

# **The Transformative Power and Influence of American Popular Music Lyrics During the Vietnam War in the Sixties and Seventies**

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## **Abstract**

The transformative power and influence of popular music lyrics amid social movements, specifically throughout the Vietnam War with the rise of the counterculture movement in the United States, has too often been dismissed by political science scholars. The implications of lyrics and the extent to which popular artists of the Vietnam War era were referencing a particular cause proves the role that popular music can play within social movements. This research project attempts to make a unique contribution to the niche area of inquiry with an analysis of the impact of lyrics as a tool for imposing social change. The overarching theme expected to stand out among the popular music of this time is one of rebellion and change. Research includes an in-depth empirical analysis of music from the period of interest, readings, and application of scholarly articles pertaining to the influence of popular music as well as the political climate during the Vietnam War, including interpretations of lyrics based on common knowledge and personal experience engaging with the popular music of the era.

**Keywords:** Vietnam War, Music, Social Movements

## **1. Introduction**

Over the course of the 2019-2020 academic year, I studied the value of using popular music as a vessel for meaning. Within my learning, the importance of listening and engaging with the lyrics of popular music in order to make sense of the world has been brought up numerous times. This has led me to wonder about the transformative power and influence of American popular music lyrics throughout different eras. Every generation faces a unique cultural and/or political movement that distinguishes it from those before. I have always been curious about the influence of popular music lyrics throughout the Cold War, specifically during the Vietnam War era. While I was not born in the United States, this period is of particular interest to me seeing as the majority of my favorite songs and musical genres came to fruition during the sixties and seventies in the United States. Indeed, I grew up listening mainly to American popular music as do so many others worldwide. It's fascinating how the music and the lyrics you find meaningful during your youth will stick with you throughout your life and even have an impact on your political inclinations. Despite enjoying music from the sixties and seventies, I have never truly thought about the implications of the lyrics I enjoy and the extent to which the composers are referencing a particular cause. As a student of political science, I cannot help but wonder about the impact of popular American music lyrics within social movements, specifically the counterculture movement that took place throughout the Vietnam War. An overarching theme stands out among the popular music (ranging from psychedelic rock to folk and country) of this time, one of rebellion and change. In the following essay, I will explore the use of self-expression through lyrics as protest in the U.S. during the sixties and seventies.

## 1.1. Hypothesis

Popular music, specifically those during the sixties and seventies coinciding with the Vietnam War, along with the implications of lyrics, can have a lasting impact on social movements; the song lyrics found in several popular music genres in the U.S. discussed below have been identified as such. While there exist multiple channels widely available to incite social change in contemporary America (such as social media, television broadcasting, and podcasts to name a few), lyrics, which were also printed prominently on LP album covers widely available to the public, were a powerful and even favored tool of activism during the sixties and seventies. What made lyrics so powerful throughout this era was the widely accessible nature of popular music.

## 1.2. Assumptions

- Music can be used as a vessel for meaning.
- Listening and engaging with the lyrics of popular music is a useful tool for making sense of the world.
- Music, and specifically the meaning of lyrics, enjoyed during the developmental stages of youth can have a lasting impact on future political inclinations.
- The lyrics of popular American music during the sixties and seventies expresses the widespread discontentment felt among the youth across the nation due to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.
- The lyrics of popular music from varying genres reflect current political climates.

## 1.3. Methods

This research evaluates the use of popular music as protest during the counterculture movement of the Vietnam War in the United States. The lyrics of five respective artists (Bob Dylan, The Grateful Dead, The Doors, Cat Stevens, and Johnny Cash) were evaluated and displayed as evidence backing the claim that music served as a platform to install change across America throughout the Vietnam War. Interestingly, all of these artists preferred live performance over studio recordings due to the level of engagement with listeners made possible at concerts. The fact that these artists all belong to different genres demonstrates the fluidity and importance of spreading awareness through music. It is not difficult to see what the artists stand for when closely analyzing the meaning of their lyrics. Many social movements came to life at concerts during this time period. Indeed, the artists showcased in this research openly asserted their opinions at concerts through direct contact with the masses which made way for a divisive platform to incite change.

## 2. Historical Context

The United States has always prided itself on the concept of freedom and equality. Naturally, the country that has come to be recognized as a world power took it upon itself, as guided by charismatic political leaders, to assimilate the fundamental values of democracy, which have set it apart from so many others, across the globe. Over the course of history, numerous nations began to engage in communist practices, which ultimately went against the foundation of capitalism that was strongly set forth in North America. The United States became increasingly involved in a worldwide fight against the spread of communism as this poses a serious threat to capitalism. What started off as a display of soft power against a movement viewed as antithetical to Western capitalist life soon grew into a series of full-fledged proxy wars between the United States and the Soviet Union that spanned over much of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1965, the first act of war was set forth in Da Nang, and so began the Vietnam War<sup>1</sup>. “Over the next several years, as the United States escalated its ill-fated involvement in that conflict, hundreds of thousands of Americans joined in mass protests across the country, repulsed and outraged by the terrible bloodshed taking place in Southeast Asia”<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, with the increased presence of television in modern homes, the population had access to alarming content, and, because of that, the Vietnam War is commonly referred to as the first televised war. “Though the anti-war movement had begun on college campuses at the dawn of the 1960s, more and more people joined in opposition to the war in the latter half of the decade, as television brought images of its atrocities into American homes in a new level of excruciating detail”<sup>1</sup>. This allowed individuals to observe for the first time what really goes on abroad in

wartime and realize how immoral it can be. Subsequently, a cultural revolution was born: the counterculture movement of the sixties and seventies, whose members are also recognized as hippies.

Society's contemporary issues are always reflected in the lyrics of popular music. Songs often act as an intermediary between the people and government, allowing citizens to make sense of the world. Confusion and disarray reigned throughout the Cold War era. Self-expression through lyrical messages, therefore, facilitated the externalization of the nation's deepest thoughts and feelings. This can be explained by the fact that one's musical choices often reflect one's view of the world. So, it's only natural that a movement of counterculture revolving around transformative music lyrics broke out in the sixties and seventies during a time of high tension alongside the Vietnam War. This countercultural movement was led by the youth of the era, as most anti-establishment movements are. Undoubtedly, the most crucial part of human development occurs in the teenage years. Being exposed to a wide variety of musical genres will surely allow for children to become well versed in political dilemmas across generations. Oftentimes, the youth of one era feels misunderstood by their older counterparts. The rise of new and, literally, unheard of musical genres can and does lead to a cultural divide between generations. Therefore it becomes difficult for all citizens to relate to one uniform cause.

During the sixties and seventies, the United States experienced a rise in paternalistic government tendencies. There was an overwhelming presence of American troops overseas in an attempt to eradicate communism. As a result, the leading themes of the counterculture movement were peace, freedom, and equality. The influence of media and the use of music lyrics as a display of discontent became the most commonly used tool by activists. Reactions took form in music festivals such as Woodstock in 1969, as well as large peace gatherings, sit-ins, peaceful marches, and numerous acts of civil disobedience. This unique form of rebellion used lyrics to disperse content while expressing anger which allowed citizens to create their own individual meaning. The so-called hippies were against U.S. involvement overseas and the merciless killing of other humans. In response, they were promoting peace and love. "But hippies' rejection of mainstream American culture, and their distinctive brand of rebellion—including their long hair and beards, colorful style, psychedelic drug use, love of rock music and eco-conscious lifestyle—would leave a lasting impact on the nation in the decades to come"<sup>1</sup>. The role of music here was to lead listeners to action by encouraging personal reflection with popularized lyrics. The hippie or beatnik lifestyle allowed individuals to form bonds over a central idea. What brought the group together was more than similar tastes in music, it was the belief in peace. And so they became members of a dedicated movement to act out against the American government. It was understood by the hippies that finding peace at home should be the priority of the government rather than espousing American ideals abroad. This was largely reflected in the lyrics of popular American music of the sixties and seventies.

### **3. Influential Artists**

#### **3.1. Bob Dylan**

Bob Dylan, whose music offered a blend of American folk and blues, was a champion of revolutionary song. During the Vietnam War, his music was often called upon as a leading voice for action, using his lyrics to appeal to the emotions of his audience as a reactionary tool for change; "[...] he believed that the majority of the protest songs of the 1960s, a time of middle-class affluence, were 'rhetorical,' expressing individual feelings of formless discontent with particular issues"<sup>2</sup>. In an attempt to direct the masses towards organized action, the lyrics of his songs displayed current issues in a meaningful way for others to connect and relate to. "The issues with which Dylan struggled also represent themes that can be traced back to the myths and parables upon which this country was founded"<sup>2</sup>. Albeit, the negative effects of paternalism were being felt across the nation as many young individuals found themselves having to enlist and participate in a war which they did not agree with.

Two of my personal favorites by Bob Dylan, "Blowin' In The Wind" and "The Times They Are-A-Changin'", speak to the harsh and misguided practices of the U.S. government abroad. With a strong appeal to emotion and the use of melodic anaphoras, his lyrics had a wide and lasting impact. "Songs of this type often featured complex narratives that [...] may not have had a chorus at all. By telling an educational story, rhetorical songs drew attention to a single incident or political issue"<sup>2</sup>. Dylan was largely influenced by multitude of individuals: singer and songwriters of Western folk music, poets, ethnomusicologists, and essayists such as Walt Whitman, Woody Guthrie, John Steinbeck, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Alan Lomax, all of whom drew particular attention to political issues and used their words as a means for getting their points across, and essentially to plead the government to consider changing its course of action<sup>2</sup>. Most of Dylan's work promoted equality with an emphasis on compassion. The hippie movement is often recalled to have formed its roots around the notion of emancipation, self-reflection, and

change within. It would appear that “[...] Dylan focused on the need for people to consider injustice by examining their consciences”<sup>2</sup>. Dylan’s peaceful demeanor and pleasant voice worked to his advantage in spreading awareness of the injustices being imposed overseas. By directly engaging with his audience, Dylan’s lyrics were almost educational. “Dylan’s early rhetorical songs were especially effective when they focused upon the feelings of their frequently misunderstood central characters”<sup>2</sup>. These feelings of rage and anguish were reflected in society at the time when the majority of the youth’s cries went ignored. As he became more mature, Dylan’s music was not so outright with its messages, he favored his audience to be increasingly introspective and consider their emotions before taking action, so as to act meaningfully and with reason<sup>2</sup>. As a matter of fact, “In subsequent efforts, Dylan would become subtler, but he continued to require his audience to look critically within themselves”<sup>2</sup>. It’s easy to see how such a brilliant man could have such a widespread impact on a cultural movement aimed towards peace. These tactics spurred discussion among fans and brought the movement forward.

### 3.1.1. evidence

#### Blowin’ In The Wind, Bob Dylan, 1963

How many times must a man look up  
Before he can see the sky?  
Yes, ’n’ how many ears must one man have  
Before he can hear people cry?  
Yes, ’n’ how many deaths will it take till he knows  
That too many people have died?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind  
The answer is blowin’ in the wind (17-24).

#### The Times They Are-A-Changin, Bob Dylan 1964

Come senators, Congressmen  
Please heed the call  
Don’t stand in the doorway  
Don’t block up the hall  
For he that gets hurt  
Will be he who has stalled  
There’s a battle outside  
And it is ragin’(22-31).

As displayed in these two excerpts, Bob Dylan’s prose-like songs were extremely effective in gathering the attention of his audience. By directly addressing those in power to make changes, Dylan became a recognized political actor of sorts. Dylan was able to raise awareness and call listeners to action by using carefully curated lyrics, which are often recognized as poetry. In fact, Bob Dylan was the 2016 recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature as a form of recognition for his influence on society through the power of lyrics.

## 3.2. The Grateful Dead

Another great example of the dispersion of ideas through creativity would be counterculture rock band The Grateful Dead. Emphasizing peace and equality, with songs verging on something like psychedelic poetry, the band was able to grow a cult-like following of devoted fans. “Undoubtedly, Grateful Dead stands out as a band that rose to popularity with its counterculture roots. The band follows a set of ground rules, values, and culture not unlike the counterculture of the ’60s. [...] Grateful Dead offers a blend of hits that expresses emotion without having much interest in the profit that follows”<sup>3</sup>. For The Grateful Dead, the music industry was not about fame or wealth, their purpose was to spread peace and love by making people happy, and allowing them to feel like they were a part of a whole<sup>3</sup>. This of course was contradictory to the typically capitalist American society. For that reason, the band, along with their followers, were seen as deviant. In addition, the mainstream media began to associate The Grateful Dead with psychedelic drug use which only furthered their disapproval by older members of society. Indeed, LSD was central to the counterculture movement which was simultaneously psychedelic. However, “Deadheads can resist mainstream society [...] through drug use or subverting capitalism by bartering, sharing and communality”<sup>4</sup>. The notion behind the act of straying from predisposed norms allowed for emancipation within society. The band’s psychedelic appearance accentuated by

colorful attire was largely recognized by fans across the country, allowing people to unite and gain a sense of association with the movement. By spreading pleasure and happiness, many musicians such as The Grateful Dead were able to instill peace in a time of fear.

### *3.2.1. evidence*

#### US Blues, The Grateful Dead 1974

Red and white, blue suede shoes, I'm Uncle Sam, how do you do?  
Gimme five, I'm still alive, ain't no luck, I learned to duck.  
Check my pulse, it don't change. Stay seventy-two come shine or rain.  
Wave the flag, pop the bag, rock the boat, skin the goat.  
Wave that flag, wave it wide and high.

Summertime done, come and gone, my, oh, my.  
I'm Uncle Sam, that's who I am; Been hidin' out in a rock and roll band.  
Shake the hand that shook the hand of P.T. Barnum and Charlie Chan.  
Shine your shoes, light your fuse. Can you use them ol' U.S. Blues?  
I'll drink your health, share your wealth, run your life, steal your wife.  
Wave that flag, wave it wide and high.

Summertime done, come and gone, my, oh, my.  
Back to back chicken shack. Son of a gun, better change your act.  
We're all confused, what's to lose?  
You can call this all the United States Blues.  
Wave that flag, wave it wide and high.  
Summertime done, come and gone, my, oh, my.  
You can call this song  
The United States Blues (1-17).

In the lyrics displayed above, it is not difficult to see the message that The Grateful Dead strived to convey: the inherently American practice of glorifying war is unjust. Many of the popular artists of the sixties and seventies wrote songs that told the tale of a highly dramatized main character in order to catch the attention of listeners and pique their interest through their lyrics. Leaving room for interpretation added to the ever so admired eerie nature of The Grateful Dead. Indeed, the psychedelic use of instruments paired with meaningful and relatable lyrics made The Grateful Dead a unorthodox leader of the counterculture movement in the fight to end the Vietnam War. Devoted fans of the Grateful Dead formed a unique subcultural group that abstained from the social norms ingrained within American culture.

### 3.3. The Doors

There were many ways in which artists were capable of distilling their opinions across America. The Doors, a psychedelic rock band, used rather extreme measures to express their feelings towards the Vietnam War and an overbearing government. "Nearly twenty-five years ago, in the middle of a season in which rock & roll was seeking to define itself as the binding force of a new youth community, the Doors became the house band for an American apocalypse that wasn't even yet upon us. Indeed, the Los Angeles-based quartet's stunning and rousing debut LP, *The Doors*, flew in the face of rock's emerging positivist ethos and in effect helped form the basis for a schism that still persists in popular music."<sup>5</sup> With no real commitment to the cause, finding themselves at the opposite end of the political spectrum in comparison to the government, The Doors were seen as a radical group and largely disliked by the authorities and older audiences. Despite their frantic nature, this band was still able to influence culture in a positive way: "the Doors had fashioned an album that looked at prospects of hedonism and violence, of revolt and chaos, and embraced those prospects unflinchingly."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in times of great despair, great action is often required in order to see any sort of change (think of Martin Luther King's persistence to advance racial equality with the civil rights movement). Their efforts proved fruitful: many outraged individuals attended Doors concerts without fail to jive with others over their mutual discontentment with the political climate.

### 3.3.1. evidence

#### The Unknown Soldier, The Doors 1968

Wait until the war is over  
And we're both a little older  
The unknown soldier

Breakfast where the news is read  
Television children fed  
Unborn living, living dead  
Bullet strikes the helmet's head

And it's all over  
For the unknown soldier  
It's all over  
For the unknown soldier (1-11).

While most of The Doors songs demonstrated some level of discontentment with society, “The Unknown Soldier” was outrightly speaking to the atrocities of the Vietnam War. The use of aggressive and unprecedented melodies made for an especially deviant band. This seemed to work well in proceeding with the counterculture movement. Their music was harsh and eerie, their lyrics were forceful and decisive. The Doors refused to follow mainstream societal conventions and this was largely reflected in their style. Their live concerts were often used as an opportunity to misbehave and further their message. Jim Morrison, the band’s lead singer, was arrested on numerous occasions for willfully disobeying the law at mass musical gatherings. His rebellious nature guided his lyrics and demonstrated his anger with authoritative power.

### 3.4. Cat Stevens

Folk artist Cat Stevens also displayed discontent with the political climate in the United States throughout the Vietnam War. Specifically with his song “Peace Train”, in which Stevens pleaded all citizens alike to board the same “train” or rather the movement towards peace. “ ‘Peace Train’ [...] could not have been more differently received, becoming an anti-war anthem. The last song in *Teaser and the Firecat*, ‘Peace Train’, was one song of many popular protest songs from the 1960s and early 1970s, and was released one month before John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’ ”<sup>6</sup>. The escalation of the problem gave way to a different type of war at home, one of cultural revolution through access and transparency of information. The Vietnam War was the first majorly televised conflict, and the unprecedented access to information worked against the establishment, bringing the horrors of war into the homes of Americans and turning public sentiment against the government.

### 3.4.1. evidence

#### Peace Train, Cat Stevens 1971

Now I've been crying lately,  
Thinkin' about the world as it is  
Why must we go on hating,  
Why can't we live in bliss

'Cause out on the edge of darkness,  
There rides a Peace Train  
Oh Peace Train take this country,  
Come take me home again (35-42).

Cat Stevens music was typically characterized by its upbeat and flowy melodic tempo. Such a style not only made his songs tasteful to the ears but easy to follow and remember as well. Recognition and patterns are of the utmost importance within social movements as they allow for individuals to really gather around a uniform cause. His lyrics

follow a smooth and articulate pattern that had a lasting impact on those who listen. “Since peace is an inner-feeling, this song aims to project peace through its sound, first quietly, through the simple acoustic riffs and bass line, leading to the harmony, a brief break (a characteristic of Yusuf’s songs), and then it explodes. The lyrics are also a projector of the hope for peace”<sup>6</sup>. Stevens was seen as a peaceful man who advocated for inclusivity in order to create a prosperous and equal society.

### 3.5. Johnny Cash

Johnny Cash, often referred to as “The man in black”, has always been regarded as a strongly opinionated country/folk artist. His songs, which often resemble poems telling stories of pain and suffering, were beloved by many Americans in the 60s and 70s. In 1972, Cash famously performed “What is Truth” for President Nixon during a visit to the White House. The song strongly criticizes U.S. military involvement abroad and questions the meaning of freedom in contemporary American politics. Johnny’s voice was influential in the development of the counterculture movement, and this act had a positive effect on the fight to end the Vietnam War. Other artists such as Neil Young, particularly with his song “Ohio”, also used direct responses, outrightly criticizing the U.S. government.

#### 3.5.1. evidence

##### What is Truth?, Johnny Cash 1971

A little boy of three sittin’ on the floor  
Looks up and says, “Daddy, what is war?”  
“Son, that’s when people fight and die”  
The little boy of three says “Daddy, why?”  
A young man of seventeen in Sunday school  
Being taught the golden rule  
And by the time another year has gone around  
It may be his turn to lay his life down  
Can you blame the voice of youth for asking  
“What is truth?”

A young man sittin’ on the witness stand  
The man with the book says “Raise your hand”  
“Repeat after me, I solemnly swear”  
The man looked down at his long hair  
And although the young man solemnly swore  
Nobody seems to hear anymore  
And it didn’t really matter if the truth was there  
It was the cut of his clothes and the length of his hair  
And the lonely voice of youth cries  
“What is truth?” (10-29).

Johnny Cash was undoubtedly a more dark and stern artist in contrast to some of the more colorful artists discussed in this paper. With his particularly somber demeanor, Cash conveyed sorrow in all of his music. While the counterculture movement was formulated around an upbeat and colorful theme, Johnny’s music was nevertheless effective in spreading awareness of the violation of human rights taking place in Vietnam. “This artist’s iconic image in fact depends on his ability to stage the idea of irresolvable ambivalence – to illuminate how that model of cultural ambivalence, [...] is an important paradigm for U.S. popular music and for American identity. Cash embodied the tensions in the American character without resolving them. And, in doing so, he encouraged listeners to engage with our most fundamental national paradoxes [...]”<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, Cash recognized the hypocrisy in America’s fight to end communism through brutal warfare.

#### **4. Outcomes**

As mentioned by Shellie M. Clark, “The study of the effects of music on Cold War politics and the relationships of people to their own governments provides evidence of the power of music to influence historical events, and illuminates the lengths to which government agencies have gone to control that influence”<sup>8</sup>. The sixties and seventies were a crucial period in the development of contemporary American culture. Indeed, “With the exception of the two world wars, 1968 was surely the most explosive and divisive year of the 20th Century. As the year dawned, the Summer Of Love had mutated into the winter of discontent. Revolution was very much in the air, all around the world”<sup>9</sup>. The influence of music in leading cultural movements made way for progress and forever changed the course of history. Without a doubt, “The songs captured the emotions of people for and against the war and reflected the mood of an increasingly diverse country amid dramatic social and political change”<sup>10</sup>. This reinforces my point that music is one of the most efficient tools to spread unpopular opinions and start social movements. Because of the lighthearted nature of popular songs in the sixties and seventies, it was easy for musicians to make a long-lasting impact on society. Appealing to emotion with the use of rhetoric is by far the most effective way to spread knowledge.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The importance of music in society cannot be stressed enough. Not only can it be used as a tool to disperse ideas, but it can also be used as a coping mechanism to make sense of the world. Songs have been used throughout history to call citizens to action. The rhetoric used in popular music has proven to be a divisive tool amidst social movements, inciting action, and acting as a guiding voice of change. Music is still relevant in today’s social movements. I encourage you to consider the music you listen to and discover the messages they are portraying. What is your movement? Some of the most prominent contemporary political musicians include: Eddie Vedder, an anti-war activist who predominantly expresses his frustration with American society through his folk rock; John Mayer with a multitude of pop rock songs such as “Waiting On The World To Change” pleading for inclusiveness of all races and genders; and lastly J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar, both hip hop artists who frequently call out police brutality while striving for institutional reform. All these artists, no matter their generation, have stood up against something they fundamentally believed in. So, I plead with you to listen and engage with music, because the music and lyrics of the present day will in due course of time become a true reflection of our Zeitgeist.

#### **6. Addendum**

This essay was originally written in the fall of 2019. In the interim, there have been a number of events which have drastically changed the course of history. I would like to take this opportunity to further stress the transformative power and influence of popular music lyrics. During the social isolation we faced as a responsive measure to cease the spread of the novel CoronaVirus, music proved its value by connecting individuals across the globe and instilling a sense of happiness when all hope was felt to be lost. While nothing can compare to a live concert, it was heartwarming to see artists chime in virtually to provide their audiences with much needed relief. Following the death of George Floyd, America was awakened to the extent to which racial inequality has become institutionalized. I firmly believe that music can act as the flame that ignites revolutionary change. This was made evident in the sixties and seventies. I strongly encourage all to introspect and recognize their place among the Black Lives Matter movement in order to be an active participant in the fight to end racism.

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