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A study of Rock Music of the 1950s and 60s

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Senior Project
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INTRODUCTION:

Art is important because it sensitizes people and makes them aware of important issues and events. "[M]usic can reveal the nature of feelings with a detail and truth that language cannot approach." (Pielke 1986) It has the capacity to reach a huge audience. It is a "language understood by all without instruction...Music is a way of holding off time, making the present fill all space. It joins us with others yet defends our privacy. It lifts the spirit, assuages grief, and sometimes teaches as well. Above all, music creates values, along with a social structure that nurtures, defends, and celebrates those values." Rock and roll performed this role in the 1950s and 1960s. It rallied the younger generation together behind a new set of beliefs and values and encouraged them to adopt new perspectives. The music became an important form of culture and means of expression. Rock and roll was not just a new kind of music, "but a whole youth-led politics that challenged the institutions of the entire society." (Ennis 1992)

Despite the significant impact that popular music has on society, it is continually overlooked, questioned and dismissed as insignificant. In reality, "the study of American popular music is important, if not essential, to our understanding of who we are and have been as people. Popular music offers a unique view into the people’s beliefs during particular time periods." By studying music, one can gain insight into attitudes, ideas and fears of people. (Bindas 1992) Music has a vital connection with society. A study of music can provide an increased understanding of how society operates. I have chosen to study rock music and its impact on the younger generation of the 1950s and 60s. I hope to
show how rock music acted as a cultural context for change in creating new values, beliefs and world views for the youth of the 1950s and 60s. I intend to show how it led them into and prepared them for life in the 1970s. I will examine the relationship between rock music and politics, with a focus on the Vietnam War and how protest music shaped popular opinions toward this event. I hope that my research will demonstrate the power and influence of music on society and politics.

Because no two people hear or interpret a song in the same way, there can be no definitive interpretation. People interpret the meaning of the song in terms of their own personal experiences. No song affects any two people the same. Both situational and personal elements affect how a song is interpreted: when it is heard, how it heard, where it is heard, with whom it is heard, as well as the private feelings of the listener and the public world that shapes the listener’s experiences. The writer cannot control these aspects. He/she can tell the audience what the song means to him/her, but cannot tell the audience what the song will mean to them. Thus, the meaning of a song is ambiguous and confusing; it often does not mean what it says. The music itself is as important, if not more so, to the interpretation of a song as the lyrics. Yet the sound, the tune, the words and the rhythm cannot be analyzed with same techniques. “This is further compounded by uncertainty as to what matters most in any given song.” (Street 1986) In addition, research results on the effects of popular song lyrics upon their listeners are inconclusive. (Orman 1984) Therefore, I have decided not to analyze specific lyrics, but to observe instead what the musical style represented and expressed to American society in the 1950s and 1960s.
RESEARCH METHOD:

This research was conducted from secondary sources obtained from area libraries. Because the topic chosen is twenty-six to forty-six years old, much scholarly research exists. It was not difficult to find sources related to this topic. The challenge, rather, was acquiring substantial material that was applicable to this particular focus. Few of the sources addressed the effect of rock and protest music on political policy. Additional sources on the Vietnam War were consulted for this additional information.

The twenty-five sources used were selected based on content and focus. Numerous sources addressed the history of rock music and specific rock stars and were, therefore, not useful to this research. Sources with information about the influence of rock music on society and politics and the Vietnam War proved to be most valuable and difficult to obtain.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

"One of the most significant art forms to rise out of recent American culture is rock music. A generation grew up with it; danced and loved to it; dug on it; smoked, tripped, and rapped with it; and eventually united behind it." (Hibbard 1983) Rock music played a leading role in the youth movements of the 1950s and 60s and was an important social phenomenon, form of culture and means of expression. It was a reaction against society's established norms and values. Rock and roll questioned and challenged the
traditional way of life. It brought the younger generation "together and opened wide the perspectives for seeking alternate answers." It had an obvious effect on the thoughts, ideas and values of its audiences. It was different from other kinds of music not just artistically, but also in the way it influenced politics and commerce. Rock and roll "provoked trouble right from the start in all three of these areas, and it still does." (Ennis 1992)

The explosion of all the arts after the end of World War II brought old and new art forms to millions of Americans. The GI Bill and mass marketing allowed "a greater penetration of arts into the American population than ever before. More importantly, young artists formed a new set of cohorts who quite self-consciously adventured considerably past the boundaries set by their teachers." All of the arts, from literary to dance, experienced a rebirth and creative growth. "Popular and "serious" music refashioned their boundaries, simultaneously unleashing the other popular musics from their wartime restrictions and dislocations. The design of postwar architecture, household products, and clothing flourished with a genuine and creative freshness." (Ennis 1992)

"The time was one of transition, leading to the redirection of accepted social norms and art forms, and the emergence of new ones such as rock’n’roll." (Hibbard 1983)

"Rock differed from almost all the new products of 1950s civilization by reacting against the accepted style of life. The music defied the traditional middle-class standards of taste, was associated with antisocial values, and with time it came to embody a way of confronting the "system" on a day-to-day basis...rock performed a critical role in defining and materializing a new world view; a vision based upon the images slipping through the
minds of the generation coming of age. The late 1960s proved to be a rare instance when
the fabric of the social order tore apart, revealing extraordinary options and creating new
social forms.” The culture and attitude of the period extended far beyond the music.
“With its maturity in the middle 1960s, it became the major art form of a nascent
counterculture and a vehicle for the articulate expression of a growing discontent with the
American way of “earning a living”.” (Hibbard 1983)

“More than an expression of youthful rebellion, rock performed a critical role in
defining and materializing a new world view; a vision based on images slipping through
the minds of the generation coming of age. The late 1960s proved to be a rare instance
when the fabric of the social order tore apart, revealing extraordinary options and creating
new social forms.” The songs had a huge impact on their audience and were a critical
force in the development of the ensuing “generation gap”. “Rock reflected the growing
discontent of certain young people and gave it a voice. It permitted individuals to know
they were not alone in viewing the dominant culture as repressive and forced many young
people, who might have merely accepted the American culture in terms of their parents,
to scrutinize their society more closely.” (Hibbard 1983)

“The rock songs of the late 1960s brought forth alternative values and visions of
many levels...Whether denouncing the war, celebrating drugs, or redefining love and sex
relationships, the songs declared freedom, sensation, passion, and life. They made the
young aware of themselves, reconfirmed their beliefs and acknowledged, within a
positive framework, the changes that were taking place. The sound brought together a
generation...and gave the young a shared experience and an articulate, although not
necessarily accurate, expression of what is and what will be. Even more important, rock music transcended dreary reality to offer America an optimistic utopian view of the future.” (Hibbard 1983)

Rock and roll was associated with sex, drugs, and antisocial behavior. It was seen as “the corrupter of youthful innocence, the downfall of civilization.” “The pervasive intensity of the sound...compelled wanton expressions of freedom, emotional release, and physical movement.” Many took offense to Elvis Presley’s performances, finding them “disgusting and especially distasteful.” “On September 9, 1956, Ed Sullivan’s Toast of the Town televised a performance of Elvis Presley from the waist up in an attempt to mollify any fears of impropriety,” but many still took offense. Throughout the country, “fathers banned rock’n’roll dances and concerts in civic buildings and dance halls, and at swimming pools. A number of high schools forbade the playing of rock’n’roll at talent shows and completely tabooed its use at dances.” But to the younger generation, rock’n’roll was a way to escape from the restrictions of social control, and adult overreactions to the sensuality of rock’n’roll only upset teenagers and “solidified their conceptions of the restrictive character of adult life.” “Rock’n’roll became one of the few agents that polarized parents and their children.” (Hibbard 1983)

Many adults were upset with the songs that depicted drug experiences. With “their intense musical and emotional shifts, intersticed with fragmentary lyrical thoughts and images...the songs encapsulated, glorified, and preserved a drug-induced trip.” (Hibbard 1983)

Adults were also concerned with rock and roll’s associations with juvenile delinquency. “As early as 1956, Time magazine reported:
In San Antonio, rock ‘n’ roll was banned from city swimming pool jukeboxes because, said the city council, its primitive beat attracted “undesirable elements” given to practicing their spastic gyrations in abbreviated bathing suits.

Music Journal claimed:

Aside from the illiteracy of this vicious “music,” it has proved itself definitely a menace to youthful morals, and an incitement to juvenile delinquency. There is no point in soft-pedaling these facts any longer. The daily papers provide sufficient proof of their existence.” (Hibbard 1983)

Despite these concerns and the adults persistent attempts to squelch the music, rock and roll was here to stay. “The music of the late 1960s made an indelible mark on society, and its imprint still remains.” It “continues as a style, deftly nurturing itself, maintaining by habit, inertia, or the veneration of long usage. Elaborately self-conscious, it has assumed a multitude of forms, ranging from heavy metal to fusion, 1950s revival to glitter, southern country rock to the California sound, disco to punk and new wave. It has become an accepted part of American civilization.” (Hibbard 1983)

CULTURAL CONTEXT:

“An understanding of leadership requires careful attention to the contextual aspects of the process.” (Wren 1995) Dr. Wren and Dr. Swatez developed a model of leadership that identifies and integrates historical and contemporary forces into a model of leadership. By applying this model to the development of rock music in the 1950s and 1960s, we can gain insight into the impact of rock and roll on the younger generation of the 1950s and 1960s by studying the impact of historical forces and the influence of cultural values.
The Historical and Contemporary Contexts of Leadership model "portrays leadership as the interaction of leaders and followers within a sequence of overlapping contextual categories... Each category (the historical context of leadership; the contemporary context of leadership; and the immediate context of leadership) has its own unique attributes that impact the leadership process in distinct ways...and shape the resulting leadership options." (Wren 1995)

The "historical context" of leadership includes the impact of operative historical forces. "The term "contemporary context" of leadership represents the norms, values, and customs of the surrounding society- in short, the impact of cultural mores." The contemporary sphere also includes the potential influences of subcultures. The "immediate context" of leadership "embraces all those more "micro" situation factors which have such an impact upon leadership. These include, but are not limited to, the structure and goals of the group or organization, the culture of the organization itself, and the nature of the task at hand." (Wren 1995)

Let us now examine the historical and contemporary contexts surrounding the development of rock music. The Americans born at the end of World War II were part of a demographic burst referred to as the "Baby Boom". These children were raised with a particular cultural heritage passed on by their parents and influenced by historical events. The set of beliefs held by their parents "was founded on the optimistic promise of peace and plenty won by the military victory over the Axis powers. The children were to be guided in achieving the fruits of that victory. By the time they got to high school in the late fifties, however, it was clear that the promise had been broken, or at least was not
coming out the way the kids thought it should." (Ennis 1992) Institutions such as the
church, family, and small community were on the decline; the amount of “meaningful
work” was decreasing; the Civil Rights movement was taking shape; the military was
expanding; the Cold War and nuclear testing had begun; the executive branch of the
government was becoming more autonomous; and many felt as though they were living
in a superficial world of images created by the mass media and advertising. Many also
perceived that they were living in a materialistic society, as many of their parents were
concerned with material security. This concern can be explained in terms of the older
generation’s past experiences- “the Depression, the Second World War, and an
orientation toward success.” (Hibbard 1983) Nonetheless, these things caused the
younger generation to doubt the authority of the adults and to question and avoid doing
what the adults wanted. There was a belief among the young that the adult institutions
sought to mold and shape them in ways they disagreed with. “There was an equally sure
belief that there were alternative roads to life besides those announced by parents,
teachers, and so on, even if those paths were only dimly seen.” (Ennis 1992)

“American teenagers were growing up in a rapidly changing society. America’s
value system, especially its attitudes toward love and sex, was visibly in
transition...Rock’n’roll emerged as one of the first art forms to respond to the dichotomy
between daily practice and the values preached by society by interweaving traditional
values with new perceptions and feelings. Although rock’n’roll accepted the dominant
cultural values, it was also separating itself from that culture by creating its own forms
and heroes. By expressing a world view couched in terms of individual experiences
rather than corporate concerns...rock’n’roll held out the possibility of reassessing and circumventing societal norms.” (Hibbard 1983)

The reactions and criticisms against rock and roll by the older generations can be understood by examining the social context of the time. “A society that had objected to the use of the words *seduction* and *virgin* in Otto Preminger’s *The Blue Moon* (1953) would not abide by the obvious lasciviousness of rock’n’roll. A reaction was inevitable.” This reaction only solidified the youth conception of “the restrictive character of adult life” and “the society’s security-through-conformity attitude.” (Hibbard 1983) Certain young people felt that society’s attempt to uphold its image ignored what was really happening in American society.

**SOCIAL NEEDS:**

Rock and roll attained its status as the “premier music of the nation” “not on its musical qualities alone, but rather through its fulfillment of certain social needs.” Many American youth felt that society no longer served individual needs. Rock music presented a “vision of a world ordered in terms of individual needs.” (Hibbard 1983) American youngsters felt they were being gripped by constricting social policies and moralities. While the younger generation tried to escape from these restrictive policies, the adult response was to assert their authority and restrictions more fiercely upon the youth. (Ennis 1992) Rock music was a form of rebellion against the established order. (Orman 1984)

Rock music fulfilled some of the needs exhibited by this younger generation
MUSIC & POLITICS:

Art and politics are thoroughly entangled within our society. “Artists, as the masters of the senses, clothe political actions and shape political goals.” (Ennis, 1992) “Political values, actions and experiences are filtered through and shaped by popular music.” Rock music is innately political because it influences the way people think and act. “It is political because it affects or reflects the way people behave...What it affects or reinforces are the politics of the everyday. Its concerns are with our pleasures and relationships, and the institutions that inform both. These...are profoundly political, being concerned with issues of power, equality and personal identity.” (Street 1986)

Rock music has interacted with the political system ever since 1955. It has influenced and been influenced by the American political establishment. Rock has challenged the political system by questioning the values, goals, attitudes and methods of its political leaders, and thus become an important political socializing agent. (Orman 1984) The protest music of the 1950s and 1960s offers a clear example of the link between politics and pop. But, politics is also involved when people attempt to control music. Records have been burned, banned and broken for fear of rock’s effects. Because art sensitizes people and makes them aware of important issues, and because of the power of the arts to influence people, politics has often tried to control the arts “in an attempt to manage dissent.” Whether or not the music was an actual threat to the government, the government perceived it to be and rock quickly “found itself subjected to the scrutiny of the political establishment.” (Street 1986)
People in positions of power have frequently responded negatively to perceived threats of authority by musicians. (Orman 1984) In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates cautions Adeimantus about the power of music to subvert the state. In Book IV, Socrates claims that those in charge must beware of innovations in music that are contrary to the established order. Socrates claims: “They must guard against changing to a new form of music as against a universal danger. Ways of song are nowhere disturbed without disturbing the most fundamental ways of the state.” Adeimantus replies to Socrates and says: “[Music] just settles down gradually and gently flows into people’s dispositions and pursuits. From there it swells and bursts into business agreements and then, raging with depravity, sweeps down on laws and constitutions, Socrates, until finally it overthrows everything public and private.” (Larson 1979)

Rock music created widespread moral panic throughout the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. It was characterized as a social problem to be eradicated. (Bindas 1992) “A congressional subcommittee held hearings on the perceived relationship between juvenile delinquency and rock’n’roll.” (Orman 1984) Church leaders across the country argued that this new music “came from the devil to subvert the youth of America.” (Street 1986) Anti-Communist groups asserted that rock and folk music was introduced by communists to brainwash American youth and subvert society. (Rodnitzky 1976) Records were burned and banned. According to John Orman, “The Juvenile Delinquency and Crime Commission of Houston, Texas, banned more than fifty songs in one week.” (1984) John Lennon shocked many when he announced that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. The Federal Communications Commission requested that radio
stations refrain from playing songs that advocated the use of drugs. (Street 1986) In 1970, Vice President Spiro Agnew claimed that rock music glorified and encouraged the use of drugs and threatened to destroy our national strength. (Rodnitzky 1976 and Orman 1984)

In the early 1950s, the McCarthy Committee investigated a number of folk singers suspected of being associated with left-wing organizations. A number of singers, including the popular folk singer Pete Seeger, were blacklisted as a result. Several years later, the FBI assumed an interest on artists who criticized the war. Phil Ochs and John Lennon were placed under intense FBI surveillance. “The FBI and the Immigration and Naturalization Service together accumulated 26 lbs of paper on Lennon.” FBI agents tapped Lennon’s phone, attended his concerts and monitored his movements. (Street 1986)

Responses to rock music also included a “crack-down on rock festivals.” Numerous state legislatures passed legislation designed to curb outdoor and overnight rock festivals. In its zeal to end rock festivals, Indiana inadvertently outlawed the Indianapolis 500 auto race. These examples reveal some of the insecurities, perceptions and paranoia of those in power and also show how those in power used it to control music. (Street 1986) Try as they might through these reactions, they could not control the power of rock.

Another sort of power and another source of politics can be seen in the struggle that ensued between the “power elite”, which controlled the media, and the radical culture, which attempted to reach the young before the former. “Popular music now
became a major political weapon, since the new radicalism was primarily a youth movement...Because radicals found it difficult to confront their adversary in our complex corporate society, the new political background became largely cultural and generational rather than social and economic.” This struggle has become known as “The Making of a Counter Culture.” The idea was to reject and destroy the old culture in an attempt to force a critical evaluation of society as well as to liberate the individual. Popular music was used as a tool to fragment the culture and gain power and influence. (Rodnitzky 1976)

Many American youth were disenchanted with the government and viewed it as repressive, ineffective and immoral. As a result, rock lyrics experienced a tremendous increase in social and political themes during the late 1960s. The “lyrics critically examined societal beliefs and values insofar as they affected the quality of life. While many songs questioned the establishment’s viability, other songs...presented an alternative to American life which was embodied by a misty utopian world of peace, love, and happiness. Such sounds of optimism as “San Francisco,” “The Word,” and “All You Need is Love,” elucidated a positive approach to life, which was to supplant the old ways.” (Hibbard 1983)

Some legal matters were actively challenged by the youth. The draft was their main concern, followed by the laws governing liquor service and the voting age. The younger generation questioned “personal identity and the meanings and boundaries of family, neighborhood, even nation...The answers most definitely became political
because national and world events brutally reached into young lives across increasingly distant age-graded boundaries." (Ennis 1992)

THE YOUTH MOVEMENT:

Political movements, almost by definition, work without the support of traditional institutions and established lines of communication. They seek to alter the status quo, which requires the strength and unity of their members. Music has the ability to create this sense of solidarity and community. (Street 1986)

Music is an effective agent for expressing dissent and creating a sense of community and popular culture. Music motivates, communicates, encourages and educates. Tunes are easily passed on. Because the meaning of a song is often ambiguous, it is much more difficult for authorities to control music than it is for them to control the written or spoken word. Music also allows for a collective experience through mass singing. "Music is not just used as a matter of convenience, as the most easily available tool; there is also an element of reciprocity: both the music and movement benefit from their mutual dependence." (Street 1986) Rock music performed these functions and played a central role in the youth movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

During the 1950s, an American youth culture beginning to take shape. Distinctive dress and hair styles, as well as a new set of beliefs, values and norms identified this expanding alternative culture and "served as images of separation from the norms of a repressive, business-oriented society." (Ennis 1992 and Hibbard 1983) The fifties shook
the foundations of the established order and left the younger generation anticipating something new. (Pielke 1986)

“Although teenagers created their own culture within the locked framework of their high schools, they never found during the 1950s either an organizational form or a belief system that could bring them together into a coherent social movement. They were a dispersed or at best a locally aggregated mass that was activated by strong but elusive forces, the greatest of which was youth itself.” (Ennis 1992)

“Soon, though, the 1960s became “The Sixties”, a culture and an attitude that extended far beyond the music. “Self-realization”, “personal expression”, and “freedom” were the catchwords of the new youth culture that looked toward rock music for its anthems.” (Bergman 1985)

Rock music “made the movement of the 1960s more widespread and recognized...and provoked a variety of politically motivated actions, such as riots and demonstrations, which in turn led to further media publicity for the discontented young.” It provided a strong sense of community and identity for the youth of America. The songs expressed their thoughts and values; and the performers provided cultural heroes for the younger generation. Rock music acted to reflect, reinforce and spread the youth culture. “One entity fed off the other.” (Hibbard 1983)

Pielke maintains “that rock music should be understood as the artistic expression of America’s cultural revolution. Hence, contemporary American culture provides the substance of rock music. The two are intrinsically related.” (1986)
THE VIETNAM WAR:

“The public, still numbed by the presidential assassination, solemnly watched a televised America drift inextricably, and eventually explosively, into the Vietnamese “police action.”” (Hibbard 1983) In 1964, Lyndon Johnson forced the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution through Congress, which firmly engaged America in the Vietnam war. Antiwar protest and demonstrations soon followed, along with military escalation. (Pielke 1986) “Students in greater numbers than ever before began to see themselves as directly threatened by the “university” and the “government.” They began, also as never before, to define themselves as their own constituency, one that included their younger brothers and sisters. Students were receiving threats to free thought, speech, and action, so they focused their attention on those two institutions that most students had heretofore held aside from condemnation.” (Ennis 1992) “Vietnam represented the Establishment’s destructive tendencies” and caused many people to lose faith in the political process. Many did not understand why the war was being fought. Vietnam represented a direct threat to the lives of men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six. “As the justification for the war became increasingly dubious, many young men questioned whether the risk of their lives was a reasonable price to pay for American citizenship.” Many felt that it was not and evaded the draft. (Hibbard 1983)

Vietnam caused people to doubt the ways of the old system and realize that America was no longer what most people thought it was. Many felt that the entire
American system of values and priorities had to be refocused before any major social changes could transpire. “The words of Randolph Bourne, written in the midst of World War I, rang terrifyingly true.

_The kind of war which we are conducting is an enterprise which the American government does not have to carry on with the hearty cooperation of the American people but only with their acquiescence. And that acquiescence seems sufficient to float an indefinitely protracted war for vague or even largely uncomprehended and unaccepted purposes. Our resources in men and materials are vast enough to organize the war techniques without enlisting more than a fraction of the people’s conscious energy....

....Our war is teaching us that patriotism is really a superfluous quality in war. The government of a modern organized plutocracy does not have to ask whether the people want to fight or understand what they are fighting for, but only whether they will tolerate fighting....We are learning that war doesn’t need conviction, doesn’t need hope to sustain. Once maneuvered, it takes care of itself, provided only that our industrial rulers see that the end of the war will leave American capital in a strategic position for world-enterprise.” (Hibbard 1983)

“The Vietnam war was the only twentieth-century U.S. conflict to catalyze a significant number of popular antiwar songs. In direct and indirect ways, folk music was responsible.” (Bindas 1992) Folk-protest songs and singers played a vital role in the political-cultural revolution of the 1960s and were prominent symbols of this era of protest. Many protest singers became cultural heroes for much of the younger generation, “who could no longer find heroes in the traditional fields of politics, business, and sports.” (Rodnitzky 1976) Rodnitzky identifies several factors which contributed to the climate that made protest singers cultural heroes. “In an era of idealism, the singers stood for ideals. To a younger generation moving away from materialism, folk music symbolized simplicity. For political activists committed to bringing power to the people,
songs were a bridge to the youthful masses. Music was clearly a key ingredient. Never before in history had music meant so much to a generation.” (1976)

Street offers several reasons for folk music’s long association with politics and political movement. Because it emphasizes the lyrics and uses simple instrumentation, folk music is “both adaptable and hospitable to politics.” The voice carries the song and “serves the lyrics.” Folk is rather flexible in its choice of subject matter: “its form imposes few, if any, limitations on the political content of its lyrics.” With these characteristics, “folk’s lyrics can perform a variety of politically useful tasks: they can argue, analyze, explain, describe and encourage.” The ideas, lyrics and sounds, however, are communicated through the music. Therefore, the music and the context in which it is experienced determines the ultimate politics of the song. (Street 1986)

Folk music also has the ability to create a sense of community and solidarity. Folk singers try to create feelings of shared intimacy, honesty, and integrity. (Rodnitzky 1976) Mass singing provides a message and an experience as well as a sense of conviction and unity.

An analysis of the shifting lyrical themes of the anti-war songs of the 1960s reveals the increasing resistance forming against Vietnam and further establishes “the role of rock as an expression and disseminator of the seeds of discontent.” Common themes included man’s inhumanity to man, opposition to a war believed to be immoral and ill-conceived and moral indignation toward those who created wars. Such themes are revealed in Pete Seeger’s “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” (1962) and Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1963). (Hibbard 1983)
The protest songs of the late 1960s adopted a new outlook. While earlier anti-war songs “stressed the inhumanity of the war in terms of a higher morality, the songs of the middle and late 1960s needed no further justification for opposition to the war than the preservation of an individual’s life. Morality resided within the individual’s sense of right or wrong, for no higher morality seemed to dictate society’s actions. The anti-war songs manifested the counter culture’s acceptance of Polonius’ advice to his son Laertes, that, “above all things, to thine own self be true.”” These songs gave support to many individuals faced with an extremely difficult decision by letting them know that others shared this position. (Hibbard 1983)

Joan Baez, an important popular-culture figure, told her audience at a SANE Emergency Rally on Vietnam on June 8, 1965:

“This is mainly to the young people here, but really to everybody....You must listen to your heart and do what it dictates....If you feel that to...go to war is wrong, you have to say no to the draft. And if you young ladies think it is wrong to kill...you can yes to the young men who say no to the draft.” (Rodnitzky 1976)

The Bob Seger System’s “2+2=?” (1968) reflected the thoughts of many draft age men. This song depicted the situation faced by most potential draftees: they did not want to go to war, but discovered they must if society demanded. The singer, called a “fool” and an “upstart” for questioning the rules, described the death of a friend in “a foreign jungle land” and referred to the girlfriend of the deceased who cried and cried and did not understand. This song addressed the doubts of many young men and “made resisting the draft a matter of survival.” (Hibbard 1983)

Bob Dylan had a tremendous influence on the music of the 1960s and is credited with establishing “political rock.” He liberated the lyrics of songs with “some of the
most powerful political messages ever recorded.” His songs protested war, racism, inhumanity, and poverty. Dylan’s protest poetry contained “a subdued, rational, moral outrage.” His “early connection with the “movement” was singing the songs that had never been sung before, and he captured the essence of the movement’s position in his poetry.” (Orman 1984)

Artists like Bob Dylan and the Byrd merged folk with rock and roll to create folk rock in 1965. “They brought the protest song to rock.” Because it reached a wider audience, folk rock eventually became more important than folk. “Eve of Destruction” (1965) was the first big hit of a rock protest song. This song “catalogued a series of political and social ills, including military conflict in Asia.” The record was banned by a number of radio stations. (Bindas 1992)

Rock music “was slow to criticize the Vietnam War because of the controversial nature of antiwar songs. Until the late 1960s, a majority of Americans supported American involvement in Vietnam. Rock depended far more than folk on market sales, and record companies and artists feared offending potential customers.” Thus, relatively few antiwar rock songs appeared before 1968. (Bindas 1992)

In 1968, however, polls showed a decline in popular support of the war, and increasing numbers of young people viewed political radicalism as acceptable. “It became fashionable and profitable for rock musicians to record antiwar songs. Four reached the Top 100 in 1968. In the next six years, twenty-six antiwar songs cracked the Top 100.” Among the most successful were Edwin Starr’s “War,” which held the number one spot during the summer of 1970, John Lennon’s “Imagine,” which topped the
charts in 1971, and “Run Through the Jungle” by Creedence Clearwater Revival.

“Whether overtly political or not, the new folk, rock, or folk-rock music of the 1960s had political effect” and played an important role in antiwar protest. (Bindas 1992)

There are numerous theories and interpretations as to why students participated in protest activities between 1965 and 1971. According to the Cognitive Development Approach, the protesters were “acting out of a high sense of moral outrage... related to the injustices perceived by them.” This approach is based on the premise that “students who have reached a higher stage of principled moral and cognitive development tend to be more active in sociopolitical protests.” (Orman 1984) Many that actively opposed the war “argued from a moral perspective that the United States had no right to intervene in Vietnamese affairs, use excessive force, or prop up a corrupt government against the will of the people.” (Hall 1990) The social learning perspective argues that students learned the American ethic of citizen participation. “They felt politically efficacious, and they wanted to prove that citizens can change government policy by protesting.” Protest provided a common goal and a sense of community for the participants. (Orman 1984) Regardless of what motivated people to protest, it had important consequences.

It is estimated that four million Americans publicly demonstrated against the war in Vietnam. Studies on the impact of these anti-war demonstrations have produced mixed results. Some feel that the movement helped influence public opinion against the war and convinced the government “to abandon its mistaken and immoral policy in Indochina.” Other studies “conclude that the antiwar demonstrations had no significant
impact on the presidential handling of the war, Senate votes, or public opinion. Some even suggest that the movement was counterproductive.” (Hall 1990)

Several things hindered the impact of the antiwar movement. It was, for the most part, disorganized, divided, and fragmented by internal interests and conflicts. Anti-war groups focused much of their efforts on mass demonstrations rather than on long-term, hard political organizing. “Although the war had been a moral crisis, its resolution required a political solution.” The movement also proved susceptible to government efforts to subvert and disrupt its actions. (DeBenedetti 1990)

Despite these limitations, the antiwar movement did achieve some success. While presidents Johnson and Nixon both denied being influenced by antiwar protests, they were worried enough “about the potential impact of dissent that they went to great lengths to undermine the credibility of the antiwar movement. These efforts contributed to both men’s fall from power.” It is possible that the protests limited military options in conducting the war and curbed further escalations. Hall suggests that “Dissent against the war combined with the civil rights struggle and the counterculture of the 1960s and early 1970s to create a period of domestic turbulence unparalleled in recent American history. The constant tensions of social disruption threatened to split American society and contributed to a national weariness that eventually made it impossible for the government to continue the conflict in Vietnam.” Other scholars further attest to the success of the movement. “Melvin Small credits it with restraining military escalation and imposing Vietnamization upon Nixon as the only strategy acceptable to the nation” (Hall 1990)

According to Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield, activists questioned the
government’s credibility, legitimized protest and resistance, established a greater degree of political accountability, increased public skepticism, and created political action. (1990)

By the mid-1970s, public opinion polls revealed that a majority of the public supported arguments made by antiwar protesters that the war had been a mistake, possibly even immoral. This strong acceptance allowed Congress to reject continued combat, and the Vietnam War moved to a close. (Hall 1990) In 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed, ending American involvement in Vietnam. Even if the antiwar movement did not directly lead to the end of the war, it certainly made it possible.

This can be observed in Gerald Ford’s shifting support for the war. In 1965, he wrote to a constituent that he was “unequivocally opposed to retreat and withdrawal from Southeast Asia.” As Johnson expanded U.S. military presence in Vietnam, Ford organized bipartisan support of this effort. He even suggested that the government cut back on domestic programs to put more resources into the war in Indochina. However, with Nixon’s election in 1968 on a pledge to end the war, Ford’s position on Vietnam “changed to fit new political and public-opinion realities….Gone was the no-substitute-for-victory rhetoric, and Ford joined the administration chorus in proclaiming the much less absolute goal of “peace with honor.”” After he became president, he moved publicly to soothe some of the domestic bitterness caused by the Vietnam experience. On August 19 at a national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), he announced a program of conditional amnesty, or “earned reentry,” for draft evaders and military deserters. This action was intended to “convey openness and toleration in place of
suspicion and recrimination," but met with opposition instead. Antiwar spokesmen opposed the plan because it failed to grant unconditional amnesty to those who had followed their conscious. Defenders of military service attacked the plan for offering leniency to those charged with avoiding their patriotic duty. The program was not successful. It lasted twelve months and attracted only six percent of eligible offenders. Of those, about 8,000, or one-third of the applicant, received formal offers of clemency. (Anderson 1993) In 1977, Carter offered unconditional amnesty and pardoned all Vietnam draft evaders. (Pielke 1986)

"Arts of conviction and persuasion either set forth the fundamental convictions and realized ideals of society, or create images to persuade people to form different beliefs...Rock music in the middle and late 1960s primarily functioned as an art of persuasion. Consciously and unconsciously it propagated an alternative way of viewing our society and induced people to consider, if not accept, new values and beliefs about how life should be lived." (Hibbard 1983)

Protest music was vital in making many youth "more serious, radical, and politically worrisome." Many youths were searching for examples of conscience and principle which they found missing from society, and popular protest music fulfilled these needs. Protest songs lent meaning to their lives and "salved their guilt and proclaimed their humanity and their fellowship with the oppressed." (Rodnitzky 1976)
DISCUSSION:

During the 1950s and 1960s Music served as an important form of protest; first, against a repressive society and accepted way of life, and later, against the Vietnam War. Music served an important role in the momentum of these movements and in the expression of the movements' concerns and dissent. It served as a unifying force by providing a common bond and sense of community.

During this era, rock music attempted to shift established paradigms, defined by Kuhn as "the entire collection of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community." The conflict between the old paradigm and the emerging one creates a crisis within society. (Kuhn 1970) Society, like the science that Kuhn refers to, often suppresses novelties, like rock music, because they threaten the established paradigm. According to Kuhn, paradigms gain status because they are more successful at solving acute problems. In the 1960s, protesters turned to music and protest because the status quo appeared to be ignoring society's problems. The youth set out to find "a new set of social forms which more closely approximated their ideals." (Hibbard 1983) Society was unable to control racism, inhumanity and poverty. The government was unsuccessful at ceasing the war in Vietnam. The government, the older generation, the elites and rock and roll competed for control in the midst of a crisis.

The younger generation had visions for a better future and they attempted to realize their visions. They were motivated to change society so that their dreams could come true. In this way, they were citizen leaders who facilitated organized action to address basic needs of society. They sought to bring about change that would increase
their well-being. They protested perceived inadequacies of our national and political leadership and worked to take down the barriers to change contained within the political system. (Couto 1992) According to Gardner, citizen participation is key to holding political power accountable. (Gardner 1990)

Music was used as a tool of influence and persuasion. Political activists began to use the music to express their message and give them a voice. Especially in the antiwar movement, people were persuaded to join the cause because doing so would be acting in accordance with some higher code of ethic. (Lewicki, et.al. 1994) Music was an effective way to reach a large audience composed primarily of youth. The youth were drawn to the music because it fulfilled needs that society did not. The music provided the people with identity, unity, and shared values and goals. The youth drew on these characteristics for motivation and group cohesion.

We can learn much about social movements and the effect of music on such movements by studying their development, growth and impact on society. Whether or not rock music directly influenced political policy, it produced a revolution in terms of a change of commitments. It caused many American youths to question established norms. Many young Americans became committed to the new values and beliefs advocated by rock music and exposed to society. Rock music was successful as a force for social change with the power to change attitudes.
Bibliography


