

How the Anti-War Movement of 1968 Influenced Music & Society



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Introduction

Bursting into the 1960s a cultural and social phenomenon began, cultivated by music, war, and the newly individualized youth. Youth, for the first time, began to gain footing within nations' economies, politics, and self-expression. However, Britain embraced the youth as a symbol of hope for the country's post-war depression; while the United States continued to stifle youth individualism. The younger generation welcomed the British Invasion because of the trends, music, and attitude. Hippie culture imposed new views on the youth such as openness to sex, love, drug use and a strong anti-war sentiment. Alongside the 1960s, the Vietnam War progressed and caused significant tension in the United States. Hippies and college students alike started to protest the war efforts. Student-led demonstrations began to spread, most notably in Britain, France, and Germany, raising concerns at U.S. embassies across Europe.

Although the sixties saw great social reform and the birth of new ideologies, the decade also experienced some of the greatest American tragedies. Americans grieved over the death of President John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated on a visit to Dallas, Texas in 1963. A growing civil rights movement sparked controversy as racial tensions permeated the media and segregation continued to be an issue. Martin Luther King Jr. led marches, protests and used his philosophy of nonviolence to bring attention to the discrimination against minority communities. Less than three weeks before MLK's murder in Memphis, however, thousands of young British

anti-Vietnam War protesters gathered outside the US Embassy at London's Grosvenor Square on March 17th, 1968. Mick Jagger and John Lennon both witnessed the proceedings. Each came away from the demonstration with strong impressions and a political awareness that would soon reach the wider culture through controversial songs recorded by their respective groups. By analyzing the content and public reception of these songs, as well as specific student-led movements among the U.S. and abroad, we can see how pop music and the youth acquired global cultural significance as a mirror of world events during that turbulent year, 1968.

Historical Background

Beginning in 1939, made from the ashes of the first world war, World War II flourished until 1945. Although the U.S. urged for isolation from the war, President Roosevelt allowed Britain and France to purchase weapons. Economic tensions continued to propagate European states in an effort for global dominance. Germany proceeded to strike Britain with the "Blitz" from 1940-1941, which involved the bombing of cities such as London, Manchester, and Liverpool (Saunders 2015, 5). From the destruction of European nations, notably Britain, the U.S became known as the dominant economy and cultural leader. Continued capitalist efforts led to the Vietnam War in 1945. Tensions due to French colonization and lack of recognition for Vietnam's government continued to fuel the war. The French government combined the territories of Tonkin, Annam, Cochincine, Cambodia, and Lao to create the Indochina Federation. The Vietnamese government and population were furious as those territories spoke the native language and had been previously under their control before French colonization (Marr 2013, 24). Several years after the start of the Vietnam War, the United States could not decide on how to approach the status of Vietnam and the territories (Lawrence 2005, 2).

After World War II, the U.S. devised the Marshall Plan to restore European countries economies and promote stable democratic governments. The Marshall Plan began in 1948 and continued until 1951. U.S. officials agreed to provide financial backing for European countries to be rebuilt to pre-war standards. From the Marshall Plan, European economies once again flourished and began to be restored. The U.S. status became further elevated from the country's ability to provide such support to many European countries (Hogan 1987, 26).

In the 1950s, the United States decided to financially support the French in their efforts and provide military alliance. Fighting against the communist regime, became the main priority of the United States and France. Otherwise, communism threatened to take over the Indochina Federation if the French lost dominance over the war. The United States had a minor economic incentive to join in combat for natural resources, although certainly not the most pressing reason. Additionally, internal political conflicts arose as Republicans desired to alienate President Truman's war time abilities. Republicans were successful when accusations were made about President Truman as being, "...weak willed and [Republicans] demanded vigorous action to prevent the spread of communism..." which provoked President Truman to take a harsher stand against communism to portray the United States as a strong foreign entity (Lawrence 2005, 5).

Early 1960s United States involvement in the Vietnam War increased under President John F. Kennedy's administration. At the beginning of President Kennedy's administration, troops in Vietnam was approximately 1000, and by 1961 the number of soldiers tripled. In 1963, when President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, the number of troops had escalated to almost 18,000 (Kissinger 2017, 34). Support of the Vietnam War began to falter amongst the U.S. population. The country soon became divided on the correct action to take towards the Vietnam War mostly within the realm of college campuses and youth groups. The U.S.'s

elevated status set the example for other countries for political demonstrations. Cultural diffusion of music and political ideas spread from U.S. intervention within European nations.

Youth Led Movements

College students across the U.S. were organizing, protesting, and questioning the intentions of the government. Due to foreign exchange programs between the United States and Germany, the Students for Democratic Society organization (SDS) was able to expand across continents. Germany's formation of an SDS was made possible after Michael Vester's university exchange year to the United States (Klimke 2009, 22). German SDS envisioned values of, "...a society that would enable people to develop their own personalities in harmony with each other, a democratically controlled government, and an economic order that would guarantee even the needs of the poor, otherwise exploited by capitalism, through a planned economy" (Klimke 2009, 24). American SDS and German SDS soon became interconnected in 1962 by promoting both their organizations and planning trips for members to Europe. German youth shared a growing disdain for American politics and Vietnam War policies. In turn, German SDS, began to place tensions on the American Embassy in Germany and write letters to American officials explaining their dismay with the Vietnam War. The United States government had no choice but to recognize the growing impact of youth abroad and on the home front. Therefore, the United States shifted policy gears and methods towards the youth in efforts to become more culturally diplomatic. The shift in attention allowed the Inter-Agency Youth Committee (IAYC) role to grow in 1960 to portray a good image of America for this, "...future generation of leaders..." (Klimke 2009, 1).

Several American universities are noted for their anti-war efforts such as Kent State, Penn State, and Michigan State Universities. By 1964, shortly after earning their freedom of

speech on campus, Kent State was able to organize anti-Vietnam War groups and put on displays of peaceful protests (Heineman 1993, 6). Penn State contributed to the university antiwar movement from their SDS leader influence of peaceful protest and, "... [Joining of] working class youth and white ethnics" (Heineman 1993, 2). Michigan State University's faculty stepped in to organize a Vietnam War talk for students to voice their concerns and oppositions to the war. Religious officials on campus took the initiative to listen to concerns students had about the draft (Heineman 1993, 185). A ROTC spring event sparked a demonstration among religious protesters on campus. Protesters marched through campus to where the event was held and protested the Vietnam demonstration present (Heineman 1993, 187). American university students shifted their focus and exercised their new-found freedoms. Campus life experienced an awakening of youth expression and a new recognition for current events and government policy. Youth culture began to realize the power a protest could hold and the ability to invoke change from university to government institutions.

Furthermore, Youth protests in the early 1960s sparked a media frenzy and new societal image. Media started to portray these movements as, "...concerns over declining moral standards and threats to law and order..." which did little to help movements establish a legitimate hand in the eyes of governments in western countries (Thomas 2008, 2). Unfortunately, youth-led movements gave way to the media only covering those anti-war protests in which violence or overly aggressive behavior erupted (Thomas 2008, 4). The mainstream image of 1960s youth became that of unruliness and disobedience towards authority such as the government. From the media portrayed image, youth experienced backlash from their disregard of societal norms and radical politics.

However, for some student-led groups, the press acted as a vehicle for recognition of youth movements in the mainstream news. Ironically, the media allowed for the diffusion of youth's new cultural values into the American population and abroad. Therefore, in some instances, the media helped youth protests acquire new publicity and members.

Similar to the SDS, Britain, developed two main groups who spearheaded the protests against the Vietnam War, the British Campaign for Peace in Vietnam (BCPV) and Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC). BCPV, organized in May of 1965, was primarily influenced by Christian values and advocated for the removal of American from Vietnam as a start to creating a solution to ending the raging war. In June 1966, the VSC perceived the conflict as more of an economic power struggle between capitalism and socialism. VSC advocated for the victory of North Vietnam and received heavy influences from leftist organizations such as the International Socialism and the International Marxist Group. Left wing politics refers beliefs in radical politics for social equality. Several universities and independently led groups protested alongside the VSC and BCPV. (Thomas 2008, 7).

Before the March 1968 protest at Grosvenor Square, the VSC held other violent demonstrations which took place in July and October. The July 1967 protest received a relatively good turnout of almost 5,000 and due to the violent nature, a small number of protesters were arrested. However, the VSC did not stop there and continued to organize protests around London. In October, the VSC organized two rallies, one on the 22nd and the other on the 27th. The October 22nd protest saw almost double the attendance than that of the July 1967 protest and witnessed even more arrests. On the 27th of October, the VSC was notably more peaceful, but the press had other intentions. British press aimed to portray the anti-war protest as violent and imposed heavy bias when writing news reports. This demonstration had an,

“...overwhelming majority of the 100,000 participants [being] peaceful, and only a small group broke away from the main march with the intention of marching on Grosvenor Square” which differed from other protests where premeditated violence took place (Thomas 2008,13). Various political and student committees were in attendance including the Young Liberals, Young Communist League, and London Peace Committee (Thomas 2008, 11). Far-left views were heavily represented in this protest with the intention of bringing attention to the faults in American Policy regarding the Vietnam War. In March 1968, the era of peaceful demonstrations for the VSC ended and was replaced by one of the most violent protests Britain had seen.

March 17th, 1968 marked one of Britain's most infamous anti-Vietnam War demonstrations to occur since the beginning of the war. Recalling the two main protest organizations in Britain being the VSC and BCPV, the BCPV worked towards the ending of the war and was the primary organizer of demonstration (Thomas 2008, 11). The VSC was more, “...committed to the victory of the Vietnamese people against the war of aggression and atrocity waged by the United States,” which lead to the organization being more familiar with violence as a protest tactic (Thomas 2008, 11). The demonstration took place in front of where the United States Embassy was located at the time in Grosvenor Square. On the 17th almost, “...20,000 protestors took part in a demonstration outside the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. One estimate suggests that there were 300 arrests and thirty- six injuries,” the number of arrests was significantly higher than those of previous VSC demonstrations (Thomas 2008, 13). The media frenzy began shortly after the demonstration; more against Vietnam protesters than ever before. The purpose of marching at the United States Embassy was to invade as a sign of support for Vietnam. After the event, the VSC strived to revise the action to support every organization and opinion that was within the anti-war sentiments. Interestingly, many of the same student activists

who organized university sit-ins against the war were at the center of the VSC for planning demonstrations and protest strategy (Thomas 2008, 11).

The impact of these demonstrations and most importantly the March 17th protest at Grosvenor showed a growing influence of students voicing their opinions in a more forward and public manner. Government officials were now forced to face the opposition of the Vietnam War that occurred abroad. The demonstration recast the image of the youth from being seen and not heard to a boisterous example of freethinking. Youth embodied a new culture of individualism and self-expression free from the confines of their parents' generation. Despite the individualism youth strived for, many were able to form groups such as VSC and SDS that bonded together for a common cause. The Grosvenor Square events and other various student-led protests led to musicians taking a stand on how they felt the Vietnam war conflicts could best be resolved.

The Beatles & The Rolling Stones on Grosvenor Square & Lyrics

The Beatles' fame originated in London and soon spread to the United States during the British Invasion. Parents and teenagers alike became captivated by the Beatles. Unlike previous artists, the Beatles' political and social views were portrayed through their music and interviews without hesitation from the band members. Similarly, The Rolling Stones began to gain popularity and reflected on political views through song lyrics. Both musical groups contributed to the British Invasion in the United States and the anti-war sentiment amongst American and British youth.

Furthermore, the impression of the 1968 protest in Grosvenor Square at the US Embassy influenced the lyrics to The Beatles "Revolution" by John Lennon and Paul McCartney (Both versions from the "White" album and on the B side of "Hey Jude") and The Rolling Stones

“Street Fighting Man” written by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. “Revolution” became known as, “The most controversial and overtly political song the Beatles had produced so far...” showing the effects of the lyrics of the song. However, when the Rolling Stones released “Street Fighting Man” public reception, “...was equally passionate yet much more favorable...” (Platoff 2005, 241). In terms of politics, the “[Rolling Stones] were the Left to the Beatle’s Center,” meaning the Rolling Stones carried more radical views compared to the moderately perceived Beatles’ (Platoff 2005, 254).

Jagger’s “Street Fighting Man” opens with a rugged tone and fast-paced guitar playing which amps up the tempo of the song. Thereby, making the song sound almost like you are itching to react or being baited into a riot. The sounds lack a sense of comfort and instead invokes one’s adrenaline. During the late 1960s, London was described as “relatively tranquil” politically, which frustrated Mick Jagger and was evident in his lyric, “There’s just no place for a street fighting man” (Kundani 2018, 205). Jagger alluded to Grosvenor Square when he wrote, “Ev’rywhere I hear the sound of marching, charging feet, boy // Cause summer's here and the time is right for fighting in the street, boy” highlighting the violent protests in the summer of 1968. This lyric serves as his account for what he witnessed before continuing the song. As the song continues, Jagger states, “Hey! Think the time is right for a palace revolution // But where I live the game to play is compromise solution” showing the desire for a reform of government as represented by “palace” However, Jagger knows the only way the government allows for a “compromise solution” that will ultimately not be in favor of student-led protests but of government interest. Lack of concern for youth opinions pertaining to the Vietnam War in Britain and the United States is represented. Towards the end of the song Jagger writes, “Hey! Said my name is called disturbance // I'll shout and scream, I'll kill the king, I'll rail at all his

servants” these lyrics address the actions of the youth. The government and particularly the media that has labeled youth as a “disturbance” The following lyrics portray how the youth will not be silenced by the “King” or authority and will “rail at all his servants” representing government policies and law enforcement officers. Jagger’s song repeats the sentiment of London’s sleepiness and of a “poor boy” who does not know what to do or how to help. Furthermore, “Street Fighting Man” shows Jagger’s support for the Grosvenor Square event and promotes a stance of violence as an acceptable method for invoking change. Jagger recognized his presence at the event led to him being more of a distraction from his fame. “Street Fighting Man” gave Jagger an opportunity to be a political leader for youth movements from his music (Platoff 2005, 255).

The Beatles released two versions of “Revolution” on the White album (just before Christmas 1968) and on the B side of “Hey, Jude” single (released at the end of July 1968). “Revolution” on the White album emulates a softer and more refined tone almost as if it embodies a lullaby than the B side of “Hey Jude”. “Revolution” on the B side of “Hey, Jude” takes on a similar tone to Jagger’s “Street Fighting Man” from its consistent up-tempo guitar playing and rock n roll edge. Lennon opens “Revolution” by singing, “You say you want a revolution // Well, you know // We all want to change the world” shows the desire of the youth movements to change the state of the world and the war. As a response to violent protests, Lennon states, “But when you talk about destruction // Don’t you know that you can count me in - out” which portrays his qualms about violence and brutality used to protest the government. In comparison to Jagger, Lennon is very clear about his lack of support for the tactics used in the Grosvenor Square protest. Repeatedly throughout the song, “Don’t you know it’s gonna be all right // Don’t you know it’s gonna be all right // Don’t you know it’s gonna be all right” is sung

to soothe the audience about the events happening in the world. The intention behind Lennon's release of "Revolution" was to promote his, "...God will save us feeling about it, it's going to be all right" evident throughout the main lyrics of the song (Platoff 2005, 244). Lennon calms his audience almost subtly suggesting everyone to step back and analyze the movement because he genuinely believes God will save everyone from the violence and turmoil. Further commentary on Lennon's support of, or lack thereof, the protest is seen in the lyric, "But if you want money for people with minds that hate // All I can tell you is brother you have to wait" expressing he will not back the efforts of those spreading hate or violence as he believes it is no way to resolve conflict. Like Jagger, Lennon mentions the government and how to improve the situation of authority. "You tell me it's the institution, // Well, you know // You better free your mind instead." urges a revolution of mindset as opposed to the only placing blame upon the government's policies. Lennon is expressing a solution free from violence and hatred of institutions will allow for an alleviation of the world's pain. "Revolution" on the "St. Jude" album exemplified Lennon's primary stance of nonviolence from his reinstating of, "...count me out" after the lyrics addressing destruction. Comparatively, "Revolution" on the White Album delivers the lyric as "...count me in – out" showing a seemingly subtle but significant difference between the song versions. Lennon's "...count me out" led to the audience believing the Beatles' were ignorant towards the state of the world and reasoning behind using violence at politically charged demonstrations. The White Album's "Revolution" from the songs release towards the bitter end of 1968, serves as a reminder of Lennon's "everything will be ok" sentiment going into a new year.

The Impact of “Revolution” & “Street Fighting Man”

“Revolution” left magazines and the public deciphering the meaning of the lyrics and eventually, mixed opinions of support for Lennon’s nonviolent promotion. *Time* magazine praised Lennon’s song, because to the magazine, the lyrics represented a message to the radicals in the late 1960s to “cool it” (Platoff 2005, 248). *Ramparts* magazine, written to appeal to their New Left readers, explored both “Street Fighting Man” and “Revolution” in relation to the 1968 political climate. Once again, “Street Fighting Man” was perceived by the New Left youth to be more symbolic of the actions that should be taken in protest during 1968. Lennon’s “Revolution” received backlash from his repetition of “You know it’s gonna be alright” which listeners and writers felt ignored the political and social climate because of the song’s release in the midst of violence at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in July 1968 (Platoff 2005, 249).

Increasingly, the debate on whether to invoke violence protests loomed across activists around the globe. For Americans, Martin Luther King Jr. had died calling for strictly nonviolent responses to social injustices. However, the violence demonstrated at the between the police and protesters at the Democratic National Convention led Americans to believe the era of nonviolent movements had died along with Dr. King. Countries abroad began to experience similar demonstrations fueled by youth-led movements. France experienced a series of violent protests in Paris during 1968 referred to as French May. Students from the University of Nanterre organized the demonstrations at the start (Feenburg 2001, 28). What had started as an idea between professors and students to create committees to deal with campus-wide issues soon spilled over into students deciding to protest capitalism in their society. The *enrages*, a group of French University students, became one of the most well-known student protest groups during French May. *Enrages* would hold discussions on police brutality, pay wages, and of course the

Vietnam War. Although the student led groups mainly focused on police brutality, many became involved with the workers strike in France. Student groups began to recognize, “Between your problems [Workers] and ours [Students] there are similarities: jobs and opportunities, standards and workplace, union rights, self-management,” which further reinforced their cause against society and the government (Feenburg 2001, 149). France began experiencing a strong leftist presence from university students similar to the U.S. and Britain at the end of French May, United States officials recoiled at, “How successful a handful of university students in France were in precipitating a crisis which has potentially very serious overtones for our foreign policy interests,” meaning not only had the students influenced the French government but they also influenced foreign policy thinking in the United States (Klimke 2009, 2). Only through violence was their cause so effective on the French and American governments to invoke change. Therefore, the world had continued the transition towards a more chaotic and forceful means of being heard. Youth activists felt their movements could no longer rely on the peaceful protests already once employed. “Street Fighting Man” became the embodiment of what the movement wanted in 1968 while “Revolution” stifled the intentions of the movement. “Revolution” although a brilliant political analysis was left behind from the lyrics seemingly dated outlook on the protests plaguing the world.

Conclusion

Although Jagger and Lennon walked away from the 1968 Grosvenor Square incident differently, both songs expressed their stance on the youth led demonstrations. Due to the artists popularity, their songs influenced how society and youth saw the protests. “Revolution” and “Street Fighting Man” forced protesters to reflect on their actions and determine if violence was the correct method to furthering the movement. The 1960s gave a voice to musicians and youth

leading to increased public thoughts and opinions. Inspired by the Beatles and Rolling Stones, artists commonly express various political views and organizations they support. Music today is powerful enough to provoke someone to think twice about a political system or social injustice. The courage of the 1960s youth set the example for student-led protests precisely fifty years later as the 2010s youth experience debates on gun control, police brutality, and women's rights. The 1960s never truly left, only has died down until the next political pendulum swing.

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