SOUNDS OF DISSENT
PROTEST MUSIC IN THE VIETNAM WAR

By
Inge J. Oosterhoff

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Supervised By
Dr. Scott H. Bennett

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During the Vietnam War, America rang with voices of antiwar dissent. Some of these voices could be heard through music. Popular artists such as Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Phil Ochs and Tom Paxton actively spoke out against the Vietnam War in their songs.\(^1\) Protest music as a form of nonviolent war protest has been largely neglected in research concerning anti-Vietnam War activism. But can music protesting the Vietnam War be seen as a legitimate form of protest that actively encouraged antiwar dissent? To answer this question it is pivotal to distinguish what role Vietnam War protest music played in the anti-Vietnam War movement and whether it merely reflected the sentiment of the public or actually encouraged antiwar dissent. This paper argues that songs protesting the Vietnam War both reflected and encouraged antiwar dissent in American society and amongst GI’s.

Scholars of the Vietnam War era have never reached a consensus over the role music played in the antiwar movement. Whether music is shaped by, or shapes society is a question that scholars have never been able to answer.\(^2\) How Vietnam War protest songs influenced American society is even more difficult to discern. Some Vietnam scholars argue that these songs merely reflected or accompanied antiwar sentiment already spreading in American society.\(^3\) Others suggest that it actively promoted antiwar sentiment.\(^4\) This paper combines both views in the argumentation that Vietnam War protest music encouraged antiwar dissent, in which the reflection of existing antiwar sentiments played a key role.

Protesting war and promoting peace through music is not unique to the Vietnam era. Music has been used to influence war sentiment for ages and was commonly used to express antiwar sentiments after WW1. Musicians and composers musically discussed possibilities for peace and questioned the justness of war. Governments acknowledged music’s influence on public sentiment, as musicians were often commissioned to compose songs for army bands or to accompany propaganda movies.\(^5\) However, during the Vietnam era an
unprecedented number of songs actively spoke out against the war and propagated against the government’s agenda.  

In their promotion of antiwar dissent, Vietnam War protest songs reflected existing sentiments of dissent in American society. Scholar and commentator Todd Gitlin claims that the music expressed the central values of the sixties’ movement as it generally questioned the establishment and American society. Additionally, the music reflected the multiplicity of the protest culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Besides protesting the war, songs commented on oppression of the American psyche by the government and media, social injustice, generational conflicts and disillusionment with technology and consumerism. Scholars Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison argue that popular music expressed the Movement’s collective identity, comparable to the way that identity was presented in peace organizations and mass protests.

By articulating existing sentiments, Vietnam War protest music actually promoted antiwar dissent. The two should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Singer Pamela Polland states that “The social change came first […] and the music reflected that. But the music ‘announced’ the changes to wider audiences – it heralded the changes, and in doing so, it educated a broader public.” Antiwar songs could spread existing antiwar messages to people who might not affiliate with peace organizations or active protests. Additionally, songs gave validity to people’s own observations. Scholar and journalist Joel Garreau claims music directly influenced his politics. He would listen to songs by Bob Dylan and Joan Baez for hours and learned them by heart. Although not everyone would have had a similar devotion or experience, Garreau’s experience illustrates the influence that anti-Vietnam War songs could have on individuals.

Yet Vietnam War protest music may have been more important because of its collective influence. The protest movement of the 1960s and ‘70s was highly fragmented, as
different antiwar groups failed to agree on their approach and ultimate goals. However, the music played at demonstrations and rallies was the same everywhere. Consequently, music helped to unify the anti-Vietnam movement through a highly accessible medium. It was also a popular medium with the younger generation, which was one of the most critical and outspoken groups of the 1960s. Adolescents were already actively involved in many different forms of protest, including marches, teach-ins, sit-ins, etc. Music gave a common ground on which to unite politically and emotively. According to Todd Gitlin, this established a sense of communal identification and encouraged youths to collectively protest the Vietnam War.

The best-known example of unification through music and protest is the Woodstock Festival of 1969. Although often dismissed as a hippie festival, it combined music and entertainment with political messages and antiwar protest, distributing these amongst a large group of people. Some songs were mellow in their political content, but others brought clear messages against the Vietnam War to the audience. The audience sang along and enjoyed the performances, while being taught about the Vietnam War and being given specific words of protest.

Changes in the American music industry during the 1960s allowed musicians to clearly articulate their messages of protest. Lyrics became more important and regulations concerning controversial lyrics were relaxed. Musicians effectively gained more personal say into the content of their songs. This allowed musicians to not only reflect popular sentiments, but to promote their own point of view, even if it deviated from the mainstream. Rather than relying on the stock of existing folk songs with an anti-establishment- or antiwar sentiment, musicians began to write their personal experiences, views and disillusionments into their songs. They commented on different social issues and on the Vietnam War in particular.
The freedom to express personal political beliefs in their music gave musicians a mission for their music that exceeded money and commercial success. The focus shifted from producing bankable hit songs to producing politically conscious songs. Most anti-Vietnam War music never reached a high position in the music charts. Although this may seem detrimental to the music’s effect on society, it actually may have worked to its advantage, as the protesting counterculture generally rejected consumerism and the mainstream.

Apart from lyrical freedom, new musical genres and techniques helped musicians protest the Vietnam War in their songs. Different scholars have attributed significance to the musical genres of Vietnam War protest songs. These genres were folk music and Rock ‘n Roll, eventually merging together in a style of folk-rock. Folk music is historically linked to social and political commentary and its dissenting role increased after it was commonly used to express anticommmunist sentiments during the 1950s. Artists such as Joan Baez and Bob Dylan merged the music’s political history with the more popular rock style during the 1960s, moving folk music into the mainstream. Rock ‘n Roll was already a popular music genre in the 1960s, but during the Vietnam Era it became less concerned with themes of romance and became more explicitly concerned with political dissent.

The addition of the harsher sound of rock to the political character of folk helped amplify the dissenting message of Vietnam War protest songs. The new genre of folk-rock became immensely popular and proved a powerful genre for the promotion of antiwar messages amongst youth. Additionally, the popularity of musicians such as Joan Baez and Bob Dylan helped popularize anti-Vietnam War- and other protest songs. They released accessible yet highly political music that was positively received by a broad public. This helped introduce the antiwar song into the mainstream and lowered the threshold for the public to listen to explicitly political and anti-Vietnam War songs.
Equally important was the invention of new musical technologies, such as the electric guitar and sound sampling. Distorted sounds were used to convey the disorder and complexity of the war. Musicians imitated or sampled realistic sounds of machine guns, bombings, screaming people and helicopters, which gave the music a haunting and eclectic quality. In this way, the music can be said to have brought the war home non-violently. It brought the sounds of war into the houses and minds of American citizens.

Jimmi Hendrix is one of the musicians who used sound to comment on the Vietnam War. At Woodstock, Hendrix performed a version of “Star Spangled Banner” on the electric guitar, using his instrument to imitate the sounds of air warfare. In his song “Machine Gun” the electric guitar is used to imitate the sound of guns. Hendrix added antiwar meaning to this song with lyrics, envisioning the ambiguity of warfare for both American and Vietnamese soldiers. The feeling of destruction purveyed by the guitar is made more meaningful by the lyrical blending of a GI’s perspective on war, used to criticize American politics and the inhumanity of technological warfare.

Lyrics helped to clarify and amplify musical antiwar messages. Different narrative techniques were used to evoke the listener’s empathy and intellectual reflection. Musicians recognized the Vietnam War as a modern war with specific problems. This led to a wide range of lyrical topics, including GI’s experiences and emotional challenges of the war and at home, stories of torn families, blaming of the government and specific politicians, descriptions of the horrors of modern warfare, the lamenting of the enemy, etc. Several musicians used dark humor or irony to emphasize the paradoxes of the war.

Many anti-Vietnam War songs dealt with the question of who was to blame for the war. Some songs explicitly called out politicians and the government. Others did so more subtly. In “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” (1967), Pete Seeger metaphorically blames the Johnson administration for sending troops down the Mekong River. Singing about a platoon
crossing a river during WW2, Seeger describes how “the big fool said to push on.”\textsuperscript{43} Tom Paxton more explicitly blamed president Johnson for misconduct in “Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation” (1965). He criticizes Johnson’s hypocritical promises of preventing escalation by narrating the experience of a soldier who was fighting a war that Johnson claimed “isn’t really war.”\textsuperscript{44}

Joan Baez personally went to Vietnam and described the atrocities she found there in her songs. In “Oh, My Son, Where Are You” (1973), she describes the war front and laments the parents of Vietnamese victims. She pictures soldiers’ complex emotions, battlefields, the sound of bomb sirens, air warfare, prison camps, etc.\textsuperscript{45} She also performed her protest music in Vietnam, dedicating her songs to “all the Vietnamese and Americans who had died in the war, and then to all the men who had refused to fight it from the beginning, and finally to those who had quit fighting when they had become disillusioned (or, illuminated).”\textsuperscript{46}

Some songs not only promoted antiwar sentiment, but antiwar activism. For example, different songs promoted draft resistance.\textsuperscript{47} Phil Ochs symbolically resisted the draft in his song “I Ain’t Marchin’ Anymore” (1966). In “Draft Dodger Rag” (1965) he suggests ways in which young men could evade the draft, such as faking illnesses or stressing their academic careers and the need to take care of their families.\textsuperscript{48} The Byrds sang about a soldier’s doubt whether he should trade in his home for the draft to go and kill strangers in “Draft Morning” (1968).\textsuperscript{49} Other musicians, such as Pete Seeger, celebrated the stories of soldiers who refused to take part in the war. In his song “Ballad of the Fort Hood Three” (1966), Seeger exposes the soldier’s personal reasons for dissenting and their refusal to kill the enemy.\textsuperscript{50} He quotes them as saying that going to war would be like supporting a man reminiscent of Hitler and would deny the importance of other issues, such as poverty.\textsuperscript{51} By using these soldier’s stories as the subject of his song, Seeger gave them a public platform to spread their messages of dissent.
Musicians also used narrative strategies to intensify empathy and underline the multiplicity of perspectives on the war. Some used a first-person narrative to align the listener with the experience of the narrator, which in effect aligned the listener with the narrator’s political views. Some musicians, like Phil Ochs, would contrast the views of the GI and his enemy, underlining the ironies of the war’s ideology.52 Some songs affiliated with the enemy and his pain. For example, the song “Hang in There” (1969) by Holly Near equates the patriotism of Vietnamese rebels with that of American soldiers, both suffering because of it.53

However, not all popular music during the Vietnam era condemned the war. Country songs in particular expressed a definite pro-war message and sentiment.54 In an ideologically divided society, both pro- and anti Vietnam War songs were used as tools of propaganda and both found an audience eager to receive their messages. They were played at rallies to affirm communal beliefs and to convince adversaries of the artists’ point of view.55 One example of a popular pro-war song is “Ballad of the Green Berets” (1966) by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler, which topped the American music charts.56 The song glorifies military courage and pictures soldiers as “America’s Best.”57

Many pro-war songs contrasted the patriotic pride of American soldiers with the cowardice of unpatriotic war-resisters. It was a sentiment popular with many Americans.58 However, most pro-war songs were unsuccessful at rendering the ideological confusion faced by many American soldiers. The national pride and gratitude that was heralded in songs like “Ballad of the Green Berets” was usually absent when soldiers returned from Vietnam.59 Consequently, pro-war songs did not satisfyingly translate the complex feelings and mixed messages that GI’s were exposed to during the Vietnam War.

Anti-Vietnam War songs articulated the complex experiences of GI’s more successfully. They worked to form a common understanding and bond amongst GI’s and society.60 Many soldiers listened to the same music in Vietnam that people at home were
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listening to. Some soldiers appropriated popular songs that were not specifically about the Vietnam War, but that gained a meaning of dissent in the context of the battlefield. For example, the song “We’ve Got to Get out of this Place” (1965) by The Animals, which originally refers to poverty. GI’s regularly requested this song, along with more explicit and sometimes banned antiwar songs.61 In his memoir Dispatches, veteran Michael Herr recalls how he and fellow soldiers debated the futility of the war while listening to antiwar songs on the radio.62 This illustrates how antiwar music would encourage GI’s in collective antiwar dissent.

Some songs explicitly discussed the lack of veteran support in America. Songs such as “Sam Stone” (1971) by John Prine and “Bummer” (1974) by Harry Chapin narrate the meager respect that Vietnam veterans received.63 Other songs discussed the miscellaneous reception of veterans, some receiving them as national heroes, others as traders or senseless murderers. However, as many antiwar songs reflected soldier’s confusing experiences in Vietnam and America, music provided GI’s with the comfort that their experiences were heard at home.64 Additionally, antiwar music functioned as an unofficial source of information, as it often countered the information received through official communication channels in Vietnam. The antiwar sentiment and -messages that reflected the sympathies present in American society, led GI’s to question the legitimacy of their task.65

Apart from discerning the style and impact of songs, it is also important to take musician’s personal dedication to other forms of protest into account. By personally taking part in protests, musicians aligned musical antiwar messages with other forms of non-violent activism. Some popular musicians were personally involved in antiwar protests, made political statements in magazine- and newspaper interviews and commented on the war on stage.66 Musicians such as Pete Seeger already had a foot in peace-activism.67 As the antiwar movement grew, young musicians such as Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs and Joan Baez, who were
all outspoken antiwar activists, joined in the musical antiwar chorus. Although most took part in protests on an individual basis, they also had a collective goal, specific to their position as musical artists.

On September 24, 1965, a group of sixty musicians gathered to perform for a crowd of 5,000 at a Sing-In for Peace at Carnegie Hall. These musicians, including Joan Baez, Pete Seeger and Phil Ochs, came together to musically protest the Vietnam War. They sang original songs and recontextualized existing songs such as “Stop in the Name of Love” by The Supremes to request an end to the war. The concert was announced in a pamphlet, in which the following oath was included; “The undersigned are gathered together for one purpose: to protest the immoral, irrational and irresponsible acts of war which our government carries out in Viet-Nam in our names.”

The pamphlet and the sing-in itself underlined the musicians’ collective commitment to protesting the war. Notably, war-resistance and securing peace are presented as the inherent task of the musician:

“The artist has always been counted among the resistors of death and the celebrators of life for this is his real work. Recognizing this, we are ready and willing to use our words, our tunes, our spirits and our flesh to stand in opposition to those whose game is war, to raise our voices against the screams of killers, not just for the salvation of unknown peoples in far-way places, but so that we too, may live.”

The pamphlet additionally pictures musicians as having a specific task in protesting the Vietnam War:
“It is our job to rescue truth, to expose and transfix the myths and legends…to show the naked lunch at the end of LBJ’s fork…to convince as many American as we can that we are murderers. That our taxes become transmogrified into ways to kill.”

The pamphlet illustrates that musicians did not merely see themselves as reporters of events or public sentiments, but as informers that could guide people towards active forms of war dissent.

Anti-Vietnam War music itself was also recognized as a form of protest. It was usually seen as inherently non-violent. The newspaper article “Even Their Beards Will Go,” published in the New York Times in 1968, describes how music was used as a notable and peaceful form of protest, counter to the more antagonistic protests of the time. In the 1967 New York Times article “Vietnam Blues,” the growing collection of anti-Vietnam War songs is equated with other types of non-violent protest such as “sit-ins, teach-ins, sleep-ins, walk-outs, vigils, fasts and [...] marches.”

Many anti-war musicians were personally involved in these other types of non-violent protest. They provided entertainment and spoke out at rallies and events such as the May 2d Movement, the April 17, 1965 rally in Washington organized by the SDS, university teach-ins, peace festivals etc. Joan Baez was one of the most ardent protesters of antiwar musicians during the Vietnam War. She evaded taxes because of her aversion to the war. She also organized a national tax-refusal campaign with A.J Muste in 1966. Additionally, she co-founded the Institute for the Study of Non-Violence. Baez was not the only popular musician committed to non-violent protest. For example, both Phil Ochs and Pete Seeger were pacifists and promoted pacifist ideology in their music and speeches.

The personal protest of musicians was popular with the media, as it combined famous singers and controversy. Several musicians were involved in scandals surrounding their music and Vietnam War protest. Pete Seeger was one of the artists who was blacklisted by
the American government and media and barred from giving performances on radio, television, and music venues.\textsuperscript{79} Pete Seeger gave a controversial appearance on the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour. Some of his lyrics in “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” that referred to Vietnam were cut from the program.\textsuperscript{80} The song was censored because it spoke out against president Lyndon Johnson. Seeger protested against the channel until the song was aired again, uncensored.\textsuperscript{81}

Different musicians assisted and supported peace organizations and protest groups during trials. Songstress Judy Collins set out to perform “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” at the Chicago Conspiracy Trial on January 22, 1970. Some famous protesters, including S.D.S. leader Paul Potter, were being tried. The judge refused to let Collins sing. This was not an isolated event. Over the few weeks prior to this particular incident, several musicians active in antiwar protests had been called up as witnesses. Phil Ochs was another musician who was refused the right to sing songs of protest in court.\textsuperscript{82}

Joan Baez made the news with her anti-war protest on several occasions. For example, when she had a run-in with the D.A.R. due to her tax evasion. Baez was supposed to give a paid concert in the D.A.R.’s auditorium, but the organization refused her. The D.A.R. stated in a letter of protest that they “respectfully request that Joan Baez be denied the privilege of using property supported by Federal taxes, since it has been reported in the press that she refused to pay a portion of her own legal Federal taxes because of disagreement with Government policy concerning the Vietnam war.”\textsuperscript{83} In a different article, Mrs. William H. Sullivan, president general of the D.A.R., stated, “We are directly behind our boys who are dying there.”\textsuperscript{84} Joan Baez responded by giving a free concert attended by 30,000 people outside of the Washington Monument; many more than would have fit in the D.A.R.’s auditorium. In effect, Baez not only protested the war during her concert, but also the white elite that was regularly blamed
for supporting the war. She stated that he DAR was acting “out of the same kind of fear we all make our mistakes by.”

Artists also reflected on their anti-war activism in interviews. Joan Baez has stated that she performed her songs “first as a human being, second as a pacifist, and third as a folk singer.” After almost being banned from performing at a Beacon high school due to protest of over 700 people arguing that the musician was “un-American,” Pete Seeger responded to the incident, saying “I don’t mind controversy. The human race benefits when there is controversy and suffers when there is none.” Seeger also commented on the general role of music in the Vietnam War protest, awarding a special, but important political function to music; “There has always been a running battle between politicians and artists. [...] Politics and art are not related in the customary sense. But in the broadest sense, art, including folk music, reflects the culture and attitudes of the society.” He additionally reflected on his own role in the Vietnam War protest movement, stating that, “[i]t may seem a farfetched comparison [...] but for many years I pursued a theory of cultural guerilla tactics.”

Phil Ochs has been described as “the most angry, bitter and uncompromising critic whom the folk protest movement produced.” Phil Ochs often reported on current events, in the tradition of the folk singer. Although he musically discussed different social issues, the Vietnam War was his favorite topic. The journalistic quality of Phil Ochs’ music is unsurprising, as he was active as a journalist during his time as a student at Berkeley University. In The Movement and the Sixties, Terry Anderson recalls that, “[j]ournalism major Phil Ochs at Ohio State was slated to become editor of the school paper The Lantern, but faculty advisers rejected him because his views were “too controversial.” He quit in his last year and became a folk singer.”

It is safe to say that abovementioned musicians worked hard to promote antiwar dissent during the Vietnam era. They affirmed antiwar sentiment already present in society,
educated listeners about the Vietnam War’s specific and complex problems, begged empathy for victims of the war on all fronts, directed blame towards America’s government and politicians, suggested different forms of antiwar protest and backed up musical messages by personally participating in antiwar activism. Although it is impossible to measure the actual effect Vietnam War protest music had on American society, it can be argued that anti-Vietnam War music actively promoted antiwar dissent amongst the American public and GI’s. Additionally, music had a uniquely unifying effect on the fragmented antiwar movement and was able to spread antiwar messages amongst a large group, aiding the larger antiwar movement. Subsequently, Anti-Vietnam War songs provided a soundtrack that deserves to be listened to more intently by scholars of Vietnam War protest.
Endnotes

1 These are some of the most prominent musicians who protested the Vietnam War in their music and who were personally involved in anti-Vietnam War activism. For this reason, they have been chosen as exemplary musicians in this paper. However, throughout this paper other musicians are quoted and mentioned where relevant.


3 For example: David James, Charles DeBenedetti, Charles Chatfield, Melvin Small, Kenneth Bindas, Craig Houston.

4 For example: David A. Noebel, Jerome Rodnitzky, Ray Pratt, Todd Gittlin, Ron Eyerman, Andrew Jamison.


12 Rosenstone, “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” 143.


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21 Hill, “This is My Country,” 50.


23 James, “The Viet Nam War and American Music,” 126.


25 Rosenstone, “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” 133.


29 For example: Robert Rosenstone, David James, Terry Anderson, Jerome Rodnitzky, Michael Kramer, et al.


37 Ibidem, 322.


41 Rosenstone, “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” 136.

42 Bindas and Houston, “Taking’ Care of Business,” 12.


47 Rosenstone, “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” 136.


51 James, “The Viet Nam War and American Music,” 129.

52 Ibidem, 127.


54 Ibidem, 113.

55 Perone, Songs of the Vietnam Conflict, 10.


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James, “The Viet Nam War and American Music,” 136.

MacPherson. Long Time Passing, 104.

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Herr, Dispatches, 138.


Ibidem, 134.

Ibidem, 149.


James, “The Viet Nam War and American Music,” 131.


Small, Antiwarriors, 13, 16, 23, 26, 28.

Rosenstone, “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” 133.


Small, Antiwarriors, 43.


Rodnitzky, “The Sixties between the Microgrooves,” 112.


83 Drummond Ayres Jr., “30,000 In Capital at Free Concert by Joan Baez,” 33.


85 Drummond Ayres Jr., “30,000 In Capital at Free Concert by Joan Baez,” 33.


87 Richard F. Shepard. “Seeger will Sing as Protest Fades: Objectors at Beacon Recital Say They Won’t Picket.” *New York Times*, November 25, 1965, 64.


91 Eyerman and Jamison, “Social movements and cultural transformation,” 462.

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