



THE IMPACT OF WAR ON **music**

Written by William E. Dietzel

It is said that war is 99 percent boredom and 1 percent terror. One of the things that helped many of us survive the boredom was the music. Whether listening to the selections broadcast by the AFN DJs, taking in one of the shows that visited Southeast Asia or listening to music at the local Service Club, the music was always there. And sometimes, it brought us a little bit closer to home

The late 1960s and early 1970s, according to some observers, was a time of "sex, drugs, and rock and roll." Certainly, the period saw an explosion in the recording industry and the kinds of music that appealed to the public. Music serves widely as a symbol of the '60's youth culture itself. Some identify this period as the heyday of protest music: music aimed at awakening public awareness of social issues, particularly the Vietnam conflict.

You're sad and depressed, happy and reminiscent, angry

and disappointed, and calm and melancholy. What can make you feel these feelings all at the same time? Music. In each era, each culture and each lifetime, people can find some kind of identity in the music they listened to. Through music, politics, controversies, current events were heard. The effect of this was a dramatic change in society and life forever.

So, then, how did the Vietnam War affect the music? Or how did the music affect the people? To best illustrate these effects, it's best to take a look into the style of a musician before and after the war, and a detailed look into the meaning of a song lyric. But, first, some interviews of what various Vietnam veterans thought about the music of that time.

Many veterans enjoyed the music that sprouted out of that era. There were such artists as Jimi Hendricks, Janis Joplin, the Jefferson Airplane, The Doors, The Beatles and many others. There were songs like, "Eve of Destruction," "War," "Soldier Boy," "Give Peace a Chance" and others as well. A Vietnam veteran says, "I think the music was radical and helped start heavy drug use." Another veteran recalls, "It seemed the war affected the music. A lot of songs were about the war or what was going on at home here. It seemed directed toward getting the men out, and the negative aspects of the war. Most of the younger generation at that time were against the war and wanted it over." Many of the songs also encouraged drugs and "free love."

Many songs were about the war, and mostly were against it. It was because of the war that many artists thought it was necessary to write and sing about the evils of war, and the happiness of peace. So, the war very obviously affected the music of that time.

Similarly, the music also affected the people. It preached peace, protest, freedom. Not all of the people of that era enjoyed the music: "As far as I'm concerned, much of the music from that era was just crap!" reported one Vietnam veteran I interviewed. Many, however, thought that the music was good and important. "The music back then was

the BEST! It wasn't all that psychedelic stuff either, though there was a lot of that, too. I think the culture of any era is heard in its music. Good music."

Now, let's take a look at the true meaning of the lyrics written by the artists of that time. During the Vietnam War era, many people were affected in different ways by the events that had occurred overseas. This created an antiwar atmosphere when the support was needed the most. Many different artists, such as Jim Morrison and Country Joe McDonald, started to protest the war through their music. The music became much more harsh and negative. Sarcastic, negative lyrics began to appear much more frequently during these times as views on the war changed. For example, in the song, "Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die Rag" by Country Joe McDonald (1968) he sings:

"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 . . ."

This song was meant to show how confused and disoriented the soldiers were going into combat.

The music lyrics satirically dehumanize the young men going into combat, labeling them as unimportant identities:

". . . Sent your sons off before it's too late
You can be the first one on your block
To have your boy come home in a box."

This music foreshadows the destiny of the many in the armed forces. The music became vivid images of what the future held for them. Vietnam created and caused great changes within the music industry, changes that brought on new types of music like psychedelic rhythms, and lyrics that gave a haunting and vivid telling of the Vietnam War. Those songs brought out the strongest reactions to the war.

"I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die Rag" was even played on Armed Forces Radio and described how the war affected American life:

"Come on, mothers, throughout the land
Pack your boys off to Vietnam
Come on, fathers, don't hesitate
Send your sons off before it's too late."

You can hear the sarcastic tone in this verse, and, at the same time, see how the music industry may have influenced or supported the negative attitude of the American public toward the war.

Another song, however, written after the war, "Drive On," by Johnny Cash, is a song that looks back on Vietnam and tells about how a man is trying to move on in his life:

"Drive on, it don't mean nothing
My children love me but they don't understand
And I got a woman who knows her man, drive on
It don't mean nothin' it don't mean nothin', drive on."

Both songs, read in their entirety will fully show to you the negative view the music industry had of Vietnam. Both songs, by two different artists, in their own style, criticized the war, one concerning the attitude toward the war during its time period and the other of the after-effects of the war. Music has always had a finger on the pulse of the issues of its era; the music of the Vietnam War period shows this well.

1966

This year's No. 1 hit, "Ballad of the Green Berets," sung by Sgt. Barry Sadler, was a reflection of America's growing involvement in Vietnam, but the anthem could have been Frank Sinatra's "Strangers in the Night." Interestingly, the first, contrived for the television group, the Monkees, also hit the charts, and the power of the media was soon to sweep away the power of patriotism. Elsewhere on the charts, a new sound was going strong: "California Dreamin'" by the Mamas and the Papas, went "California Dreaming," and The Beatles were saying things their way with "We Can Work It Out." "Wild Thing" and Bob Dylan's "Rainy Day Woman" were 12 and 35, respectively. Simon and Garfunkel were "Homeward Bound."

1967

The year was a wild and woolly year in music, with a huge mix of styles and offerings, ranging from ballads to rock to Motown to psychedelia. The United Kingdom's invasion continued with Lulu's "To Sir With Love" from the classic Sidney Poitier film. Doors sang "Light My Fire," and an Australian pop group, "The Seekers," hit the charts with "Georgy Girl." Social conscience was bursting out all over, and Aretha Franklin wanted (and got) a little "R-e-s-p-e-c-t."

1968

It was a for "Born to Be Wild" (Steppenwolf), a turbulent time in rock 'n' roll. Raw sounds competed on the charts with instrumentals and sweet melodic tunes underlaid with solid gold Motown rhythm like the Supremes' "I'm a Love Child" and Dionne Warwick's "Do You Know the Way to San Jose?" The Bee Gees were heard in Brisbane, and Simon and Garfunkel went from lyrical strength to catchy strength. And nobody could write off the prolific Beatles, whose every song seemed to levitate to the top of the charts.

1969

It let the sunshine in, as we let down our "Hair," musically speaking, and tried to get back to where we once belonged. Even Elvis developed a social conscience, as his baby cried in the ghetto. 1969 was an eclectic, electric mix of sounds and styles from the Rolling Stones to Creedence Clearwater Revival to Tommy James & the Shondells to Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder and all the way over to Bob Dylan. And we heard it all on AFN!

1970

The year was absolutely huge on the pop music scene, and much of its popularity is still strong today with heaps of real classics from Simon & Garfunkel, Stevie Wonder, The Beatles, Aretha and B.B. King still on the pop airwaves. And, of course, the lasting impression of "War! Huh! Good God, y'all! What is it good for?"

1971

Jeremiah was a bullfrog? What's going on? Who's the man? As well as being cool, 1971 had folk singers like Joan Baez and Judy Collins scoring hits, as well as Carole King, Janis Joplin, Al Green and the Temptations. And Mr. Timeless, Rod Stewart, shook out his hair (it's my theory that he only knows one song, but will rework it until he gets it right. But then, I'm not a "chick").

1972

We said "Bye, bye" to American Pie, a transitional year in pop music that expressed anguish, rage and hope. Songs of spirit like "Lean on Me" and songs of love like "First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" still stir my emotions, and "Brandy" stirs something else (but that's another story for another day). One 1970s anthem summed up 1972 well, "Morning Has Broken" by Cat Stevens.

1973

The American focus on the POW-MIA issue had "Yellow Ribbons" at the top of the tree. And musically, 1973 could have been in no other decade but the 1970s with Tony Orlando and Dawn, Carly Simon, Jim Croce and none other than a youngish John Denver tracking up the charts and Roberta Flack killing 'em softly. And, of course, 1973 had one of my personal all-time favorites, "Midnight Train to Georgia" (Fort Benning, anyone?).

1974

Mainstream pop was tucking away the war protests in 1974 as it ushered in mellow with the Stylistics, Olivia Newton-John and Gordon Lightfoot. Barbra Streisand made an anthem of "The Way We Were." Elton John's "Bennie and the Jets" typlified the new soft rock sound.

1975

Mellow and laid back sum up 1975 sounds, and it was all about "Feelings, nothing more but feelings," served up by the likes of Glen Campbell, Captain & Tenille, the Eagles, John Denver, Frankie Valli and Neil Sedaka. Elevator music would never be the same again. 🎵

