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Five Songs from the 1960s that Changed the World

During the 1960s, the United States was divided but popular music helped to bring unity despite the rising tension. Between the rise in the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War and the major strides made as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, Americans had a lot to disagree about. Using the Rock Window method as a basis for my analysis, I will evaluate five major songs from the 1960s by Simon & Garfunkel, Buffy Sainte Marie, Janis Ian, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and Aretha Franklin to see how they changed or commented on political events and phenomenon at the time.

Less than a year after President John F. Kennedy's assassination, Simon and Garfunkel's influential "The Sound of Silence" was released in September 1964 (Wikipedia). Although the song was not originally intended to mourn the loss of America's beloved JFK, "The Sound of Silence" struck a chord, if you will, within American popular culture as it was on the Billboard Hot 100 charts for 14 weeks total and reached number one when it was rereleased in the *Sounds of Silence* album in 1966. The song was originally written by Paul Simon when he was 21 years old which was prior to JFK's assassination. However, as Justin Novelli writes on Songfacts.com, the loss of JFK was felt across the nation and although "The Sound of Silence" was not intended to reflect the mourning of JFK throughout our nation, it worked rhetorically to do just that. Lyrically, the song works to describe a disconnect between how people surrounding the speaker

communicate, as though they do not understand each other or what the speaker has to say. The vocals of Simon and Garfunkel overlap to create a beautiful harmony but the tone used is very solemn and heavy which is also reflected in the instrumental part of the music. Originally, the song was recorded using only acoustic guitars, but was later dubbed with electric instruments after Columbia Records thought it would popularize the song more (Songfacts). For the purposes of this analysis, I will be focusing on the acoustic version as that is the song that was first heard by the American public in 1964. The acoustic guitars layered with the vocals create a fairly thin texture of polyphonic sound. Rhythmically, the song begins with a fairly slow BPM that matches the tempo of their singing, but the rhythm builds as the narrative lyrics build. The song crescendos towards the end and the rhythm quickly slows back to the way it began with the hook "... the sounds of silence". The hook is repeated four times throughout the song and each time the word "silence" is long and drawn out, which creates contrast to highlight it for the listener. This is what makes the hook easily remembered by listeners and, therefore, popular. "The Sound of Silence" has since been used in pop culture references in connection to mourning.

After John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson worked to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Civil Rights Movement seemed to gain in popularity during the 1960s with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, the creation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, and the emergence of black civil rights leaders like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Stokely Carmichael. Another major legal stride made in favor of the Civil Rights Movement was the Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* which began in 1959 and finally ended in 1967 with the decision to legalize interracial marriage (Wikipedia). Just before the Supreme Court's decision was finalized, a thirteen year-old

girl named Janis Ian wrote and composed the single “Society’s Child” which was later released in September 1966 when she was 14. The song narrates how a young white girl, like Janis Ian, had fallen in love with a young black boy but how her mother and teachers who preach equality would not let them be together. Her mother goes as far as to tell her “honey, he’s not our kind.” By the end of the narrative, Janis has to tell her boyfriend that they can no longer see each other because she is society’s child, where the song’s entitlement comes in. In other words, she blames her actions on how she is a product of society and that she is unable to live with the societal judgement that comes with being with a black partner. Musically, the ensemble of an acoustic guitar, tambourine, and piano create a polyphonic, lightly textured sound. The music and lyrics pique at the lines “Preachers of equality, think they believe it, then why won’t they just let us be?”, which is followed by the hook: “They say I can’t see you anymore, baby, can’t see you anymore.” Here, the song is building up to a high intensity where the tempo speeds up but then suddenly falls causing a tonal shift in the music and the lyrics follow suit. The tone of it transforms the song from a somewhat protest song into a sad break up song. Rhetorically, this makes the listener feel the break up more personally to imitate the loss that the girl must have felt. She clearly sees the injustice but because she is society’s child, as she says, she has to stop seeing him. Although the song mainly uses the acoustic guitar and it discusses an especially controversial topic for the time period, romantic interracial relationships, it is considered a part of the pop genre and not folk music. It is likely not considered folk because of the ensemble of instruments creating a more texturally thick sound that folk musicians do not typically lean towards.

A good example of a folk song from the 1960s is Buffy Sainte Marie's "Universal Soldier" which was first released in 1964 on the album *It's My Way!*. This famously anti-war protest song describes the various types of soldiers by differentiating them by their different types of religions, the cause for their fighting, and the nation they are fighting for. In doing all of this, Saint Marie is describing how all soldiers despite their nationality, culture, and religious identity differences live by the same universal moral - that killing is wrong. However, they choose to do so anyway which only adds to the fire that is war. This song is arguably the simplest musically but the most powerful lyrically that I am analyzing because Buffy Sainte Marie composed it using just her acoustic guitar and voice. The simplistic ensemble allows the listener to focus more so on her spoken word type of singing than on the music. Something that makes the song more complex is the lack of a definitive hook. Instead, Sainte Marie uses a similar pattern of music and lyrics throughout. For example, she sings "He's a catholic, a Hindu, an Atheist, a Jane", and a few lines later sings, " And he's fighting for Canada, he's fighting for France" with the same melody of notes played to start each of these lines. Sainte Marie then clarifies her condemning the soldiers' hand in enabling war by making the analogy of "But without him how would Hitler have condemned him at Dachau", with "him" referring to the universal soldier. Here, Sainte Marie clearly argues that the only way to create peace and stop fighting is if we do not supply the means in which to fight - soldiers. In fact, many men thought it was their duty to fight for their country and that it would bring honor to them. In the Ken Burns Vietnam War documentary segment "Joining the Marine Corps", the producers interviewed some Vietnam War veterans that chose to enlist because they saw how their parents' generation were so well honored for their service in WWII. However, they soon realized that the

Vietnam War was much different than any previous war fought because of the newly invented chemical warfare used to kill innocent civilians. These veterans did not feel like war heroes, they felt more like murderers. Obviously, Sainte Marie's claim is very controversial because the draft was later reinstated by President Lyndon B. Johnson in November 1965 which essentially forced young, healthy men to become soldiers (University of Michigan). However, there were some young men that were able to get around the draft because of certain privileges.

Creedence Clearwater Revival recognized the unjust placement of those being drafted and wrote "Fortunate Son" as a reflection of the phenomenon. Historically, it is well known that many men were able to evade their draft call. This was due to a number of different reasons, but the most despicable one was the upper class' ability to use their status, money, and connections to get deferred from going to combat or being in the military in general. This is reflected in the lyrics "I ain't no millionaire's son... I ain't no fortunate son." Later, however, the song says "I ain't no military son." An article titled "The Truth About 'Fortunate Son'" on Military.com says that, historically, even military veterans would use their connections in the military to get their sons deferred from the draft. The same article also claims "Fortunate Son" is an "anti-draft dodger song." When "Fortunate Son" was first released in November 1969 on the album *Willy and the Poor Boys*, it was in 14th place on the charts for nine weeks. Since then it has been featured on television shows and movies, such as *Forrest Gump*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Family Guy* (Wikipedia). As previously stated, the lyrics are a criticism of those that were privileged enough to evade the draft, the fortunate sons of men that had connections and power. The hook is repeated throughout the song and goes "It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate one, no." It is important to note that John Fogerty, the lead singer, sounds like he is on the verge of shouting

throughout the song. His voice is very rough and powerful sounding and the music is just as empowering. Musically, the song begins with a classic Creedence Clearwater Revival electric guitar riff with a fast tempo being played on the drums for the back beat. The drums and electric guitar are the main and most prominent instruments in the ensemble. The overall form and musical melody, or the basic tune of the piece, is repeated with each set of lyrics, giving “Fortunate Son” a very memorable and recognizable pattern. Although the song is only just over two minutes long, it still packs a punch with its forceful and energetic tone both musically and lyrically. Obviously, this song was meant to appeal to the lesser privileged and minority groups, like the middle class and African Americans, that were more likely to go to combat because of the draft evasion of so many others. Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son” worked as an agent of change as this was a major concern for Americans and why President Richard Nixon proposed and implemented the draft lottery (University of Michigan). The lottery was based on one’s birth date, but, of course, many still found ways to evade it. For those that were unable to avoid being drafted, they were sent off to fight in Vietnam where music became an even bigger part of some soldiers’ lives.

“Chain of Fools” by Aretha Franklin became a sort of anthem for soldiers despite it not being intended as an anti-war protest song. In analyzing the lyrics, the song begins with the hook which is a series of “chain, chain, chain”, which is sung by a back up choir harmonizing with lead vocalist and pianist Aretha Franklin, followed by the line “chain of fools”, which the song is named after. A narrative follows with the hook with these lines:

For five long years

I thought you were my man

But I found out

I'm just a link in your chain.

Here, it is clear that Aretha Franklin is singing about how her significant other had been cheating on her for an extended period of time. Compared to the previous songs discussed, “Chain of Fools” is a lot more musically and vocally dense. According to Wikipedia, the ensemble is composed of four backup vocalists, a bass, piano, two guitars, electric piano, and drums. All of which work together harmoniously to create the polyphonic melody of the track. The song is also a part of the Rhythm and Blues (R&B) genre and, after its initial release in 1967, it stayed number one on the top R&B charts for four weeks straight (Wikipedia). In chapter two of *We Gotta Get Out of this Place* by Craig Werner and Doug Bradley, Werner and Bradley interviewed a Vietnam Veteran that claims “Chain of Fools” was a well known song amongst soldiers. As I touched on earlier, a large portion of American soldiers were African American as a result of the more privileged, upper class consisting of mostly white Americans evading the draft. This, in turn, made the role of black musicians even more influential and personal to many of the soldiers. One soldier recalls “... I only had one record in Vietnam,” that record being one of Aretha Franklin’s. He claims, “Aretha kept me sane” (Werner & Bradley). Another soldier remembered after collecting body parts for a body bag and listening to “Chain of Fools” that “We danced until we puked... If we hadn’t have done it, I might have lost my mind” (Werner & Bradley). Werner and Bradley also suggest that African Americans may have interpreted the chains of the song to symbolize the chains that enslaved their peoples in the past and that being drafted was just another form of enslavement. This may be true, but a more general analysis of the lyrics lean towards the fact that those following orders and giving out more orders to increase

the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War are just a small part of a larger chain of fools. Thus, turning a song about infidelity into an anti-war anthem.

Although the 1960s presented a time for great political and social hostility, music and the movements music worked in conjunction with helped join Americans together at home as well as overseas in Vietnam. As the soldier interviewed in chapter two of *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* inferred about Aretha Franklin's "Chain of Fools", music creates a platform for people to bond over (Werner & Bradley). In the case of the United States during the 1960s, there was plenty of great music for people to bond over.

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