Music and Society: How Protest Music Shaped the 1960s

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When the United States military officially entered combat units into Vietnam on March 8th, 1965, it marked the beginning of one of the tensest and most divisive eras in the country's history. The deployment of troops into the country only added to the cultural fire that engulfed the country with Civil Rights movements becoming ever prominent in the minds of Americans (Abramson, et al. 2018). At the same time, music had entered a period where the topics addressed by artists had grown with the teenagers who had listened to them in prior years. No longer were teens dancing to upbeat love songs. (Abramson et al. 2018). The tensions of the 1960s allowed artists like Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan to explode onto the scene with ballads and stories about apathetic conscripted soldiers fighting for something they didn't believe in against their will. (Deaville, 2018). The popularity of this music makes sense for the time. This was the reality faced by teenagers and young adults in the 1960s. In their minds, the government had overstepped their boundaries in drafting them to fight overseas, where they may or may not agree with or even know why they're fighting (Deaville, 2018). In this paper I will discuss the roots of how protest music came to be in the 1960s, major artists of the era, and the public perception of the music. I believe it is crucial to understand the connection between protest music and the Vietnam War, as it provides the best way to understand American life and culture in that period.

Literature Review

Understanding the Decade

In a purely musical context, it makes sense to understand the sixties not simply by the chronological start and end points of the decade, but by the rise and fall of the outspokenness of the youth of the time period. University of Texas history professor Jerome Rodnitzky (1999)

argued that it is better to understand the 1960s from a musical standpoint as beginning in 1963 and ending in 1973, with the withdrawing of troops from Vietnam. (p. 105). The protest music of this era is most often colloquially referred to as folk music. Carleton University music professor James Deaville (2019) pointed out that the Vietnam war in the public mind stands out from previous wars in America. It was not just professionals who sang on behalf of the people; now, anyone with a guitar and a pension for songwriting and could get listeners was considered a folk singer. As Pete Seeger stated, "if folks sing them, they're folksongs" (Seeger, 1965 as cited in Rodnitzky, 1999). Deaville identified that "People took a personal stance on the war, for or against, as the rising counterculture encouraged activism among young men and women" (Deaville, 2018, p. 212). Rather than being united against something like fascism, the public was more divided and more interested in expressing their feelings in any way they could. This relatability, as stated before, contributed to the rise of folk artists and reviving folk music as a whole in the United States.

Roots of Protest Music

The folk music that emerged in the era of the Vietnam War traces its roots to one significant place. Protest music as a concept cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its roots in music from black enslaved populations. Wilkes University sociology professor Dr. Andrew Wilczak (2023) described the music of these enslaved populations as "a method of spreading news, a spiritual outlet, and a way to communicate routes along the Underground Railroad" (p. 16). This music followed its creators from the southern United States to urban black communities, where it began to gain popularity among the wider population (Haycock, 2015). Wilczak (2023) pointed out that opposed to the music of the Vietnam era, revolutionary music from black communities, especially during the Civil Rights era, was "overwhelmingly

spiritual, framing resistance to racial oppression either actively perpetuated or passively accepted by the government as a challenge that one can overcome through sheer perseverance and persistence" (p. 16). As he further assessed, the spirituality of the music of the civil rights era is less revolutionary in a way that inspires its listeners to take up arms, but rather to address the injustices brought about by the government. These injustices are similar to what made the music so popular with the under-30 population during the war.

Key Figures

The Civil Rights movement and the folk music that was about to gain popularity crossed paths at a seminal moment in American history: the 1963 March on Washington. There, before Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous speech, Bob Dylan performed a rendition of his song "Only a Pawn in Their Game" to the crowd of onlooking protestors. This performance symbolized Dylan's broad appeal across both eras, and he may well be the most important singer/songwriter of the early 1960s. Dylan was catapulted to fame through the folk group Peter, Paul, and Mary's cover of his ostensibly pacifist anthem "Blowin' in the Wind" (Rodnitzky, 1999). Dylan's music pre-1963 carried a broad message of support for the civil rights movement (Rodnitzky, 1999). However, as the Vietnam became more present in the lives of Americans, the decrying of it became more prominent in the lyrical content of folk music, including Dylan's. His 1964 song "The Times They are A Changin'" clearly outlines his anti-war message (Deaville, 2018). The anti-war message was spread by other important artists, too. One of the most outwardly left-wing opponents to the war was Phil Ochs. His views can be seen in the title of his 1965 album *I Ain't Marching Anymore*, which contains a litany of aggressively pacifist songs. At the same time that album was released, however, Dylan suddenly switched his tune; both literally and

metaphorically, he put down the acoustic guitar and picked up the electric guitar and merged genres with the ever-rising popularity of rock n' roll (Rodnitzky, 1999).

Public Perception

The public perception of folk and protest music was quite possibly its biggest catalyst in how impactful folk music became. For example, the public's reaction to Dylan's symbolic gesture at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, in no simpler words, "split the sixties" (Wald, 2015, as cited in Deaville, 2018, p. 215). Dylan's fame had made him a decisive figure in the public eye, and abandoning what had made him a beloved figure influenced the publuc greatly. The artists recognized this power, too. Following the trio's cover of Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind*, Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary argued that their music could "mobilize the youth of America in a way that nobody else could" (Aronowitz, 1964, p. 32, as cited in Rodnitzky, 1999, p. 107). Yarrow's optimistic opinion of his group's music as a tool for change is contested. Haycock (2015) argues that "the mythology, philosophical foundations and intent of protest musicians to change the world, through the protest music they produce, is clearly linked with the hope and ontological foundations of adult education for social change" (p. 432). In other words, while the intent of protest music may be to empower social change, in actuality, this is rarely the case. This does not mean, however, that the music did not affect people in some way. For soldiers in Vietnam especially, radio was a lifeline for soldiers to escape from the horrors of a war-torn country. Bradley (2018) delved into the topic of the entertainment of soldiers abroad in depth. The main radio station for soldiers was AFVN, which divided soldiers over its quality due to its "easy listening" and "pop standards" (p. 197). Contrarily, American prisoners of war recount a North Vietnamese propaganda radio station intended to decrease morale, which had the opposite effect. The DJ, Hanoi Hannah, played protest music from America, which was then

absorbed by the POWs in the famed “Hanoi Hilton”. Soldiers felt that this music spoke to them more compared to what the US government allowed their radio stations to play (Bradley, 2018).

Discussion

As we can see, the music of the 1960s tied in heavily with the Vietnam war in numerous ways. The music itself, from its origins in the southern black populations, conveyed a message that was relatable and spoke to the listeners. Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs’ left-wing charged anthems allowed them to become superstars, though others believed they held more influence than they really did. However, they did affect the fighters abroad in ways that actually helped them overcome the enemy rather than succumb to their attempted torture. This information provides an interesting perspective to the 1960s. The musicians of this era can be interpreted in several different ways, either as champions of certain beliefs, supporters of the soldiers, or even as “public pedagogues” as Haycock (2015, p. 427) put it. Bob Dylan can certainly be seen as the first two, due to his music not only serving as a major voice of the generation, but also how his music helped the soldiers of the war. POWs interviewed stated that Dylan’s music was played by Hanoi Hannah, once again to its opposite intended effect (Bradley, 2018). Furthermore, understanding the roots of the music helps gives a better understanding to why the music had such a big impact on the era. This is one of many implications that understanding the decade this way has. Never again would a perfect storm of domestic tensions create such an environment for music like this to become popular like it did. While rock n’ roll had steadily progressed and even become more nonsensical with progressive rock becoming mainstream, folk music was a realistic and approachable genre that appealed to those who needed it, whether that be everyday citizens wanting peace or soldiers in captivity. It just so happened that the most amount of people needed to hear it during the 1960s and into the 1970s. This is not to say rock and folk did not

merge as most music genres tend to. As stated before, Bob Dylan's demonstration and physical abandonment of acoustic folk music led critics to dub his new electric style as "folk rock" (Rodnitzky, 1999, p. 109).

Conclusion

The protest music of the Vietnam era is an important, decade-defining phenomenon that characterizes the population of the US in a way that no other decade has. It can be argued that the 1960s is perhaps the most important decade in American history since the 1770s, and at the forefront is the music, the listeners, and the people behind it. It is crucial to use the music of the era to fully understand the 1960s, and how it allowed America to navigate the politically tense climate of the civil rights era into the Vietnam war. While some may argue against calling music a "key player" in the decade, or argue against the impact it had on society, it only takes one interaction with anyone who has lived through that time period to understand what sort of imprint the music of Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Joan Baez, Phil Seeger, and many others left on them and their loved ones. As stated before, the implications in understanding the 1960s through the lens of the music of the era helps provide a greater cultural understanding of the political climate of the decade and how the music represented the public majority.

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