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### Runner-up Project: There's Something Happening Here: American Protest Songs of the Vietnam War

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There's Something Happening Here:  
American Protest Songs of the Vietnam War

Jordan Stevens  
Historical Methods  
Ms. Marquess  
November 7, 2018

Americans have been singing protest songs since the inception of the nation and the idea of protesting through music is as old as music itself. The earliest and most well-known American songs and hymns of protest were patriotic songs like “The Star-Spangled Banner” and the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” that were written during the War of 1812 and the Civil War respectively.<sup>1</sup> The effectiveness of protest songs of the era was limited though, as the only people who heard the song were the people in attendance at the performance. This changed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the invention of the phonograph. Later versions of the phonograph were called record players and Americans used them to listen to popular music, and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century several advancements were made in radio technology, allowing even more Americans the ability to listen to the popular music of the time. By the time that Franklin Roosevelt gave his famous “Fireside Chats”, tens of millions of Americans owned a radio. In 1941, out of 82 million American adults, 54 million tuned in to hear Roosevelt’s broadcast on the radio.<sup>2</sup> These technological advancements that allowed more Americans to listen to music in their homes made music more popular as a hobby and gave protest songs a larger platform.

Along with the technology to listen, inspiration for the songwriters was abundant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and protest songs became an important part of American musical culture. Many 20<sup>th</sup> century musicians found inspiration in issues like fighting both world wars, the great depression and workers’ rights, and movements that supported women’s and civil rights. All of those issues have had protest songs written about them, but the songs were not integral to the movement overall. The protest movement that most relied on song in America were the popular protests of

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<sup>1</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, *Songs of Protest, War and Peace: A Bibliography and Discography* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 1973), x-xi.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher H. Sterling. “The Fireside Chats” Library of Congress, Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1944)(2002) Date Accessed October 17, 2018<https://www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/FiresideChats.pdf>.

the Vietnam War. Juan Rene Carillo argues that the protest song was the most influential aspect of the protest of the war.<sup>3</sup> Some of the most enduring and recognizable protest songs ever came from the Vietnam War era, like Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" and "Fortunate Son" by Creedence Clearwater Revival. Most Americans have probably heard both songs so many times that the words stop meaning anything, but at the time of their release they were two of the most relatable and hard-hitting songs on the radio. Besides being relatable because of the lyrics, many Vietnam War protest songs were catchy, aesthetically pleasing songs and that obviously increases any songs popularity. The backdrop of the Vietnam War only boosted the popularity of these protest songs. The Vietnam War created a political and social climate from which the most influential songs in modern American protest music were produced. These songs are remembered for their biting criticisms of several different aspects of the war like young people bearing the burden of fighting the war, the draft, the president, and the whole idea of war.

The overconfidence of American leadership was a huge factor in the blunders of the Vietnam War, but the U.S. military gave them several reasons to be confident since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1898, the United States went to war with Spain over the sinking of an American ship in Havana Harbor and soundly defeated them in about three months. The American victory in the Spanish-American war brought with it a new sense of patriotism and independence. This little war gave the U.S. a new identity as a colonial power that had no problem interfering in world affairs and a power recognizable on the world stage. With this newfound military power, the U.S. took their troops to Europe and assisted the allies in winning the first world war and did the same twenty years later in WWII. By the end of WWII, there was

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<sup>3</sup> Juan Rene Carillo, "The Influence of Protest Songs on the U.S. Public: A Vietnam War Perspective" (Master's thesis, The University of Texas at El Paso, 2014) 3, Accessed October 5, 2018, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

a new threat on the world stage in the eyes of Americans and that threat was communism. The devastation of WWII left two superpowers in the world, the USA and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). They were uneasy allies during the war, but their conflicting ideologies created a rift after the war. The USSR occupied several eastern European countries after WWII and U.S. officials were worried that other European and Asian countries would fall into the communist fold. The United States responded with a policy of containment while the USSR attempted to spread communism, and this was the underlying cause of the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> The Cold War was sometimes fought in the form of proxy wars in places like Korea and Vietnam. In Korea, containment was successful, and the Korean peninsula has been in the same political situation ever since, but it would not go so well in Vietnam. Vietnam was a French colony struggling to gain independence in any way possible, it just so happened that the party fighting for independence was also communist. The communist Vietnamese were called the Viet Minh and they fought a guerilla style war against the established and trained military forces of the French. President Truman decided to send aid to the French, which was hypocritical because America, a former colony, was helping the French maintain control of a colony. When President Dwight Eisenhower was elected, he decided that money and supplies was not enough, and this was no longer a fight to help the French, but to stop the spread of Communism, so he sent a small number of military advisors to help the South Vietnamese strategize. Even with American support the French lost their dominance over the country after losing decisively to the Viet Minh. Vietnam was partitioned in half, with the Viet Minh taking the Northern half and the Southern half became a new country called South Vietnam. However, the fighting would not stop for the

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<sup>4</sup> Amanda Carr-Wilcoxson, "Protest Music of the Vietnam War: Description and Classification of Various Protest Songs" (master's thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2010) 9, Accessed October 5, 2018, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

Viet Minh, now called the North Vietnamese Army, who turned their attention and began fighting the U.S. backed South Vietnamese. At the conclusion of his term, Eisenhower advised the incoming President Kennedy to do whatever he could to stop a communist takeover of Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> Lyndon Johnson took over the situation after the abrupt assassination of Kennedy and further escalated the war. President Nixon took office in 1969 when U.S. troop levels reached their peak at about 543,400.<sup>6</sup> Vietnam was an issue passed from one president to the next for three decades, and U.S. involvement escalated until there were hundreds of thousands of young Americans fighting and dying in Vietnam. This escalation was carried out in secrecy and without the consent of congress, and therefore without the consent of the American people.

The Vietnam War started as a fight for independence that spiraled out of control when the U.S. got involved. The war was extremely unpopular in America and especially unpopular with the young men that were sent to fight a war that they never asked for. This unpopularity coupled with the American tradition of protest created an opportunity for musicians to tap into the feelings felt by the people that listened to their songs. Many musicians that protested the war were young people who felt the same way as their listeners and had the same chances of being sent off to the war. Musicians and artists from every genre and style of music had their versions of protest songs, but the most popular and important genres of the time were Rock, Folk, and Soul or Rhythm & Blues music. These musicians did what they did best and wrote about their feelings and explained their grievances. Songs like “For What It’s Worth” mention “Young people speaking their minds, getting so much resistance from behind”, but speak their minds was

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<sup>5</sup> David Anderson, ed., *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), 134.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Hillstrom, Laurie Collier Hillstrom, and Diane M. Sawinski, *Vietnam War Reference Library* (Detroit, MI: UXL, 2001) xix.

about all they could do when this song was released.<sup>7</sup> For a majority of the years that the United States was in Vietnam, the voting age was 21, but eligibility for the draft started at age 18. Barry McGuire's "Eve of Destruction" perfectly satirizes the issues stating, "you're old enough to kill, but not for voting".<sup>8</sup> This line encapsulates what many millions of young Americans were feeling, hopelessness. The U.S. forced these kids that could not vote to go to a country halfway across the world to kill people who were just fighting for their own independence. According to James E. Perone, some radio stations and networks banned "Eve of Destruction", but it still managed to become a billboard #1.<sup>9</sup> The voting age was lowered in 1971, after years of sending unrepresented young people to die and kill, but by then the war was coming to a close and it did not help the thousands and thousands of young U.S. troops already in Vietnam. Songwriters like Phil Ochs shared the same sentiments in his song "I Ain't Marching Anymore", but Ochs points out that "It's always the old to lead us to the war, it's always the young to fall".<sup>10</sup> Young people in America felt especially put upon because this seemed to be a war only a few old men in powerful positions wanted, and most of the young people that actually fought did not want any part of it. The U.S. bestowed a great burden upon the young men of America and this not only made the kids angry, but their parents as well.

An overlooked aspect of the mistake that was the Vietnam war, is the effect on the parents that sent their child to war. "Backlash Blues" was a popular protest song, performed by Nina Simone, that tells the story of a mother who sends her son to Vietnam and is left in America

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<sup>7</sup> Buffalo Springfield, "For What It's Worth" Recorded December 5, 1966. Streaming audio, accessed September 15, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/3PkdGRruLnJ9zCtANiDrpB>.

<sup>8</sup> Barry McGuire. "Eve of Destruction" Recorded July 15, 1965. Streaming audio, accessed September 21, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/search/results/eve%20of%20>.

<sup>9</sup> James E. Perone, *Songs of the Vietnam Conflict* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001) 10.

<sup>10</sup> Phil Ochs "I Ain't Marching Anymore" Recorded 1964. Streaming audio, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/28XoBuuNDXciDAfEgDMg6>.

in second-class housing, living with racial injustice.<sup>11</sup> It cannot be forgotten that the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement were happening simultaneously in America, and there were plenty of raw feelings to go around. “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die-Rag” was another popular protest song of the Vietnam era and it was performed by Country Joe & the Fish at Woodstock. The song starts out with the band chanting “Give me an F”, and then the crowd would respond “F!” and they spelled the word fish with this chant, but when it was performed at Woodstock the band started with the usual “Give me an F”, only this time they spelled out a different four letter word.<sup>12</sup> This example demonstrates the frustration and angst felt by the younger generation. “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die-Rag” is remembered best for other parts of the song, but the last verse mentions the mothers and fathers of the war:

Well come on mothers throughout the land, Pack your boys off to Vietnam  
Come on fathers don't hesitate, Send them off before it's too late  
Be the first one on your block, To have your boy come home in a box.<sup>13</sup>

This song was satirical and almost comedic, but the image of parents sending their kids off to Vietnam and then receiving the news that their kid died was a reality to many thousands of families in America. These two songs show, in different ways, the horrible situation of having to send a child to war and, potentially, to their death.

During the Vietnam War, the United States implemented the draft. Though this was not the first time America relied on the draft to bolster their numbers in wartime, it was the first time that it was unpopular. The U.S. used a draft in WWII when it looked like they might have to intervene, and it was actually a popular idea because the allies were losing, and the American

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<sup>11</sup> Nina Simone. “Backlash Blues” Recorded 1967, RCA Victor’s studio B, Streaming audio, <https://open.spotify.com/album/12aKG91Tj6hJFOe90TzcX2>.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Hillstrom and Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *Woodstock* (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, Incorporated, 2012) 60.

<sup>13</sup> Country Joe and the Fish, “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die-Rag”, by Joe McDonald, Recorded July-September 1967, Streamed audio, Accessed October 28, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/5qLH7ahsjN4qZumjwdlkhT>.



people believed in the reasoning for fighting. With the Vietnam War the situation was completely flipped as the conflict in Vietnam was unpopular with the American people and reasoning was shaky. The draft was obviously a target for protest and protest songs because even though the draft was supposed to be random it seemed like the lower-classes of America were the ones chosen.

There were plenty of ways to secure a deferment from the draft, but they all seemed to benefit wealthier people. Young men received deferments for going to college, medical or mental issues, or simply knowing the right people. The idea of well-connected kids getting deferments really annoyed songwriter John Fogerty, who along with the rest of his band Creedence Clearwater Revival, wrote “Fortunate Son”, which decried the idea of wealthy Americans avoiding service simply because of their wealth. With lines like “Some folks are born silver spoon in hand, Lord, don’t they help themselves” and “It aint me, I aint no millionaires son, no”, it was clear who Fogerty was addressing.<sup>14</sup> Along with deferments, there were other less legal ways to avoid Vietnam. An individual could lie about their reasons for going to school, lie about an injury, or even bribe the local draft board, who had the ultimate say over who went and who stayed. These illegal resisters were celebrated or at least supported by some American musicians. American kids could relate when Phil Ochs sang the chorus of “Draft Dodger Rag”:

Sarge, I'm only eighteen, I got a ruptured spleen, And I always carry a purse,  
I got eyes like a bat, And my feet are flat, And my asthma's getting worse,  
Yes, think of my career, my sweetheart dear, And my poor old invalid aunt,  
Besides, I ain't no fool, I'm a-goin' to school, And I'm working in a DEE-fense plant.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Creedence Clearwater Revival. “Fortunate Son” Recorded 1969, Fantasy Studios, Berkeley, California, Streaming audio, accessed September 15, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/31q47gQszFt0CddSyMksgO>.

<sup>15</sup> Phil Ochs “Draft Dodger Rag” recorded 1964, Streaming audio, accessed October 16, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/28XoBuuNDXciDAfEgDMg6>.

Within the verses the singer pretends that he actually supports the war and wants to go to Vietnam. This song points out the absurdity of draft deferments while condemning the entire war. Ochs is also lampooning other odd ways of getting deferments like being gay or working in a factory that supplied weapons or ammunition for the war. Ochs used humor to prove his point. Humor and satire were common in Vietnam War protest songs because the humor mixed with the serious topics made for a more memorable and influential song.<sup>16</sup> The courage and sanity of draft dodgers was celebrated in “Draft Resister” by Steppenwolf, who recognized that these people were just doing what they believed to be right, in the face of terrible punishments.<sup>17</sup> Steppenwolf felt for the kids that had to choose between going to potentially die in Southeast Asia or stay home and go to jail. The draft put many thousands of Americans in this awful position and this created more anger and division over Vietnam.

The Vietnam War offered opportunities to musicians and songwriters of the era to get their frustrations out about the whole topic of war. There were several anti-war protest songs not specifically about Vietnam, but war in general, and these overall anti-war songs became some of the most enduring songs of the era because of their connection to Vietnam. “War” performed by Edwin Starr asked “War, huh, yeah, what is it good for?” and then answered, “Absolutely nothing”.<sup>18</sup> The message of the song was obvious and simple. Starr thought that all war was completely useless. This song was especially potent for soldiers like David Samples, who said about “War”, “It had a message and to a lot of us it came loud and clear”.<sup>19</sup> Even the soldiers that

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<sup>16</sup> Duane Fish, “Songs of the Sixties: A Rhetorical Examination of Songs as a Protest Against the Vietnam War” (PhD diss., The University of Utah, 1994) 225-226.

<sup>17</sup> Steppenwolf “Draft Resister” Recorded 1969, American Recording Co. Studio, Studio City, CA, Streaming audio, accessed October 16, 2018 <https://open.spotify.com/album/3TQWgonBLY6GKL2PAO9DOK>.

<sup>18</sup> Edwin Starr. “War” By Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, Recorded May 15, 1970, Hitsville USA (Studio A), Detroit, Michigan, Streaming audio, Accessed September 21, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Doug Bradley and Craig Werner, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 42-43.

were fighting the war were listening to anti-war protest songs and relating to their messages. Several anti-war songs from the late 1960s became hits based on their opposition to war. One example is “What’s Going On” by Marvin Gaye in which Gaye seems perplexed over Vietnam and U.S. involvement there. Gaye provided a solution singing, “We don't need to escalate, You see, war is not the answer, For only love can conquer hate”<sup>20</sup>, but there did not seem to be much love in the hearts of people sending young American kids to war.

All of this anger that young people were holding had to be directed somewhere and that place was right at the leaders of the U.S. at the time. Lyndon Johnson was president from 1963-1969, when the largest buildup and heaviest fighting took place, so he was targeted in many protest songs. The most scathing protest songs were directed towards Lyndon Johnson and his actions because of the dishonesty, secrecy, and ignorance associated with the whole affair in Vietnam. While campaigning for the presidency in 1964, and also when he assumed office, Johnson promised not to escalate the war in Southeast Asia. In a speech just a few weeks prior to the election of 1964 Johnson said, “We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves”.<sup>21</sup> Songs like “Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation” by Tom Paxton called the president out by name and calls out Johnson’s hypocrisy on American involvement in Vietnam, Paxton pointed out another controversy in the second half of the chorus singing “though it isn’t really war, we’re sending 50,000 more to save Vietnam from the Vietnamese”, meaning that since congress never declared war, Johnson was acting of his own accord in Vietnam.<sup>22</sup> Paxton uses this song to express his

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<sup>20</sup> Marvin Gaye, “What’s Going On” Recorded June 1, July 6,7,10, 1970, Hitsville USA, Studio A, Streaming audio, accessed September 23, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/6qX4eoPWGt eMdJMqGOWPTs>.

<sup>21</sup> G. Calvin Mackenzie, *The Imperiled Presidency: Leadership Challenges in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) 43.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Paxton. “Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation” Recorded 1965, Streaming audio, Accessed October 15, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/49MMiTWQbXb4wwXwi07eDG>.

feeling of confusion related to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Other writers like Pete Seeger were much less overt in their message, but the criticism was there, nonetheless. Seeger's allegorical "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" sees a platoon of training soldiers almost drown in the Mississippi because their captain refuses to allow the men to turn back and when the captain drowns himself, the sergeant takes command and turns the men around.<sup>23</sup> The whole situation was a thinly veiled reference to Vietnam and the captain, also called "the big fool" in the song, was obviously Lyndon Johnson.

The American people lost faith in the president during this time and these protest songs provide evidence of that. Bob Dylan was a young songwriter during the Vietnam war and his feelings for the war and those responsible were obvious. In one of, if not, the most disrespectful and acrimonious protest songs ever written, "Masters of War", lines like "That even Jesus would never forgive what you do" and "And I hope that you die...And I'll stand over your grave 'til I'm sure that you're dead", Dylan made sure listeners knew he was furiously angry about the situation. Dylan sings about wishing death on the people responsible for not only Vietnam, but all wars everywhere.<sup>24</sup> According to Mike Marqusee, Dylan would go on to use this song to protest many different American military involvements, performing it in public during both the First Gulf War and the Iraq war.<sup>25</sup> Dylan himself was surprised with the cruelty of the lyrics to "Masters of War" writing "I don't sing songs which hope people will die, but I couldn't help it in this one. The song is a sort of striking out, a reaction to the last straw, a feeling of what can you

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<sup>23</sup> Pete Seeger, "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" Streaming audio, Accessed September 24, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/5dAW14NIDSNUHmcwDazAES>.

<sup>24</sup> Bob Dylan. "Masters of War" Recorded April 24, 1963, Streaming audio, Accessed September 24, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/0o1uFxZ1VTviqvNaYkTJek>.

<sup>25</sup> Mike Marqusee. *Wicked Messenger: Bob Dylan and the 60s*. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011)1-2. Dylan performed "Masters of War" at the 1991 Grammy's and again in 2004 on the day before the presidential election.

do?”.<sup>26</sup> Now wishing death on people may not be the best strategy, but the feelings behind the song were real and the popularity of the song proves Americans were feeling the same way. Wayne Hampton analyzing Dylan and “Masters of War” wrote that never before had a song as harsh become so popular.<sup>27</sup> The seriousness of the war was translated into the protest songs about it, and this gave the songs more weight as part of the larger protest of the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War had so many different facets and there were horrible things occurring to everyone involved in Vietnam, from the soldiers, to the families, to the protesters on the street and there were protest songs written about each one of these facets. One of the more recognizable protest songs from the era is called “Ohio” by Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young, which tells the story of four college students at Kent State University being murdered by the Ohio National Guard for protesting the Vietnam War.<sup>28</sup> College students at Kent State University planned a protest on campus of the Cambodian campaign of the Vietnam War, but some protesters began throwing rocks and the Ohio National Guard was called in to disperse the students. The National Guard forced the students off the large, grassy, common area on the campus, and then the Guard turned to leave the area. As the National Guard marched away, an officer turned back and began firing at the students, causing several other guardsmen to fire their weapons at the students. In total four students were killed, and many more were wounded. This event stirred up so much resistance to the war and this song only amplified the protests. Another negative aspect of the Vietnam War was the treatment of veterans once they returned home from duty and this issue was examined in probably the most misunderstood and misused protest song

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<sup>26</sup> Bob Dylan. Liner notes to *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Bob Dylan, Columbia, CL 1986, 1963.

<sup>27</sup> Wayne Hampton, *Guerrilla Minstrels: John Lennon, Joe Hill, Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee, 1986) 160.

<sup>28</sup> Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young, “Ohio” Recorded May 21, 1970, Streaming Audio, accessed September 15, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/5C1NUv7hNWS6n0GBtLetKM>.

ever. In the 1980s, Bruce Springsteen wrote “Born in the USA”, and by then he had time to see the mistreatment of soldiers returning from Vietnam. These troops that went to fight for the U.S. and when they came back, they could not get the help they needed whether it was medical attention, housing, or just a little help occasionally. The verses of the song describe the terrible situations these veterans were going through, and make the patriotic chorus, in which Springsteen practically screams the repeated line “Born in the U.S.A.” four times, sound sarcastic or ironic.<sup>29</sup> Even though these men were born in the USA, fought for it, and died for it, they were treated as outcasts and this irked Springsteen and many other Americans like him.

Vietnam was a horrible mistake in the eyes of many looking back on it, and the music of the era can be used to understand the feelings of the young people and protesters who opposed the war. It does not take long listening to Vietnam war protest songs to get a sense of the anger, distrust, and opposition towards almost all aspects of the Vietnam War, from the draft, to the president, and the reason for U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. People in America were losing their brothers, fathers, cousins, friends, and family and they just wanted this war to end. The protest songs were a way of coping with the pain and somewhere to turn their anger. While there were songs and musicians that supported the war, they were vastly outnumbered by the protesters of Vietnam. The Vietnam War was unique in American history and from that came the most unique protest, one that was led by songs and songwriters. These songs became the anthems and battle cries of protesters all around the world for many years after with some still being reworked and reimagined today. To say these songs were influential is an understatement. They seemed to effect real change in America during the Vietnam War which is the objective of

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<sup>29</sup> Bruce Springsteen, “Born in the U.S.A.”, Recorded April 1, 1982, Power Station, New York City, Streamed audio, Accessed October 27, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/album/0PMasrHdpaoIRuHuhHp72O>.

most protests. The Vietnam War protest movement was a perfect storm to create some of the greatest protest songs, because all-time great lyricists and musicians were pouring all of their feelings of rage, confusion, and grief into their work and creating new feelings with each new song. These musicians used their awesome talent to create great songs that also have a serious and relevant message.

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