

American Popular Music: From Patriotism to Protest

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Equipment Needed: Audio/Video Equipment for Power Point presentation and CD player.

Abstract: (see attached page)

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Popular music is often a reflection of the society in which it is produced. On the other hand, society itself is often influenced and motivated by the popular music of its time. In this paper, I will compare how the popular music of the World War II era and the popular music of the Vietnam era reflected and influenced America's political attitudes and ideologies. Whereas the popular music during WWII (between 1942 and 1945) was patriotic, nostalgic, and supportive of the war effort, the popular music during the Vietnam Conflict took on a decidedly different attitude, reflecting cynicism, influencing protest, and emphasizing the tragedies and evils of war.

American Popular Music: From Patriotism to Protest

America's popular music reflects the society in which it is produced and influences the society that listens to it. An obvious connection exists between popular music and a particular generation's vision, values, and outlook. Because popular music is a reflection of, as well as an influence on, an era's beliefs, ideals, and values, it can provide an interesting gauge of our country's political, social, and cultural climate and predict prevailing attitudes and behaviors. Examining the popular music of various eras in America's history allows us to *listen to* the changes that punctuate the shifts between one generation and the next. This is especially evident when comparing America's popular songs from World War II and the Vietnam War.

America's late involvement in World War II, combined with an improving economy that had been nearly in ruins for over a decade, sparked resurgence in American nationalism. However, only 20 years after WWII, the conflict in Vietnam seemed to evoke a radical departure from that spirit of nationalism. Anti-war protests, anti-government jargon, flag burning, and draft dodging--these were commonplace occurrences in America during the Vietnam conflict. In only two decades, the American outlook on war, the notion of the enemy, the belief in our government's use of force, and the definition of patriotism had all changed dramatically.

These vastly different views of war, American pride, and patriotism are easily recognizable in the popular music of their respective eras. Songs to rally support for the

war effort filled radio station play lists during the 1940s. Songs of protest and cynicism dominated the charts in the mid-to late '60s and early '70s. The times influenced the music, and the music influenced the times.¹

World War II marked the first attack on the U.S. in nearly two centuries. It also threatened the balance of world power and promoted ethnic cleansing: Hitler planned to conquer the entire continent of Europe and effectively murdered over six million Jews². Likewise, WWII brought about the manifestation of nuclear weapons, which were used for the first time to annihilate the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In all, an estimated 40 million people were killed during WWII.³

During a time of destruction, death, and chaos, one might expect America's popular music to focus on the tragedies of the war. However, on the surface, American popular music seemed unaffected by the catastrophic events happening in the world at this time. For the most part, it was upbeat and lively, "with melodies in major keys and the climaxing in lyrics alluding to the message 'America is great'."⁴ Unlike WWI, when popular music focused on only pro-war and battle songs, the music of WWII was far more diverse in subject matter. It included song topics from the Pearl Harbor attacks to the new role of women in society.

Much of the music during WWII appeared to be an attempt to divert attention from the war itself. Likewise, the death of Tin Pan Alley--which had been the publisher of and driving force for popular music during WWI--in the mid 1930s gave way to the

¹ Perhaps the most recent example of this might be the numerous songs that immediately followed the events of September 11, 2001 by musicians such as Paul McCartney, Bruce Springsteen, and others.

² William I. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*. Touchstone Books, 1990. 117-20.

³ Shirer, 25.

⁴ Patrick Garrity. "Music and World War II." *Music and the Remembrance of War*. <http://www.dickinson.edu/~history/product/garrity/section2.html>. . Oct 10, 2002.

newer jazz, big band, and rhythm and blues movements which produced the majority of the WWII era's music.⁵ Nevertheless, WWII music definitely supported America's involvement in the war and provided encouragement, support, and motivation for the nation and its military.

Despite the smaller output of music during WWII due to the American Federation of Musicians' strike from 1942 to 1946, American musicians continued to produce popular songs.⁶ The music created during this period provided diversion, comfort, and made a significant connection to people's everyday lives and concerns. It also proved to be a motivation for the public and military alike. Many songs, because of the recording strike, were produced just for the military and shipped overseas.⁷ Yet even with the strike, there was no lack of war songs back home.

The vast number of WWII songs supported American soldiers, American home-front war efforts, and America's involvement in the war. Numerous composers and songwriters focused on denouncing and ridiculing Hitler and the Nazi regime as well as fostering animosity toward the Japanese. American patriotism and nationalism were at a high point, and this was clearly evidenced by the music of the period.

American music pushed the war effort forward with optimism. Written on the day of the Pearl Harbor attacks and released only nine days later, Cliff Friend and Charles Tobias' "We Did It Before and We Can Do It Again" became one of the most inspirational and popular songs of the decade. The song relies on America's success in WWI and predicts another American victory in WWII. Helping to memorialize one of

⁵ David Ewen. *Great Men of American Popular Song*. Prentice Hall, Inc., 1970. 260-1.

⁶ Ewen, 261.

⁷ Scott Johnson. "The War Years." *Louis Armstrong Discography*.
<http://www.satchography.com/waryears.html>. 1999. Oct. 10, 2002.

the most tragic events in American history, "We Did It Before and We Can Do It Again" also encouraged American troops and helped to relieve some of society's doubts, stress, and fears.⁸ Other songs about Pearl Harbor--such as Frank Luther's "Remember Pearl Harbor," a march-style composition, which references other American battles for liberty such as the American Revolution and the Alamo, and Doctor Clayton's "Pearl Harbor Blues"--were released and popular.⁹

The message in "We Did It Before..." carried through to much of the wartime music that followed it. American pride and patriotism became important subjects of interest. Though written in 1917, Irving Berlin's composition "God Bless America" was not performed until 1938. Kate Smith's rendition of Berlin's song gained increasing popularity and by the end of WWII had become America's "second national anthem."¹⁰ The theme and lyrics of "God Bless America" are indicative of the resurgence in American nationalism that took place during the war years. Music, like the posters and advertisements of the day, bolstered feelings of patriotism and service for the good of the country.

As America's sense of nationalism increased, more and more songs revealed the country's anger and disgust with its WWII enemies. In 1942, before the horrors of the Holocaust and Hitler's crusades throughout Europe were revealed to the American public, Spike Jones and His City Slickers recorded Oliver Wallace's "Der Fuehrer's Face." This satirical piece mocks Hitler and parodies the melody from the Nazi anthem

⁸ The Authentic History Center. "The Music of World War II." <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music01.html>. Oct. 12, 2002.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ewen, 261.

“Horst Wessell Lied.”¹¹ Likewise, America's rage and rather racist national criticisms and feelings towards Japan were expressed through song. Little musical or lyrical analysis is required to understand that America's conflict in WWII was as much against Japan as it was against Germany and the European Axis Powers. The titles alone of such songs as “We’re Gonna Have to Slap the Dirty Little Jap” by Bob Miller and “You’re a Sap, Mr. Jap” by the Andrews Sisters are evidence of Americans' loathing for the Japanese, for their part in the war, and for their actions at Pearl Harbor.¹²

In addition to denouncing America's enemies, this era's popular music helped raise American confidence, bolster support for the war, and boost military morale. In fact, songs of encouragement and support for America's military personnel were commonplace during WWII. Frank Loesser's “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” is perhaps the most famous, a battle song that promises if our soldiers “praise the Lord and pass the ammunition,” then “we’ll all stay free.”¹³ “Keep ‘em Flying,” a U.S. Air Force slogan, was turned into a jingle in support of U.S. pilots. Among other songs popularized on military camps was “Salute to the Army Air Force” and those that commended government and military officials, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and General Douglas MacArthur.¹⁴

¹¹ The Authentic History Center. “The Music of World War II.” <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music03.html>. Oct, 12, 2002

¹² The Authentic History Center. “The Music of World War II.” <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music01.html>. Oct, 12, 2002

¹³ The Authentic History Center. “The Music of World War II.” <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music07.html>. Oct, 12, 2002

¹⁴ The Authentic History Center. “The Music of World War II.” <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music06.html>. Oct, 12, 2002

Perhaps the most common theme in WWII war songs was the idea that freedom was worth supporting and fighting for. Like “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition,” which states that by fighting our soldiers are protecting freedom, songs such as Irving Berlin’s “Any Bonds Today” and Frank Luther’s “Remember Pearl Harbor” reminded Americans that sacrifice and determination would not only protect invaded European countries from fascism but protect America’s liberty as well. While “Remember Pearl Harbor” reiterates the importance of men who have died in the past, men who “died for liberty,” a verse from Berlin’s “Any Bonds Today” (performed by Kay Kyser) suggests that non-fighting Americans likewise had a responsibility to protect America’s freedom: *Bonds of freedom that’s what I’m selling today. We’ll be blessed if we all invest in US. Scrape up . . . Buy a share of freedom today.*¹⁵

Along with patriotism and a love of liberty, popular WWII-era music includes songs that honor commitments to family and other loved ones. Nostalgic works such as “Goodbye, Mama (I’m off to Yokohama),” by J. Fred Coots, and “Dear Mom,” by Maury Coleman Harris, express soldiers’ longing for home and the anticipated pain of separation from loved ones.¹⁶ Jack Leonard’s jazz tune “We’ll Meet Again” offers an optimistic soldier’s attitude about his fate: *We’ll meet again/Don’t know where/Don’t know when/ But I know we’ll meet again some sunny day.*¹⁷ Holiday music likewise reflected soldiers’ cautious optimism and their desire to be reunited with family and friends. Perry Como’s

¹⁵ Legacy Recordings. *The Words and Music of World War II*. <http://legacyrecordings.com/wwII>. Oct. 12, 2002.

¹⁶ The Authentic History Center. “The Music of World War II.” <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music02.html>. Oct. 12, 2002.

¹⁷ The Authentic History Center. “The Music of World War II.” <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music07.html>. Oct. 12, 2002.

“Ill Be Home For Christmas”¹⁸ and Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas”¹⁹ became two of the most popular American songs of all time.

A fair share of WWII-era songs were directed to and intended for American women. As tens of thousands of American men fought in Europe and Japan, women’s roles in America changed. Women began taking jobs in factories and businesses, raising children by themselves, and filling in for male entertainers and athletes. Likewise, many women played an important part in the war support effort by fund raising, working in munitions factories, and, in rare cases, even enlisting in the military. Musicians did not let women go unnoticed. “First Class Private Mary Brown” and “Pistol Packin’ Mama” are odes to those women who supported the war efforts.²⁰ Rosie the Riveter, a fictional cartoon character that represented the “toughness” of American women, inspired Redd Evans and John Jacob to write a song about her, simply titled “Rosie the Riveter.”²¹

As composers and lyricists paid tribute to the working women of America, they likewise reminded women that enduring affection helps win wars. Benny Goodman’s “There Won’t Be a Shortage of Love” references the depletion of supplies at home but reassures soldiers that “there won’t be a shortage of love when we love each other so much.”²² Redd Evans’ “He’s 1-A in the Army and He’s A-1 in My Heart” is another love song that reaffirms a woman’s loyalty to her military lover.²³ Songs like “No Love,

¹⁸ Garrity.

¹⁹ Ewen, 161.

²⁰ The Authentic History Center. “The Music of World War II.” <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music04.html>. Oct. 12, 2002.

²¹ Ibid.

²² The Authentic History Center. “The Music of World War II.” <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music07.html>. Oct. 12, 2002.

²³ The Authentic History Center. “The Music of World War II.” <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music06.html>. Oct. 12, 2002.

No Nothin’,” by Harry Warren and Leo Robin, encouraged American girls and women to remain faithful to their men while they were away from home fighting.²⁴

For the most part, big band and jazz musicians produced lighthearted and optimistic war music. Their singers crooned sugarcoated lyrics about how America would win the war, what the American public could do to help, how women’s roles were making a difference, and why German and Japanese aggressions would be defeated. At the same time, another genre of music began to rise in popularity. Folk groups, which were typically small three- and four-piece ensembles, demonstrated a dramatic shift from the 20- to 30-piece jazz and big band orchestras.²⁵ Making their mark in the recording industry and popular music field, these folk groups generally had a few guitars, one or two vocalists, and perhaps an accordion or some small percussive instruments.²⁶

Size was not the only thing that separated folk groups from the big bands and jazz groups of the 1940s. The music itself differed: with no horns, no woodwinds, and no polished vocals, folk groups offered ordinary voices and home-trained musicians’ playing simple songs on acoustic guitars. Yet it is the lyrical content that most strikingly differentiates folk music from that of the big bands. Folk music’s messages were considerably more straightforward and bold. Folk musicians Pete Seeger, Josh White, and Woody Guthrie each expressed his feelings about the war from a singularly individual viewpoint. The songs these men produced directly reflected “exactly what was on their minds.”²⁷ In Pete Seeger’s “Dear Mr. President,” he writes, “Now, I hate Hitler and I can tell you why/He’s caused lots of good folks to suffer and die/He’s got a way of shovin’

²⁴ The Authentic History Center. “The Music of World War II.” <http://www.authentichistory.com/audio/ww2/ww2music04.html>. Oct. 12, 2002.

²⁵ Garrity

²⁶ Ewen, 247.

folks around/I 'figger' it's about time we slapped him down/Give him a dose of his own medicine/Lead Poison!"²⁸ The lyrics in "Dear Mr. President" provide a detailed and graphic representation of Seeger's anger towards Hitler and the Nazi Party. Like Seeger, other folk musicians' lyrics were generally more overtly political than those of the big bands' songs.²⁹

After WWII, folk music became more and more popular, and the big band era began its decline. During the 1950s, traditional American folk music fused with rhythm of blues and created yet another genre of popular music. Pioneers of this new genre included Chuck Haley, Chuck Berry, and Elvis Presley, who shaped what was to become commonly known as *rock 'n' roll*. But the innocent playfulness of 50s' style rock and roll took a decidedly political turn during the Vietnam Era.

The "conflict" in Vietnam began during the Eisenhower administration in the early 1950s but didn't culminate into a full-fledged war until 1963. Though never classified as a "war," the Vietnam conflict took more than 50,000 American lives.³⁰ Support for America's involvement in Vietnam was a far cry from the support shown during WWII. Characterized by protest, revolt, and civil disobedience, rock and folk music during this period tended to denounce America's war effort in Vietnam and demonstrate a pessimistic attitude about America's chances of winning. Much of the era's music shared a common anti-war theme. Songs with titles such as "Piss on Johnson's War," "Napalm Sue," and "Hitler Ain't Dead" clearly exemplify contempt for America's

²⁷ Garrity.

²⁸ History of Songs. "Music of WWII." <http://www.fortunecity.com/tinpan/parton/2/history.html>. Oct. 12, 2002.

²⁹ Garrity.

³⁰ Neil L. Jamieson. *Understanding Vietnam*. The University of California Press, 1993. 16-18.

occupation of Vietnam but were never released on vinyl because their lyrics were considered too objectionable.³¹

While some anti-war songs never made it to mainstream radio stations or music stores, plenty more were recorded, received major radio airplay, and became hits. Roy Orbison's "There Won't Be Many Coming Home" warns the nation that the already staggering number of American deaths in Vietnam would only increase. Far different from the patriotic tributes to Franklin Roosevelt and other American political and military figures during WWII, Orbison's lyrics criticize President Lyndon B. Johnson and question his motives and leadership: "Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"³² Barry McGuire's "Eve of Destruction," predicts the eventual destruction of the world because of senseless war and nuclear weapons. Like Orbison, McGuire condemns politicians and the hypocrisy of the war and the US government.³³

The Vietnam War fostered discontent with, and a lack of trust in, the American government, and the popular music of that era reflects those sentiments. Bob Dylan, a folk-rock artist and one of the most popular pop musicians in American history, was an influential songwriter for opponents of the war. Though his songs rarely make direct references to Vietnam itself, they often point to political abuses of power, the government's entanglement with Vietnam, and the pursuit of absolute power by those already in positions of power. "Masters of War" details the reasons for war by those who create it and how war can only benefit those in power as the soldiers risk their lives and die for the their leaders' ideals. Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" is a reflection of the growing national "disenchantment" with the government. Whether Dylan intended

³¹ Lee Anderson. *Battle Notes: Music of the Vietnam War*. Savage Press, 2000. 21.

³² Anderson, 31

to become a pioneer for the American anti-war movement is unclear; he claims he never meant to do so, but his songs were especially popular among anti-war activists and were often sung during protests and demonstrations.³⁴

Anti-war and anti-government protests gained national attention as more and more demonstrations occurred during the 1960s. These protests sometimes served as the inspiration for songs. Graham Nash's "Chicago" expresses outrage at the apparent injustice shown towards anti-war demonstrators in Chicago in 1968. Among the demonstrators for whom this song was written were Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and Black Panther leader Bobby Seale, who were later prosecuted and convicted in a "sham" trial in 1971.³⁵

During the Vietnam era, popular music focused on the political differences that divided our nation and our nation's families, as well as an economic and class structure that protected some and exploited others. Draft dodging, which spawned family conflicts and a new variety of wartime family separations, also inspired songwriters. Victor Lundberg's "Open Letter to My Teenage Son" describes the misunderstandings between a father and a son who refuses to fight and the father's eventual banishment and disowning of his son.³⁶ Folk singers Peter, Paul, and Mary, not considered to be a politically conscience group, recorded a cover of "Cruel War." Though a more traditionally sympathetic war song chronicling the pain of separation that war brings, this

³³ Anderson, 32.

³⁴ Anderson, 32-33.

³⁵ Anderson, 33-34.

³⁶ Anderson, 34-35.

rendition seemed to imply that the Vietnam conflict was not worth the suffering it caused.³⁷

The value of a family's political connections and economic status serve as topics for Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son." Singer/lyricist John Fogerty uses this satirically titled song to highlight the struggles of a typical Vietnam draftee and the inequity of the draft selection process. In this song, Fogerty sings, "It ain't me/It ain't me/I ain't no *senator's* son/ I ain't no fortunate son." Though not specifically denouncing the Vietnam conflict, Fogerty points out that children of political figures and the wealthy were protected from the draft and never had to worry about front-line duty in Vietnam.³⁸ Senators and men with money could make sure their sons remained safe in America, while the children of the middle- and lower-classes were forced to fight in Southeastern Asia's jungles.

As the conflict in Vietnam continued, popular music began promoting the ideals of non-violence and pacifistic resistance. In fact, peace became a popular rally cry, both in songs and for those who demonstrated against the war.³⁹ John Lennon's 1969 hit "Give Peace a Chance" would become, perhaps, the most influential "peace" song of the era. Lennon, who also wrote "Imagine," another pacifistic song, likewise released "Happy X-Mas (War is Over),"⁴⁰ which includes the lines "Let's stop all the fighting . . . War is over, if you want it/War is over now."⁴¹ By 1969, the ideal of peace was so interconnected with popular music that an event featuring a "Who's Who" of rock musicians took place in New York in August of that year. Woodstock, a free three-day

³⁷ Anderson, 33.

³⁸ Anderson, 22-23.

³⁹ James Perone, *Songs of the Vietnam Conflict*, Greenwood Press, 2001, 8-14.

⁴⁰ Anderson, 39.

concert, was promoted as proving the young generation's dedication to the values of peace, love, and rock and roll.⁴²

In addition to peace songs, popular musicians continued to remind audiences of the finality and pointlessness of the war. Death was not an uncommon topic for Vietnam-era songwriters. The Doors' "The Unknown Soldier" criticizes mainstream American society and its insensitivity to the faceless, nameless soldiers who are dying daily in a senseless war. The song's lyrics imply that although the average American can see the "Bullet" that "strikes the helmet's head" on the TV news, he is detached from the reality of the experience and acknowledges only that "it's all over/ for the unknown soldier."⁴³ Country Joe MacDonald's "I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag," a satirical "recruitment" song for reluctant draftees and their parents, promises every new soldier a trip home in a body bag: "Yeah, come on all you big strong men/ Uncle Sam needs your help again . . . Be the first one on your block/To have you boy come home in a box." The song's gruesome message is juxtaposed against an upbeat, lively melody.⁴⁴

Despite an outpouring of protest songs, the Vietnam era was not without a few patriotic pro-war songs. Sgt. Barry Sadler, an army vet who had been stationed in Vietnam, wrote "Ballad of the Green Berets" in 1965. The song, which pays tribute to the elite "green beret" troops, reached number one on the Billboard charts and sold millions of copies.⁴⁵ Though other patriotic songs were written during the Vietnam era, few gained any success. It was clearly the protest songs, whether condemning the war or

⁴¹ John Lennon. Ono Music Inc./Northern Songs Ltd. 1971.

⁴² Perone, 15-16.

⁴³ Anderson, 40.

⁴⁴ Anderson, 42.

⁴⁵ Anderson, 87-88.

ridiculing the hypocrisy of the American government, that dominated popular music during the Vietnam-war era.

America is a nation of remarkable contrasts. The political and cultural differences that separate the WWII generation from the Vietnam-conflict generation prove just how much can change in two decades. Though varying viewpoints and values of Americans from the 1940s and 1960s are evidenced in textbooks, movies, and television footage, it is perhaps in our country's popular music where these shifts are most fully recognized.

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