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The Contributing Factor to a Divisive Society After the Vietnam War

Amy Jin

ABSTRACT

The Vietnam War, which lasted for nearly two decades, was documented in over five thousand pieces of music. These lyrics contained various themes, ranging from patriotism to anger; the complexity behind this popular music recorded and revealed the intricate nature of the U.S citizens' struggle. There has been a good deal of scholarship already on music and the Vietnam War. For example, Anne Meisenzahl and Roger Peace has investigated protest music on the home front, and Doug Bradley and Craig Werner has analyzed the consumption habits of soldiers in the field. What has not been done, however, is a systematic comparison of the two themes. A holistic portrayal of music in this crucial era, therefore, has not been available. With technological innovation, Vietnam was the first war in which soldiers could bring their personalized music to the frontlines. Their playlist was rather different, and thus contributing factors to this difference is worth highlighting. While students back home used music to protest the war, soldiers in the field used music to escape it.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Vietnam War, which lasted for nearly two decades, was documented in over five thousand pieces of music. These lyrics contained various themes, ranging from patriotism to anger; the complexity behind this popular music recorded and revealed the intricate nature of the U.S citizens' struggle. There has been a good deal of scholarship already on music and the Vietnam War. For example, Anne Meisenzahl and Roger Peace has investigated protest music on the home front, and Doug Bradley and Craig Werner has analyzed the consumption habits of soldiers in the field. What has not been done, however, is a systematic comparison of the two themes. A holistic portrayal of music in this crucial era, therefore, has not been available. With technological innovation, Vietnam was the first war in which soldiers could bring their personalized music to the frontlines. Their playlist was rather different, and thus contributing factors to this difference is worth highlighting. While students back home used music to protest the war, soldiers in the field used music to escape it. The Vietnam War was one of the major themes of rock and roll music on the home front. Protest music against the Vietnam War peaked during the 1965s when President Johnson called for 50,000 more ground troops to be sent to Vietnam and increased the draft to 35,000 each month. This further escalation resulted in large scale demonstrations accompanied by the first peace concert. What was thought to be a quick and decisive battle seemed to be dragging on indefinitely. This escalation also signified in a change in the music that general people back home listened to. When the war first started, music was rather patriotic, however, as the war

progressed, vocabulary in the lyrics became increasingly defiant against the government. During that time, music was an outlet for the general public to express their feelings of betrayal, fear, and anger.¹

This music was intimately related to domestic social and political movements. Influenced largely by the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist movement, the New Left formed and became one of the most prominent revolutionary forces in the 1960s. The New Left, its members mainly consisted of domestic college students who were disappointed by the government, sought to counter violence with violence. No longer displaying unquestionable obedience to the government, they formed ideas about participatory democracy. Rather than abstract theorizing like the old left that was prevalent in the 1930s-1940s, they preferred practical efforts. In April of 1965, Paul Potter, president of the SDS, addressed the first national demonstration against the Vietnam War. He proclaimed that "The people in Vietnam and the people in this demonstration are united in much more than a common concern that the war be ended. In both countries there are people struggling to build a movement that has the power to change their condition. The system that frustrates these movements is the same. All our lives, our destinies, our very hopes to live, depend on our

¹ Moores, Sean. "Vietnam: The First Rock and Roll War." Stars and Stripes, available at: <https://www.Stripes.com/news/special-reports/vietnam-stories/1966/vietnam-the-first-rock-and-roll-war-1.438304>.

Anne Meisenzahl and Roger Peace, "Protest Music of the Vietnam War," United States Foreign Policy History and Resource Guide website, 2017, updated March 2019, <http://peacehistory-usfp.org/protest-music-vietnam-war>.

ability to overcome that system.” In the eyes of the protesters, the problem was much deeper than a simple Vietnam War. They were angry with the “system”, which was the government that wouldn’t give black people and females the rights they deserved, the government that decided to employ millions of people in a war, and the government that made questionable choices and resulted in a financial crisis in the nation. It was a combination of the American activists and the Anti-war rebels, and that together, they called for a global order to fix the issues that would change the world.²

One of the most famous anti-Vietnam songs was Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son”, written in 1969. An American rock band active in the late 60s through the early 70s, their songs were mainly devoted to criticizing the war.³

We can see this in both the sound and the lyrics of the song. The song started with a clean drum-line that was later added by a rambling of guitar-line. Joined afterward by an unpredictable vocal, the introduction of the song set the stage perfectly for the Vietnam War. In just 30 seconds of the song, one felt that hell broke loose and that unpredictable consequences followed. The chaos in this song accurately portrayed the conditions in the home front. It was a decade of violence, confusion and most importantly, upheaval. The Vietnam War seemed to be the only uniting force, gathering together critics from people of different gender, race, and age.

The lyrical content is extremely critical of the war, too. It asserts straightforward criticism towards the rich man by saying that the poor are the ones dying in this battle that they had started. The song also emphasized the difference between the “Fortunate sons” and the “Unfortunate sons” by

protesting on how even though the rich people started the war, the poor were much more influenced than them. While the frustrated U.S citizens were sent to the hot jungles and fought abroad for a lost cause, the sons of the rich politicians dodged another bullet. ‘Some folks are born, made to wave the flag’, means that once a child was born into a poor him, he is destined to go to war without any dispute, whereas ‘Some folks are born, silver spoon in hand’, means that rich kids who are born with money are safe from the horrors of the war. This reflected on how partial the Selective Service System, which had enormous power in deciding who had to go and who had to stay, was. They were under pressure to exempt potential draftees who were born from rich families. This led to fearless support from rich people since they faced little to none consequences.⁴

This song, which was about class, poverty, anti-military, and anti-government, attracted listeners across the country and served as an outlet for their anger. An anthem that was wholly devoted to criticizing the government and the war, this song was rated as the number one music that people in the home front listened to.

While these movements were going on domestically, things on the field were rather simpler. It was not chaotic with different protests going on, but simply- hell. As mentioned before, soldiers who were drafted were usually poor people. Before entering the war, most of them envisioned an experience completely different. The poor wanted to believe that there was more to life than this. They hoped to escape their poor family and achieve something on the battlefield. Maybe fed up with their family who constantly pushed them to pursue a passion that they despise, or maybe deceived by how glorious the soldiers looked in the TV ads, they had gone on a journey that would later be their worst nightmare. They were fighting in the hot jungles of Vietnam, a

² Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

³ “The Twenty Best Vietnam Protest Songs.” Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, available here: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/twenty-best-vietnam-protest-songs>.

⁴ Creedence Clearwater Revival, “Fortunate Son,” Willy And The Poor Boys album (1969), available here: [https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oJmEjo_aVM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oJmEjo_aVM)

hundred miles away from home. The cruelty of the war already took a toll on them, as they were dramatized from seeing the flash of their closest companions blow up into pieces in front of their eyes from accidentally stepping on a trigger. To make things worse, they lived in fear every single day. They were not used to fighting the gorilla war- a type of warfare which you fight in the ditches and sometimes will not even be able to see where the enemies were coming from. One soldier recollected that they could go months without even seeing one singular enemy. In the jungles of Vietnam, every day was the same. Soldiers needed to always be alert for unforeseeable dangers.⁵

On the battlefield, one of the soldiers' favorite songs was "We Gotta Get Out of this Place" by The Animals. Rated as the number one music on the playlist of soldiers, this song was very different from the music that people played on the home front. This piece of music shed some light on the psychological damages of the soldiers.

Not a chaotic introduction like "Fortunate Son", the introduction of "We Gotta Get Out of this Place" was by contrast lethargic. Different from having a range of vocals and instruments, "We Gotta Get Out of this Place" chose a constant beat. The constancy of a draconian war-like environment matches the tone of this song. It almost felt like that soldiers were so physically and mentally tired of listening to a song with constant changes in pitches, and they chose a plain piece of music to listen to when they have downtime. Adding to this, because they need to constantly stay alert, listening to this soothing music that wasn't at all exciting helped with relaxation.

The lyrical content of the song had nothing to do with war. To a surprising degree, the lyrics never even mentioned the war. The main idea of this song was about how a young man wants to run away with his lover and how much resent he had

toward his dying father. This familiar anger towards dad, and this desire to run away with a lover was the main theme of how life used to be, no matter how dissatisfying ordinary it was. Mentioning war in the lyrics would only conjure up feelings of anxiety, and pain, and thus the music they preferred avoided using war terms. "There is a better life" repeated again and again in this song, and it gave hope to the soldiers. One day, they will get out of here, and they will return to the lives they once shared with their family.⁶

Rock and roll music indeed spoke the hearts of millions of people during the Vietnam War, it also enhanced the divide between those who went to war and those who stayed behind. By comparing the music that different groups listen to, one can infer that the young people in the 60s had a distinctly different set of experiences. Traditionally, it is often assumed that heavily bothered by war, the young people had a comparable set of experiences, and wonder why politics became so divisive later. It is without a doubt that they are already living in different worlds during the war, and experiencing different things. While young people back home protested for freedom, change, and an end to the war; soldiers on the field were preoccupied with their worst nightmare. Their 60s experience is different from college students, and the proof is in the music. Maybe that the far right, and far-right white supremacist terrorism, has its origins amongst Vietnam veterans, who lived through something that no one truly understood.

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⁶ The Animals, "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," Columbia Records single (1965), available here: <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=wJVpihgWE18>

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