’t Marchin’ Anymore” are very simplistic. The only sound we hear behind him is one acoustic guitar. It keeps a steady tempo through the whole song and the melody does not change. I believe that this was in an attempt to keep the message as simple as possible. We have war and conflict right now, but we have been keeping at it for far too long and now it is time for it to come to an end, hence, “I ain’t Marchin’ Anymore” (Topic 2014). This line is in reference to a line of soldiers marching into battle. The tone in which Phil Ochs sings in is very straight forward and serious. It is almost as if he is somewhat numb because of all of all of the violence. There really is not too much to dig into this song, but I think that is a very deliberate approach to the writing of this song. It is just a simple cry for all of it to stop.

As we're moving forward in time, “We Gotta Get Out of This Place,” the next song we will talk about, was a song released in 1965 and was written by two writers, a song writing duo, named Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil. It was recorded by The Animals and it peaked at No. 2 on the Billboard charts in the same year it was released (Wikipedia, n.d.). This is an interesting song because it was not initially intended to be a song that would resonate with the Vietnam War cause, however, it would wind up becoming immensely popular among the soldiers. It was a popular rock-love song that was played often at school dances and the writer just intended it to

be a song that was relatable to a lot of average, normal Americans (Wikipedia, n.d.). It was supposed to be about two lovers being stuck in a socio-economic class that was not desirable and just living off of what they had, but dreaming about leaving and starting a new life together. The soldier wound up resonating with it because it was so relatable to the feeling of being stuck in a war zone (Wikipedia, n.d.). The very beginning of the song references the feeling of being in a worn down and dirty place, almost in a scared or angry tone. Then, the chorus of the song introduces the hook: “We gotta get out of this place, If it's the last thing we ever do. We gotta get out of this place, cause girl, there's a better life for me and you,” resonated with the feeling of just wanting to be home with family instead of this cyclical danger of being in war. It boomed among the soldiers (Genuis, n.d.).

The song itself is more of a punk rock type of song. The main instruments that carry the song are a guitar, bass guitar, and drums. The instrumental of the song is somewhat simple and the tempo stays steady through the whole song, while the drum drives the backbeat of the song. The vocals on the verses are one toned with the lead vocalist singing alone in a very “hardened” tone. In other words, he sings like he has been through a lot and is ready to give everything up to start over. As the song progresses, that hardened tone turns into a yelling and aggressive tone, further showing the desperation to leave. The chorus of the song brings in extra voices to create a harmony that makes the texture of the sound very thick. Overall, the tone of the vocals and the instruments in the back of the song are played and sung in an aggressive and exhausted-sounding manner to really stress the message of the song (The Animals 2019).

“The Ballad of the Green Berets,” our next song, was released in January of 1966 and was written by and recorded by Barry Sadler. It reached No. 1 on Billboard’s chart for 5 entire weeks in the same year it came out. It also wound up being named the No. 1 top single by Billboard for

1966, as well (Wikipedia, n.d.). This was just one year after the release of “We Gotta Get out of This Place,” however, the tone and the meaning of the song could not be more opposing of each other. This song is all about praising the war efforts and commending the soldiers for their work and all round is very much in support of the Vietnam War (Wikipedia, n.d.). This was a rare occasion to see a pro-war song because the majority of pop culture was all about the counterculture, anti-war protesters and their music, so it was a big deal that this song became so popular- so popular, in fact, that it made it to No. 1 on Billboard’s chart for 5 entire weeks (Wikipedia, n.d.). The lyrics of the song, when looked at, appear to use very specific rhetoric in their tone. The words used in the verses are very patriotic or buzzer words for how the military viewed its men. The song tells a story of a soldier who is fighting and eventually loses his life, but his family is so proud of him for fighting for “those who were oppressed.” “Brave,” “fearless,” “courage,” are all words with positive connotations used to describe the soldiers in the green berets that the song so highly praises. This song really resonated with the pro-war supporters because it was a change from the usual beating down of the military that was so common in this time (Genius, n.d.).

The music itself supports this idea of noble and honorable soldiers as well, an unpopular opinion at the time. The melody is in the style of an army march. It sounds very clean cut and patriotic. The tone that Barry Sadler sings in is prideful and you can picture him with his chin up and his chest puffed out when he is singing, as if he is very proud of himself and his troops. The snare drum that carries the tune is remnant of the military music, as already mentioned. Barry is also singing alone for the first verse in a very straight toned sort of way. He is then joined by a chorus in supporting harmonies underneath in the second verse. As the song continues, the

harmonies and instruments built in grandeur to really hit the point of being proud of our troops. Horns, guitars, and snare drums can all be heard through the song, building in intensity and to create an overarching mood of the pro-war movement (When The Cowboy Sings 2019).

Moving forward in time again, “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag” was written by Country Joe McDonald, then recorded by Country Joe and the Fish in 1967. We are still progressing now and this is another year later after “Ballad of The Green Berets” was released and the anti-war sentiment was still stronger than ever (Wikipedia, n.d.). This song became one of the most recognizable protest songs because it had such a unique, carnivalesque sound. It is the perfect representation of the counterculture associated with this time period. This song was unique and vulgar with its dark humor references and it took a new mood towards the war that other anti-war artists had not taken before. Country Joe McDonald is playful and sarcastic in regards to the war, he does not take it seriously at all. It presents itself as a “pro-war” song if the lyrics are taken in a literal manner, but when the tone and the instrumentals in the track are added to it, we can hear that it absolutely should not be taken seriously and it is making fun of the war effort instead of supporting it (Wikipedia, n.d.). The story of the lyrics start by addressing young men who are eligible to fight in the war and saying that “Uncle Sam needs your help again.” Then, it goes on to say “Whoopee! We’re all gonna die!” Obviously this is sarcasm and it is a commentary on how death is almost inevitable if you are getting sent over to Vietnam. Every single verse in this song comments on a different aspect of the war and how ridiculous Country Joe feels that it is (Genius, n.d.).

The music behind Country Joe starts off with an acoustic guitar and a piano. The backbeat is the simple but steady drum in the background. Very simple two part harmonies can be heard in the chorus, but it is mainly sung with Country Joe singing the verses alone. It is very

simple, just him singing with those instruments. As the song progresses, we hear carnival sounds playing behind the track. This adds a certain carnival feel to show that the whole concept of the war is silly and not to be taken seriously, just like a carnival. We can also hear, in the studio version, sound effects like machine guns being fired in the background. The main aspect of the music that will allow you to understand the message is the tone in which Country Joe is singing with. He is singing with a swingy, twangy, type of style with not much effort. Overall, the song shows the sentiment of the anti-war movement and gives a new style to the type of music that was coming out in the late 1960s (MonsieurBjornReddy 2013).

The last song that I will be discussing from the time of the Vietnam War is “Last Train to Clarksville.” This song was recorded and released in 1966 by the Monkees, then it topped the Billboard charts in that same year (Wikipedia, n.d.). It is interesting to note that this song has been compared to a song by The Beatles called “Paperback Writer” based on the chord progression as well as the vocal structure of the song. This is important because The Beatles were such an influential group of the time and still continue to be today, many years later. The song, although not directly about the Vietnam War or protests to it, became an anthem to the soldiers who fought at the time. For starters, it is speculated that the place that the song references to “Clarksville” is referring to Clarksville, Tennessee. This is prominent because it was the site of the 101st Airborne Division that was serving Vietnam. Of course, this is just a rumour, but it added to the popularity of the song in terms of the Vietnam War. (Wikipedia, n.d.). It also seems as if it could be about the story of a soldier who gets drafted and has to leave his love and his life back home. The lyric “And I don't know if I'm ever coming home” really drives that message home because this is how a lot of soldiers felt during this war. They didn't know if they would die in combat or ever get to see their family again (Smith 2019).

The music is very upbeat and has a fast paced tempo. The instruments you can hear when listening are a prominent tambourine, electric guitar, drums that carry the backbeat, and a bass guitar. It reflects a chaotic, fast paced time that is unknown. Micky Dolenz, the drummer of the group, sang lead on this song and his tone is very rushed and urgent (Woolhat1 2012). I feel that, again, although not intended, really resonated with the soldiers of the Vietnam War. They felt scared of the unknown which is the mood that the song reflects completely. It starts out with Micky singing alone, but during the build up to the hook there are a few stacked harmonies as well as background vocals such as “oohs” and “ahhs” to add to the music. I believe that these additions add to the intensity of the song and drive the music towards the chorus. There is an addition of the keyboards towards the middle of the song that also adds to the intensity. All of these elements layered on top of each other and the signature guitar riffs all add to the similarities seen between The Beatles and this song (Woolhat1 2012).

All of these songs, plus so many more added to the hectic and climactic era that was the Vietnam War. The country was deeply, deeply divided over whether or not the war was a cause worth backing or not. The counter culture emerged very strongly in opposition to the effort. It was very interesting to take this class when I did because this year, to say the least, has been hectic as well. It was almost eerie to learn about the 1960s to 1970s because of how many similarities there are to the political climate of the country right now. When we watched the Ken Burns documentaries, it almost felt as if we were watching a documentary about 2020 with the police brutality and the protests that occurred. I think doing this assignment but analyzing songs from this generation would be really interesting to compare and see if there are any messages that are concurrent with each other. These songs were all great songs then and they remain to be great now!

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