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Social Impacts of Popular Culture During the Vietnam War

There's battle lines being drawn. Nobody's right if everybody's wrong
Young people speaking their minds. Getting so much resistance from behind
It's time we stop, hey, what's that sound. Everybody look what's going down.¹

Released in 1967, Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" immediately climbed its way towards the top of the Billboard Hot 100 and within weeks it was being played on every radio station throughout every city in America. So why in the world would the song quoted above, written about children protesting a city-wide curfew in Hollywood, become such an instant classic? Well unknowingly to Stephen Stills, the lead singer of Buffalo Springfield at the time, he had just written one of the protest anthems for the entire Vietnam War. That is not to say that the backlash against the war was non-existent prior to the release of "For What It's Worth", but the song served as fuel to reignite the flame. With lyrics that bring attention to civilian suppression and a chorus that calls for people to acknowledge the problem at hand, the song was the perfect embodiment of the populations viewpoint towards the Vietnam war.

¹ Buffalo Springfield. (1967). For What It's Worth [CD]. Columbia Studios: Charles Green and Brian Stone. (1966)

So, what is it that caused American citizens to use this song as their rallying cry? And why does it always seem to be music, movies, or artwork that causes people to come together during hardships? For centuries, people have used popular culture as their outlet of self-expression and it is in times of dissension that this self-expression is needed most. It is often seen that some form of popular culture, whether it be music or artwork, is the best measure for people to show this expression, which then allows for new ideals to stem from these works. In this paper, I will argue that popular culture is imperative to a population overcoming and learning from a time of economical, political, and social turmoil. Focusing on the Vietnam War, I will demonstrate how common it is for people to rely on popular culture for hope and education during times of crises and it is often that music, movies, or artwork are those outlets.

By dissecting the messages of other popular songs such as “War (What Is It Good For?)” by Edwin Starr and “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival while also examining books like *The Vietnam War and American Music* written by David James and *Songs of the Vietnam Conflict* by James Perone, I will support my thesis and deliver evidence on the importance of popular culture when it is needed most. In addition, I will use the film *Apocalypse Now* to demonstrate the ways pop culture can serve as a learning tool after a crisis.

This examination will be vital to the understanding of populations during times of struggle and allow the reader to recognize how important popular culture is to the advancement of society. By dissecting the Vietnam War in great detail, I hope to provide insight on how populations and popular culture may intersect in future conflicts.

Background

Before I critique the works and impacts of music and theatre in 1960s/1970s America, it is necessary to understand why there was such a backlash against the Vietnam War in the first place. The United States entered Vietnam in March of 1965 with the goal of stopping Communism from spreading further than it already had. And while this was a slightly contentious decision, it was made worse by the imposition of a draft for servicemen and the introduction of mass media. The ability to have 24/7 coverage of the war reach every citizen back in the United States showed how horrific Vietnam really was. Images of Vietnamese civilians dead in the street and videos of soldiers in the midst of combat were being broadcasted nightly to every home in America. It is reasons like the ones mentioned above that there was such a heavy anti-war mindset upon America's entrance into the Conflict.

While it was not surprising that civilians were heavily opposed to this war, it was very surprising as to which citizens were the ones taking action. One might imagine that parents or grandparents with children being sent to Vietnam would be at the forefront of these protests, but in actuality, it was college students. Students who were also in the midst of the Civil Rights, the Free Speech, and the Anti-War Movement were often the individuals who were standing in front of local government or military buildings demanding that an end be put to the war and the troops be called home.

To understand why college aged students were considered the stereotypical Vietnam War protestor, we need to look into the prior decades. According to [statista.com](https://www.statista.com), in the early 1940's approximately only 4% of the entire United States population held a college degree.² In the

² Percentage of the U.S. population who have completed four years of college or more from 1940 to 2017, by gender. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics>

1950's, that number jumped to 6.2% and in the early 1960's that number rose to 10% with more than six million actively enrolled.³ Because of this enrollment surge, universities implemented many rules to try and maintain order on their campuses, including the censorship of what could be written in student newspapers during the peaks of the Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements.⁴ It was these censorships that motivated students to overcome and allow their voices to be heard, and the Vietnam War was the perfect conflict to put their free speech desires to use.

Research - Songs

In James Perone's *Songs of the Vietnam Conflict*, Perone attempts to answer the philosophical question of whether music reflects society or shapes it. He admits in the beginning of his novel that he believes it is a combination of both, that "music can be both reflective of society at large and influential among society" (Page 6). By using the Vietnam War as his focus, Perone builds his case with statistics from the Gallup Polls which stated that the percentage of Americans describing themselves as Doves (or someone who opposed the war) rose from 26% in February 1968 to 42% one month later.⁵ And between Spring of 1967 and Spring of 1968, the number of Americans taking part in anti-war demonstrations nearly doubled from 150,000 to 300,000 (Skolnick 1969).

To test whether this was solely a coincidence or a result of influential music being created, I looked at the Billboard Top 100 Songs in only 1967 and 1968. What I found is that numerous anti war songs made appearances on the list in both of those years. Songs such as "For What It's Worth" by Buffalo Springfield, "I Feel Like I'm Fixing to Die, Rag" by Country Joe

³ U.S. college enrollment statistics for public and private colleges from 1965 to 2016. (2018). Retrieved September 5, 2018, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/183995>

⁴ C. (n.d.). Public Higher Education in America. Retrieved September 5, 2018, from <https://www.cuny.edu/site/cc/higher-education/free-speech.html>

⁵ Perone, J. E. (2001). *Songs of the Vietnam conflict*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

McDonald, and “The Unknown Soldier” by The Doors, all written with the idea of shedding light on the horrors of the Vietnam War, were some of the most popular songs in America at the time. Unfortunately, there is no way to discover whether these songs are the cause of an increase in doves and protests or if the increase in protests caused the songs to be played on a more regular basis. Regardless, the statistics taken from Gallup Polls and the appearance of these songs on the top charts show that a strong correlation existed between the rapid growing anti war movement and songs produced to draw attention to war itself.

In order to discover why anti-war songs saw such successes in the late 60’s and early 70’s it is necessary to understand the messages these songs were conveying. Edwin Starr released his hit single “War (What is it Good For?)” in 1970 to protest the Vietnam conflict. The song begins with lyrics that read, “Oh, war, I despise, 'Cause it means destruction of innocent lives, War means tears to thousands of mothers eyes, When their sons go to fight, And lose their lives.”⁶ Edwin Starr’s ability to lyrically capture the potential brutality of the war undoubtedly caused a shift in the way some people perceived it. By creating the appearance of speaking directly to every mother with a child in the Vietnam War, Starr imposed a sense of fear in many Americans that persuaded them to become opposed to the Conflict. This song was so influential that it climbed all the way to number one in America in August of 1970.⁷ Just five months later, Starr released another song titled, “Stop the War” which peaked at number fourteen in America during January of 1971.⁸ In this popular hit, Starr proclaims,

⁶ Edwin Starr. (1970). War (What is it good for?) [CD]. Hitsville USA: Norman Whitfield.

⁷ Billboard Music. (2018). Edwin Starr. Retrieved September 5, 2018, from <https://www.billboard.com/music/edwin-starr>

⁸ Billboard Music. (2018). Edwin Starr. Retrieved September 5, 2018, from <https://www.billboard.com/music/edwin-starr>

“This is bout all the soldiers, That are dead and gone today, If you asked them to fight again, Huh, what do you think they'd say. I'm not trying to be funny, I'm just trying to get my point across. War is world's enemy number one And it's time that we called it off. Ow, stop the war, now Good God, hear me saying, Don't put it off another day, Everybody singing...”

Being a heavy advocate against the war himself, Starr used his popularity to relay his message to as many Americans as possible. And by using a much more straightforward approach in this song, Starr creates a feeling of empathy in the listener. This allows him to give the appearance of speaking directly to whoever is listening which undoubtedly stirred emotion and caused people to think more seriously about the war. One really interesting aspect of this song is that Starr doesn't even seem to be singing when he says, “I'm not trying to be funny, I'm just trying to get my point across.” It seems as if he takes a break from the song to truly speak to whoever is listening. This shows that he doesn't care about the song itself, rather he cares about the message it is sending. This approach was totally unique at the time and was likely much more persuasive to the listener.

Another popular anti war song was “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival which sang, “some folks born a silver spoon in their hand, Lord don't they help themselves no, It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no military son”⁹ Clearwater was able to differentiate between what it would've been like to be a fortunate son versus an unfortunate son during the Vietnam war. By mentioning the silver spoon, he is arguing that the sons of the wealthy (fortunate sons) would never be drafted to Vietnam, but any minorities or less fortunate would be sent over there

⁹ Creedence Clearwater Revival. (1969). Fortunate Son [CD]. Fantasy Studios: Jon Fogerty.

without hesitation. “Fortunate Son” captured the support of any minority or lower class civilian in America during the conflict. It allowed people going through similar experiences of being drafted to relate to one another. This song not only served as a protest song for those back in the states, but became a staple of the soldiers in Vietnam. There are numerous personal accounts that state Fortunate Son was often played at base camps in Vietnam and is the song soldiers associate most with in the war.

Regardless of which Vietnam protest song you examine, it is undeniable that music made during the conflict had a huge impact in the growth of anti-war movement. David James attempts to capture this social power of music in his article *The Vietnam War and American Music* when he says, “Rock and roll is not only a weapon of cultural revolution, it is the model of the revolutionary future. At its best the music works to free people on all levels.”¹⁰ James was and is a firm believer in the social power of music and that power has never seen greater strength than in the times of the Vietnam War.

Research - Live Performances

While songs were of great importance to the growing anti-war mindset, it is hard to determine whether the artists wrote these songs because of their distaste for the war or because they knew it would be great publicity for their music. In this section I will be examining some of the live shows put on by artists during the time to help answer that question. In May of 1968, the Composers and Musicians for Peace put on a concert in Carnegie Hall. The Composers and Musicians for Peace (CAMP) was a group founded by Elie Siegmeister, one of the most famous

¹⁰ James, D. (1989). *The Vietnam War and American Music* (Social Text). Duke University Press.

American composers of all time and the concert was put on after the death of Martin Luther King Jr. In this concert, CAMP debuted,

“The Face of War, a searing 10-minute indictment of the horrors of war based on five of Langston Hughes’ poems... on a Composers and Musicians for Peace concert produced by Elie, in memory of Dr. King...There was virtually no press coverage”

(newmusicusa.org).¹¹

Although there is little to no information on this event since press was prohibited from attending, it is rumored that many of the most well known celebrities of the time were in the audience and were captivated by the performance. It’s emphasis on combining the literary work of the most influential poet of the generation with the brutality and unnecessary of the Vietnam War further pushed the viewpoints of the musical group on the audience. Seeing as many celebrities, who are often the biggest role models for youth, were in attendance there is reason to believe they shared their opinions publicly and influenced more of the population.

Another popular live performance that made national headlines was the Moratorium Day Rally in San Francisco in November of 1969. Moratorium Day was organized as a nationwide protest, with rallies appearing all over the United States, including 500,000 protesters in Washington D.C. At the San Francisco rally, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young (Buffalo Springfield) took the stage to play numerous songs that actively spoke against the war. Before their first song, Stills exclaimed, “Politics is bullshit! Richard Nixon is bullshit... Our music is not bullshit!”(Storey 101).¹² The band then proceeded to play music in front of thousands for the next hour. The show by Buffalo Springfield is the perfect demonstration of the groups’ true

¹¹ Lehrmanon, L. J. (2009, February 10). The Elie Siegmeister Centennial. Retrieved September 5, 2018, from <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/the-elie-siegmeister-centennial/>

¹² Storey, J. (2018). CULTURAL THEORY AND POPULAR CULTURE: A reader. S.I.: ROUTLEDGE.

anti-war feelings, rather than capitalizing on the music aspect. To make an appearance at one of the biggest protests the United States had seen and exclaim that the president was in the wrong shows that this was not a publicity stunt. It was truly the bands' belief that the Vietnam War was an unjust and unnecessary conflict and they were determined to use their music to spread that message.

Lastly, and most important of all the live performances was the inaugural Woodstock Music & Art Fair held in Upstate New York in August of 1969. The festival was the combined work of John Roberts, Joel Rosenman, Artie Kornfield, and Michael Lang and attempted to mirror the Monterey Music Festival while bringing in enough money to open a recording studio in New York. The group was able to get many of the most influential artists of the time to play a show over the three day weekend including names such as; Janis Joplin, Joe Cocker, Creedence Clearwater Revival, The Grateful Dead, Buffalo Springfield, and Jimi Hendrix. With such an incredible lineup, the concert sold 186,000 tickets on presale, close to their goal of 200,000.¹³ But when the weekend of the festival finally came, more than 500,000 people lined up outside the gates with the hope of entering the festival. With no measure to possibly control an additional 300,000 people, the festival was opened to the public with no charge. In the following paragraphs, I will examine the individual performances of some of the artists and attempt to discover why the festival became the "Three Days of Music and Peace" it evolved into.

One of the most famous anti-Vietnam War singers was Country Joe and the Fish due to the popularity of his protest song "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die." In this song, Country Joe satirically states, "And it's one, two, three, what are we fighting for? Don't ask me, I don't give a

¹³ Woodstock Music Festival concludes. (2016). Retrieved September 5, 2018, from <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/woodstock-music-festival-concludes>

damn, next stop is Vietnam... Well there ain't no time to wonder why. Whoopee! We're all gonna die." The song was known nationwide and saw great success because of the anti-war message and the ability to easily sing along with the "one, two, three." What is so interesting about this performance, often regarded as one of the staples of the inaugural Woodstock, was that Country Joe was not scheduled to play until Sunday. On Saturday, the band that was scheduled to play was having some issues so Country Joe walked on stage and played a set that was largely ignored by the crowd. This was ignored because he was saving all of his popular songs for his performance the following day, but when the set ended he walked back on stage and began playing, "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die." The audience immediately jumped to their feet and began screaming the song with him. In an interview with the New York Times, Joe McDonald said,

"I never had a plan for a career in music, so Woodstock changed my life... An accidental performance of 'Fixin'-to-Die,' a work of dark humor that helps people deal with the realities of the Vietnam War, established me as an international solo performer."¹⁴

Although it was a complete accident, the performance by Country Joe and the Fish labeled Woodstock as a form of Vietnam War protest and allowed the movement to gain great momentum going forward.

The other imperative performance of Woodstock was the set played by Jimi Hendrix on Monday morning in front of only 30,000 remaining fans. This performance is often regarded as one of the most influential in the history of music, regardless of time period and if one were to watch Hendrix's rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner" it is easy to understand why. After the

¹⁴ Sauer, P. (2017, October 10). Country Joe's Obscene Truths. Retrieved September 5, 2018

band played a few of their popular songs, Hendrix stated, “You can leave if you want to. We’re just jammin’ now. That’s all.” After a few seconds of free guitar solo, Hendrix began playing the Star Spangled Banner. But this rendition of the national anthem was unlike anything people had seen before. It started normally and sounded like what one would call a conventional version but a few seconds in, Hendrix started to interpret the lyrics in his own manner and used his guitar to reflect that. Trying to capture “the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air” Hendrix used his amplifier to create distorted sounds meant to represent the lyrics above. It was described as unappealing originally, but when it was discovered it was meant to represent the sounds of the Vietnam War and what the soldiers were experiencing overseas, it became an instant classic. Hendrix knew his stardom was a great way to spread his opinion on the war and his rendition of the Star Spangled Banner is most evident of that.

After examining just a couple of the incredible performances of the first ever Woodstock Music & Art Festival, it is easy to understand why the festival got the national reputation that it did. A lineup full of likeminded, anti-war celebrities with over 500,000 people in attendance allowed for mass sharing of ideas that would be spread all over the United States. The social impacts of Woodstock 1969 were felt all over the United States and helped create stronger support for the movement to end the Vietnam Conflict.

Research - Movies

While music served a great purpose during the war itself, the end of the Vietnam Conflict brought incredible opportunities for a different sector of pop culture. In 1975, a window opened for producers to make films that depicted and commented on the recent events. It is my hope for

this section to demonstrate the educational benefits of pop culture by examining some of the most reflective movies of the Vietnam War.

Francis Ford Coppola, also known for directing *The Godfather* and *The Outsiders*, decided to take on the challenge of accurately depicting the Vietnam War. He decided to create a movie based off the popular book *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad that also embodied the experience of serving in Vietnam. In an interview he said, “I intended to bring home the true horror of the Vietnam War so that the millions of Americans, who were fortunate enough to have only viewed it from the comfort of their living room, could experience first hand the terror and the madness, the senseless brutality and the moral chaos of the most embarrassing of wars.”¹⁵ In this movie, which was actually filmed in the Philippines, Army Captain Benjamin Willard is sent on a mission to find and kill an ex-American Colonel who went rogue, Walter E. Kurtz. What is fascinating about this movie is that it doesn’t so much attempt to primarily capture all the battles of the Vietnam War, rather it follows the journey of a few men and records the mental toll that war had on them both mentally and physically.

The opening scene of the film shows the main character, Captain Willard, in his apartment having a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder dream and struggling to keep his mind organized. When he wakes, he is shown with booze on his nightstand and a handgun under his pillow allowing the reader to question if he is going to use it on himself. As he wakes up, his flashbacks continue and although he attempts to fight them off, he can not get the horrific images of his first Vietnam excursion out of his mind. He ends up succumbing to a serious panic attack and slicing his hand open when he punches his mirror in anger. With blood running down his

¹⁵ Carroll, K. (2015, August 14). 'Apocalypse Now' brings the Vietnam War home: 1979 review - NY Daily News

arm and all over his face, Willard turns to the bottle of alcohol on his nightstand and proceeds to chug the entirety of it. From there, the movie continues to exemplify how mentally straining the war was by showing many more mental breakdowns of the characters and the constant struggle with PTSD even in the midst of the war.

The move by Francis Capolla to place a heavy emphasis on the mental aspects of war was absolutely brilliant. This allowed him to accurately depict what thousands of veterans were struggling with so citizens could develop a better understanding of not only what these men and women went through, but what they were continuing to go through after they returned to the United States. By using popular culture as a learning method, Francis Ford Capolla was able to use *Apocalypse Now* as a representative teaching opportunity that not only captured the war itself, but informed thousands of Americans on how to better understand the Veterans who may be involved in their lives.

Another movie that attempted to depict the horrors of the Vietnam War was *Platoon*. The 1986 Best Picture winner was the first war film to be written and directed by a real Vietnam veteran. This film did an incredible job of capturing the full experience of a soldier in the Conflict and attempted to show that war is not something to be glorified, rather it is something to be feared and frowned upon. In order to capture this, Oliver Stone, the director and Vietnam veteran, did not hold back on the gore in many of the fighting scenes. At numerous points in the movie, soldiers and civilians are shown being shot and killed or barely left alive screaming in agonizing pain. One scene in particular that magnificently captured the physical and mental brutality of this war is when Sergeant Barnes, the cynical psycho American soldier, shoots a local Vietnamese woman dead in her village when her husband would not give up information

about the Vietnamese armies. After shooting her dead in front of the entire village, Barnes grabs the man's very young daughter and brings a gun to her head. Right before he is about to execute the daughter as well, Sergeant Elias, the more realistic and idealistic sergeant comes and tackles Barnes away from the group. The ensuing brawl demonstrates the dissension that often existed amongst platoon members. It is not always us against them, like war movies so often depict, rather it is a constant internal struggle between the desire to survive and the decision to do what is morally right. By attempting to capture this all in one scene, Stone exemplifies not only what his personal experience was like, but what the experience of the hundreds of thousands of men and women that served in Vietnam were like.

The end of the Vietnam War allowed the film industry to attempt to capture the experience of those who fought in the conflict. Movies such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, just to name a few, demonstrate that there was a lot more to the war than simply trying to defeat the enemy. It came with hardships and mental tolls that still plague veterans today. While the movies may offer a sad reality, they also bring a chance to learn how to better understand the truth of the Vietnam War and how to better associate with veterans who may be struggling.

Conclusion

Many of the songs written and produced during the Vietnam War served as a calling for civilians and encouraged thousands to actively pursue an end to it. By examining songs that saw massive success during the late 1960's and early 1970's, I was able to conclude that there is a correlation between the Anti-Vietnam War songs and the increasing number of people who protested the war. In addition, my examination of the live performances at peace protests and the inaugural Woodstock Music & Art Festival show that these musicians were not attempting to

gain stardom off the Vietnam War, rather they truly believed in the music they were producing. That goes to show why their music saw the success it did and the true social powers that popular culture can have during times of hardship. Lastly, the ending of the United States time in Vietnam brought the opportunity for the movie industry to produce and provide many lessons on the conflict. Francis Ford Coppola and Oliver Stone were able to excellently capture the mental and physical brutality of the war to help civilians build a better understanding. Their production of *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* saw massive success in the United States and served as a learning tool for many civilians to assist in developing a sense of consciousness about the events that transpired in the Vietnam Conflict. All of the examinations mentioned above go to show how influential popular culture can be if applied in the right ways and how it can be used as a mechanism to spread and teach ideas. It is my hope that if a future conflict arises, popular culture is used in the same manner it was used during the Vietnam War in America in the 1960s and 1970s.

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