RP Final

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Songs That Reflected their World

 The current state of the world is definitely strange with many changes happening daily. However, in 1962-1975, the time frame of the Vietnam war, life for Americans was even stranger and more dangerous. The shift from the 1950’s to the 1960’s brought about many changes within society. People began questioning the government, war, and even how they lived their everyday lives. Since the time of the Vietnam war displayed so much change and social upheaval, many songs were created to reflect the time period. The songs made during this time touched on a multitude of issues ranging from but not limited to, women’s rights, war protests, political unrest, drug use and much more.

No song could have been more relevant to its time than “Blowin’ in the Wind” originally sung by Bob Dylan. The song was written in 1962 and then released as a single on “*The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*” album in 1963. This song is known for being a protest song questioning peace, war and freedom (“Blowin' in the Wind”). Dylan is an American singer-songwriter, author and visual artist who has been a prominent figure in popular culture for over 50 years. Most of his famous work is from the 1960’s and “Blowin’ in the Wind” became an anthem for civil rights and anti-war movements (“Bob Dylan”). Bob Dylan is mainly known for singing folk music and more socially conscious songs such as this one. As mentioned, one interpretation of the song could be questioning war by the lyrics “How many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died?” and “How many times must the cannon balls fly before they’re forever banned?” (“Blowin’ In The Wind- Bob Dylan”). It is quite evident that Dylan is taking a stand against the Vietnam War, or at least questioning it. Not only are the lyrics socially charged, but the overall sound of the song aids in portraying its message. As one listens to the song, Dylan is the only vocalist and his voice sounds raspy. Also, there are very few instruments used, the listener just hears a guitar (“Blowin’ In The Wind- Bob Dylan”). Through the use of Dylan’s powerful lyrics but simple sounds, his message about war is clearly heard. The events that were occurring at the time Dylan released this song also factored into its meaning and interpretation. The year of 1963 was when United States President John F. Kennedy was assassinated (“What Happened in 1963”). This time of death and uncertainty is also felt in “Blowin’ in the Wind”. Also, in the later part of 1962 into 1963, the British invasion was starting with the occurrence of the Beatles (“What Happened in 1963”). The British invasion took American youth by storm and dramatically changed popular music during that time. Both Dylan’s folk style and the Beatles innovative pop, provided listeners with music they had never heard before and thus changing music’s sound and meaning. As one can see, the meaning of “Blowin’ in the Wind” can be interpreted as questioning the status que, taking a stand for civil rights or for war. This song, overall, got people thinking about the events that were happening at that time, even though it mostly associated with the Vietnam war. It made Americans question things more and prompted them to analyze events in a new way.

 Another significant topical song from the era is “Eve of Destruction” famously sung by Barry McGuire. McGuire is an American singer-songwriter from Oklahoma, known for “Eve of Destruction” (“Barry McGuire”). Like Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ In the Wind”, this song also contains socially charged lyrics and a strong message. This song is said to reference “the Vietnam War, the draft, the threat of nuclear war, the Civil Rights movement, turmoil in the Middle East, and the American space program.” A group named “The Turtles” also recorded the song, but McGuire’s version was released in 1965 (“Eve of Destruction (Song)”). Since the song could be interpreted in different ways, people gained different meanings from it. Some radio stations during the time of its release banned the song claiming it was an aid to the enemy in Vietnam (“Eve of Destruction (Song)”). Like all songs, the lyrics are just one part of it, the actual sound is just as important. When listening to this McGuire song, his voice sounds raspy and rough, similar to Bob Dylan’s. His voice is also the only one heard and a guitar, drums and a harmonica are being played (“Barry McGuire – Eve of Destruction”). Furthermore, the events happening in 1965 gave this song a deeper meaning as the United States was becoming increasingly involved in the Vietnam war. On February 8th of 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent the first U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam and 3,500 marines were sent to a U.S. airbase near Da Nang. While more American troops were sent to Vietnam, some people began having protests against the war. On March 25th, Martin Luther King Jr. led 25,000 people at the state capitol in Montgomery, Alabama (“Historical Events in 1965”). It is obvious that Americans at this time had conflicting views about the Vietnam War. Some were supporting it out of obligation for their respect for the U.S., while others were questioning it or even refusing to support it altogether. Barry McGuire’s “Eve of Destruction” directly represents some people’s views of the war at this time. The lyrics “You’re old enough to kill but not for votin’, you don’t believe in war, but what’s that gun you’re totin’” shows Americans frustration with the war and how young men were sent to Vietnam when they were not old enough to vote (“Barry McGuire – Eve of Destruction”). This protest song, along with Bob Dylan’s “Blowin in the Wind”, got Americans thinking about the war more and questioning the United States involvement in it.

 When listening to “White Rabbit” by Jefferson Airplane, this song was also making a statement, but about a different issue. The two songs previously discussed have an emphasis on the Vietnam war, this song, however, chooses to address a different topic during this time period. Jefferson Airplane was an American rock band from California that became one of the pioneer bands for psychedelic rock (“Jefferson Airplane”). The song “White Rabbit” was written by Grace Slick and recorded by Jefferson Airplane for their 1967 album “*Surrealistic Pillow*”. The song was released as a single and soon became one of the band’s top-ten successes, getting to number eight on the Billboard Hot 100 (“White Rabbit (Song)”). “White Rabbit” has a rock sound with drums, electric guitars and Slick’s pronounced voice (“Jefferson Airplane -White Rabbit-”). One would assume a popular song during this time would address a relatable topic such as the Vietnam war. Jefferson Airplane, however, chose to talk about another issue within American society. The song uses references to the children’s book “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” and relates the story and characters to drugs. Grace Slick mentioned “the composition was supposed to be a slap to parents who read their children such novels and then wondered why their children later used drugs” (“White Rabbit (Song)”). This take on American’s drug use gained popularity while causing anger to some but was overall an agent of change for the time period. While some thought the song was meant to combat drug use, others thought it was encouraging it. In September of 1969, Time magazine released a story titled “Drugs and the Young” basically calling out Jefferson Airplane and other bands for their influence on the rising drug culture. Since the drug culture was seeming to continue to gain momentum, the Nixon Administration created “Operation Intercept”, a surprise anti-drug action aimed at lessening the amount of marijuana coming to the U.S. from Mexico (“‘White Rabbit’”). As one can see, this song made substantial impacts with drug use in America during its day and was very controversial among listeners. Even though the Vietnam war was still going on, this song shifted Americans focus to drug use. This song could be regarded as a stimulant for more concern over drug use and new initiatives began to surface as a result.

 Another song that was important to this time period is “Wild Thing” by the Troggs. This song was originally written by an American songwriter, Chip Taylor and was recorded and released by “the Wild Ones”. This version of the song was not very popular, but when the Troggs recorded it, the song reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 and number two on the UK Singles Chart in 1966 (“Wild Thing (The Troggs Song)”). The Troggs are a garage rock band that formed in 1964 in England. While the Troggs remain active, their most famous U.S. chart topping songs were “Wild Thing”, “With a Girl Like You”, and “Love Is All Around” (“The Troggs”). One could say that this band was a part of the British Invasion that was taking place during this time. Many bands from England were becoming popular in the United States like this one, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. Going along with the theme of much of the music being released at this time, the lyrics of this song could be related to love and young rebellion. Unlike the softer love songs of the Beatles, this song definitely has more of a rock sound. The chorus is “Wild thing, you make my heart sing, you make everything groovy, wild thing” (“The Troggs- Wild Thing”). These lyrics illustrate being in a relationship with someone who is crazy, wild or unpredictable. The pronounced sounds of the electric guitar and drumbeats give the song a heavier sound but are still relatively simple that one could dance to (“The Troggs- Wild Thing”). Songs at this time and even generally speaking, tend to reflect their time period and the events that were occurring. For this song, 1966 was a time when the Vietnam war was very prevalent. As of March 1, 1966, there were about 185,000 U.S. service members in Vietnam and more than 2,700 had been killed (Ray). While this song is not an anti-war or protest song, it is still important to take account the scale of the Vietnam war during this time. This same year, men and women started to wear patterned pants and flowered shirts and boots inspired by the fashion in London (“What Happened in 1966”). These prints could be thought of as wild and exciting which goes along with the message in this song. Overall, this song represents the young people in this time and shows their excitement for everything new that was going on, from love interests to fashion. “Wild Thing” could be associated with the young rebellion movement at this time and shows the generational gap between young people and their parents. The messages of being wild and rebellious would definitely affect the young listeners in America during time.

 The songs discussed thus far have addressed many issues within the time frame of the Vietnam war. From war protest to the drug culture and youth rebellion, many social upheavals were described in music during this time. One topic that has not been examined, however, is women’s rights. The song “You Don’t Own Me” by Lesley Gore illustrates the struggles women were facing and made an impact on American women at the time of its’ release. “You Don’t Own Me” was written by John Madara and David White, and Lesley Gore recorded the song at the age of 17 in 1963. The song shows “a threatened emancipation” as Gore tells the listener that her lover does not own her, and she will not be told what to do or say. “The song’s lyrics became an inspiration for younger women and are sometimes cited as a factor in the second wave feminist movement.” (“You Don't Own Me”). Taking a stand for women being independent and autonomous was just starting to come about in the 1960s. Since this song is said to have inspired the second wave feminist movement, it could also be classified as an agent of change along with Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit”. The second wave feminist movement addressed a wide range of issues from sexuality, the workplace, family, de facto inequalities, reproductive rights, and official legal inequalities (“Second-Wave Feminism”). Lesley Gore’s “You Don’t Own Me” got women thinking about their rights more and helped to inspire this movement. Lesley Gore was born Lesley Sue Goldstein on May 2, 1946 and passed away on February 16, 2015. She was an American singer, songwriter, actress and activist and “You Don’t Own Me” was one of her hits along with “It’s My Party”, “She’s a Fool” and others (“Lesley Gore”). The year 1963 was full of social upheavals from civil rights, to war protests and of course women’s rights. One of the most famous marches and speeches ever made was given by Martin Luther King Jr. on August 28, 1963. “King said the march was “the greatest demonstration of freedom in the history of the United States.”’ (Taylor). In 1963, Americans started to take a stand for what they believed in and this is also present in Lesley Gore’s song. When a person listens to the song, the idea of women’s empowerment is very prominent. The first verse is “You don’t own me, I’m not just one of your many toys, you don’t own me, don’t say I can’t go with other boys”. Gore sounds very strong and determined and makes her message known to the audience. The elements of this song scream early 1960’s by the drums, backup singers and some sort of string instrument (“Lesley Gore – You Don’t Own Me”). To sum up, this song by Lesley Gore showcases how women’s rights were becoming more important during this time. The Vietnam war was still progressing and increasing in intensity, but issues like civil rights and women’s rights were still being talked about in America.

 In conclusion, after analyzing all of the songs discussed, Bob Dylan’s “Blowin in The Wind” seems to have the greatest impact on its time. Even though this song is not classified as an agent of change, its powerful lyrics still made immense impacts on Americans during that time. Since the song was written in 1962 and then released in 1963, it was during the height of the Vietnam war (“Blowin' in the Wind”). This had an impact on the overall message since the war was just starting to gain intensity and Americans were trying to decide which side they were on, either for or against the United States involvement in the war. This song became an anthem for civil rights and anti-war movements all while asking questions to the audience throughout the lyrics (“Bob Dylan”). This song really made Americans think of what was happening during this time as things started to get rolling. Between the Vietnam war, civil rights and women’s rights, it was all starting to unfold during the time this song was released. Due to the time this song was released and the powerful lyrics it contains, it had the most impact on American culture for being the starting point of questioning society.

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