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Music as an Agent of Change

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### Five Songs That Impacted the World

The era of the Vietnam War was a time of many changes in the United States. While these changes can be seen by looking at different events throughout history, it can also be seen throughout the music of that time period. Music became a way for artists to express how they felt about happenings in the world and began to change significantly. It also allowed soldiers to relate their experiences to songs and serve as their source of entertainment while deployed. The music that was considered appropriate and accepted by society was constantly evolving as new music types were introduced such as folk-rock, rock and roll, protest and topical songs. There were many songs created by various artists throughout this time that made an impact on the world around them, some even argue that some of these songs changed the world.

One anti-war song that was written within this time period is the song “What Are You Fighting For” by Philip David Ochs, most commonly known as Phil Ochs, was a topical singer and songwriter during the 1960s and 70s. He is most commonly known for his use of topical songs relating to his opposition to the Vietnam War. His voice was distinctive, as was his sarcastic humor and use of alliteration within his music. Born in New York on December 19, 1940, Ochs always had a love for music and began his musical career playing the clarinet as a teen. He was recognized by his teachers for his passion and precision and began playing classical music before becoming interested in other sounds after hearing early rock icons such as Elvis

Presley on the radio (Wikipedia). The genres that he is most known for are folk, folk rock, and protest songs. Throughout his career with these genres, he often played at anti-war and civil rights protests, rallies, and student events in addition to other concert appearances. In 1968, Ochs performed at the Democratic National Convention protests, which led to police riots. This had a big effect on Ochs's mental health that continued to decline throughout the 1970's, eventually leading to his death by suicide on April 9th 1976 (Wikipedia).

Phil Ochs released his song "What Are You Fighting For" in 1963, a year of many different important historical events. One of the most significant historical events that occurred during this year was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963. The assassination led to Vice President, Lyndon B. Johnson, stepping up to take Kennedy's place. Another important event was the March on Washington, which included 200,000 people and was the largest non-violent march that supported the civil rights movement. This march was where Martin Luther King delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech (Schulman). These events can all be relevant to the lyrics of this song, as they encourage individuals to think about the consequences of the war. Phil Ochs believed that if people really thought about the consequences, no one would want to start or fight in one specifically, the Vietnam War. His anti-war lyrics attempt to open the eyes of the public to things that are happening, but no one seems to see or acknowledge them (Genius). The hook of the song "I know you're set for fighting, but what are you fighting for?" occurs many times throughout the song, following points Phil makes to support this question. Ochs sings "Before you pack your rifle and sail across the sea, just think about the southern part of the land that you call free." In addition to segregation in the American South, this can be a reference to the abundance of African American soldiers being drafted into the war and being put on the front line. He is urging us to think about their lives and how they

are not really free if the government can still choose to put more of their lives in danger than the lives of whites. This is just one example of the points Ochs makes throughout his lyrics, which clearly show Ochs's anti-war stance and were supported by the song's sound to help portray its lyrical message.

As for the sound of this song, the only instrument it features is an acoustic guitar accompanied by the vocals, both by Phil Ochs. The rhythm of the song is carried out by the acoustic guitar with a tempo of 113 BPM (SongData). Ochs vocal style throughout this song is very straightforward, his voice leans towards a more gravelly sound with large amounts of vibrato. The only vocals heard are those of Phil Ochs; there are no harmonies or background singers present. The straightforward sound of this song portrays Ochs like a storyteller and urges the audience to pay attention to his voice and words. There is no instrumental solo and hardly any breaks between verses, Ochs created this song to portray a message and that is what he did. By neglecting to add in a wide array of instruments and voices the audience is captivated by Ochs voice, allowing us to listen to and understand the lyrics as he intended.

Another song that portrays a strong lyrical message is the song "Just Because I'm A Woman" by Dolly Parton. This song was one of the many that were written about feminism during this time period. Dolly Rebecca Parton is an American singer/songwriter among an array of other careers. She has performed an array of musical genres including pop, bluegrass, and what she's best known for, country. Parton came from a large, poor family and started her music career early by performing on local radio stations and television programs. By the age of 13 she performed at the Grand Ole Opry, which is something that many musicians work toward their entire career. At the Grand Ole Opry she met Johnny Cash, who encouraged her to continue with her career by following her own instincts. In 1967 Parton was invited by Porter Wagoner to join

his organization and play on his television show. Wagoner convinced RCA to sign Parton, who kicked off her career by singing a duet with him. They continued to release duets and many reached the top 10 on the billboards before Parton released her first single in the summer of 1968, "Just Because I'm a Woman," which became a moderate chart hit. Parton is still alive today and is continuing to be a very successful woman in her career (Wikipedia).

Dolly Parton released her song "Just Because I'm a Woman" in the year of 1968, which was a year of great change and destruction in the United States. One major event that happened during this year was the Tet Offensive. This was an attack against Hue, Saigon, and other South Vietnamese targets by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. This attack led to many losses for the U.S. and served as the turning point in the Vietnam War for them. On April 4th 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated. This was followed by a string of protests in the following months; about both anti-war and civil rights.(History.com Editors). This song is Parton's own version of a protest supporting civil rights and feminism. The lyrics of this song were surprising for the time, as Parton was blatantly accusing men of being sexist and seemed to be demanding equal treatment. They tell a story about a woman in a relationship who is being judged and seemingly dumped by her significant other because of her past sexual experiences. The song emphasizes that the man has the same experiences as the woman, yet because of her gender it is a problem for the woman to have these experiences. The hook of the song "My mistakes are no worse than yours just because I'm a woman" is repeated many times throughout the song, emphasizes the meaning behind the lyrics, and stresses that fact that women should not be treated differently because of their gender. Many of Parton's lyrics such as "Now a man will take a good girl and he'll ruin her reputation, but when he wants to marry well, that's a different situation" along with the verses that follow cast men in a negative light. These lyrics really

supported the feminist movements and encouraged listeners to think more about the inequality between genders.

While it's difficult to establish the exact instruments used in the ensemble of this song, it sounds as if it includes the acoustic guitar, electric guitar, cymbals, cowbell, and violin. These instruments helped Parton capture the country genre that the song falls under. There is a pretty strong backbeat that is established by the cowbell sounding instrument that keeps a tempo of about 105 BPM (Tunebat). Parton's vocal style throughout the song is very high and strong, occasionally and quietly being accompanied by backup singers. The background singers can only be heard if you pay really close attention, as their background "ooh's" are extremely quiet and blend in with the ensemble. There is an instrumental solo to begin the song that introduces the ensemble and prepares us for Parton's voice and lyrics. The sound as a whole plays a big role in Parton's unique style and portrays a distressed or frustrated mood. The sound, accompanied by the lyrics, allow us to feel Parton's distress and frustration over the inequality of genders through her demanding voice.

While Ochs and Parton's songs were intentionally released as a topical song, Peter, Paul, and Mary wrote a song titled "Leaving On a Jet Plane" that wasn't intended to be a topical song but ended up being interpreted as such. Peter, Paul, and Mary were an American folk group created by manager Albert Grossman. The group consisted of Peter Yarrow, Paul Stookey, and Mary Travers after they auditioned in front of Grossman who was looking for new people for the folk music scene. They began their career by singing in coffee houses, night clubs, and other popular places in New York City's Greenwich village. As a group they sang mainly covers of other artists' songs, many of which were more popular than the originals. They performed in many different places and events including the March on Washington where Martin Luther King

Jr gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. There was only one of their singles that reached number 1 on the charts: “Leaving on a Jet Plane,” originally written by John Denver. In 1970 the group broke up to pursue their solo careers, but came back together in 1981 until the death of Travers (Wikipedia).

Peter, Paul, and Mary recorded their song “Leaving On a Jet Plane” in 1967, releasing it on the album they released that year; however, it didn't become a single until the year of 1969 when the Vietnam War was at its peak. The year of 1967 was a year of great turmoil in the Vietnam War due to many factors. Throughout this year, troop numbers stationed in Vietnam increased to 500,000. Another occurrence in the war during this year was the battle of Dak To, which led to a large number of U.S. casualties thought to be around 1,800. These events led to many protests against the Vietnam War in places such as Washington D.C., New York City, and San Francisco (History.com Editors). While the lyrics of this song were originally written by John Denver about heartbreak from being away from one that you love, which he wrote while he was waiting for a layover flight at an airport. He stated that the song was more about a longing to have someone to love rather than being in love with someone. While this wasn't originally written as a topical song, soldiers began relating to it when Peter, Paul, and Mary's version became popular. This was appropriate for the current events because of the increase in troop numbers being stationed in Vietnam. Lyrics such as “I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again” hit close to home for soldiers who were stationed in Vietnam, leaving their families without knowing if they would survive. The song is now considered topical because of these reasons regardless of the original intentions behind the lyrics.

When it comes to the sound of Peter, Paul, and Mary's version of “I'm Leaving On a Jet Plane,” the only instrument present is a single acoustic guitar played by Yarrow. The constant

guitar strumming carries the beat and sets the tempo of 133 BPM (TuneBat). The vocals include Travers as the lead vocalist with Yarrow and Stookey jumping in with harmonies for a majority of the song. While there isn't a large ensemble of instruments, the trio catches the listener's attention through their use of dynamics. They slowly crescendo throughout the verse and into the chorus, before singing at their loudest point at the hook of the song "I'm Leaving On a Jet Plane." Immediately after the hook, they immediately decrescendo back to their quietest volume before repeating the steps again. The sound of this song supports the topical message of the lyrics by emphasizing the hook of the song about leaving on a plane. This emphasizes the fear of the soldiers and their families as they are deployed to Vietnam. The dynamics make sure to convey the dire, topical meaning of the lyrics to the audience and urge us to understand.

While these three songs were a very important part of music history in the Vietnam era, there were a few songs that made huge impacts on the world. The song "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley made its impact by changing the sound of popular music. William John Clifton Haley, most commonly known as Bill Haley, was an American rock and roll musician who is recognized for popularizing the rock and roll sound. His interest in music began at an early age, stemming from his father's love of music. He built a simulated guitar out of cardboard and his parents became aware of his interest in music, immediately going to get him a real guitar (Wikipedia). At the age of fifteen, Haley left home with his guitar in search of fame and fortune. Although his independent experiences were full of poverty and other difficulties, he found enough opportunities to get him more experience. Often living on one meal a day, he learned to perform in any place that would have him. Haley played many different genres including country and yodeling as well as joined many different bands throughout his career before moving into the genre of rock and roll. Bill Haley's most successful band, Bill Haley and His Comets, helped

with the popularization of the song “Rock Around the Clock” when they re-released it. Upon the re-release, the song hit #1 on the billboard charts, helping it become a very important part of music history (Wikipedia).

Bill Haley first released his song “Rock Around the Clock” on May 20, 1954, before re-releasing it with the band Bill Haley and His Comets in 1955. 1954 was a year of fighting against McCarthyism and in Vietnam. The army was fighting against McCarthyism and held televised hearings that led to large audiences and viewers. During these hearings, the viewers were able to watch McCarthy “self-destruct” before he was formally censured by the senate, which ended his hunt for communists. Meanwhile in Vietnam, the last major battle of the war, Dienbienphu, took place (PeopleHistory). After this, the draft numbers slowly began to decrease which gave teenagers a better opportunity at living a normal life without being drafted. This can relate to Haley’s song “Rock Around the Clock” because he references partying and staying up all night. Before this song these things were considered unacceptable and surprising to older generations. Now that teenagers have more freedom if they were not drafted, they should be able to live their lives more care-free before they grow up and have more responsibilities to worry about. “Rock Around the Clock” has a lyrical theme of teenage rebellion and partying. It tells a story of teenagers partying by mentioning the different times of the night at which they would still be partying. An example of this is when Haley sings “When the clock strikes two, three, and four if the band slows down we’ll yell for more” (Genius). This shows how the teenagers are being urged to continue partying all hours of the day and night until it reaches midnight, when Haley sings “When the clock strikes twelve, we’ll strike again.” Many of the lyrics such as “We’re gonna rock, rock, rock ‘til broad daylight” also convey this lyrical theme, just without the use of



specific times (Genius). The theme of the lyrics is accompanied by an upbeat sound that supports it.

The instruments present in the song “Rock Around the Clock” by Bill Haley include drums, guitar, piano, saxophone, and bass guitar. There is a strong backbeat that occurs on beats two and four at a tempo of 180 BPM and is carried by the drums (Songbpm). Haley’s vocal style throughout this song is very energetic and sounds more like he is belting. The way he belts makes the words come across as if he is speaking them, just at different pitches. This was a new vocal style that became popular after this type of rock and roll became popular. Haley’s vocal style assists the lyrical meaning of the song in that it is very upbeat and carries the sense of a party. There are multiple instrumentals throughout the song including electric guitar and saxophone solos. The first two solos continue the fast paced tempo of the song and demonstrate the party music that the teenagers are dancing to in the lyrical story. The last instrumental, however, is slower than the other two, its function being to close out the song. Together, all of the different musical pieces of the song work together to convey Haley’s lyrical message.

The change of popular music occurred many times throughout history and there are many different songs to show that. However, there are only a few songs that people claim to have changed the world and “Times They Are A-Changin” by Bob Dylan is one of them. Originally named Robert Allen Zimmerman, Bob Dylan is an American singer-songwriter, author, and visual artist. He was and still is an extremely important artist in a variety of different genres and is often referred to as one of the greatest songwriters of all time. Throughout the time period of the Vietnam war, he wrote an array of topical songs including some anthems for the civil rights and anti-war movements (Wikipedia). Growing up, Dylan listened to the radio beginning with country and blues before switching to rock and roll in his teenage years. The music on the radio

peaked his interest in music and he went on to perform in several bands throughout his high school years. One performance at his school's talent show was so loud that the principal had to cut the microphone. After dropping out of college Dylan moved to New York City where he met Woody Guthrie and was greatly influenced by his work. He then continued his musical career by performing in Greenwich Village where he met other artists and found more inspiration for his music. He released his first album which was eponymous in March of 1962, which was the beginning of his successful career (Wikipedia).

Bob Dylan released his song "Times They Are A-Changin'" on January 13, 1964. 1964 was a year of death and protests in the United States; however, there were still good things that happened as well. The U.S. soldiers fighting in Vietnam had a lot of casualties this year in multiple battles and attacks. This was the year that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed, which gave Johnson power to retaliate through any measures he thought necessary in order to promote international peace. While the war caused many deaths during this time, there were also plenty of violent deaths happening outside of the war as well. There was a series of murders beginning in 1962 by a man named Albert DeSalvo, who was referred to as the Boston Strangler. These deaths continued to occur until 1964 when the final victim was found and they finally captured DeSalvo, imprisoning him for life. This was also the year that the report of John F. Kennedy's death was released where we found out that his killer had acted alone and none of the security was at fault. One positive thing that came from this year was the Civil Rights Act being signed into law by Lyndon B. Johnson on July 2nd (PeopleHistory). This Act was a huge step in the right direction of preventing more violence in the world. Dylan saw these events and decided he couldn't stay quiet anymore and that he needed to make a stand.

Through the lyrics of “Times They Are A-Changin,” Bob Dylan urges his listeners to open their eyes and pay attention to what is happening in the world around them. He pushes the idea that if one doesn’t accept the change and stop fighting it, they are going to get left behind. He emphasizes this through his lyrics of “admit that the waters around you have grown and accept that soon you’ll be drenched to the bone, if your time is worth saving then you better start swimmin’ or you’ll sink like a stone” (Genius). He warns the public not to try and stop these changes and to stop being scared of new things, urging parents to stop trying to control their children from being a part of the change in the fourth verse. Specifically when he sings “don’t criticize what you can’t understand,” he is addressing the older generation and telling them to stop holding on to what they consider appropriate and move on. These lyrics were a very strong message to the public and changed how many people within the United States viewed all of the events happening. The creation of this topical song changed the world by addressing what needed to happen in order for the world to succeed. Dylan was a huge influence on those around him and was able to touch people through his music the way no other artist could.

The sound of Bob Dylan’s song “Times They Are A-Changin” supported the lyrical meaning through both the vocal style and the instruments present. Similar to many of Dylan’s other songs, the only voice that can be heard throughout the song is his own. His gravelly vocal style along with the few instruments urges the audience to pay attention to the lyrics. The only instruments present in the song include the acoustic guitar and harmonica and he keeps a tempo of 174 BPM (Songbpm). There is no strong backbeat, just a consistent guitar riff. The instrumental sections that are present include harmonica solos between the verses to help Dylan transition between them. The simple sound of the song fits in with Dylan’s signature sound and plays a big role in why the song was so effective in changing the world.

If you listen closely to the music created throughout the era of the Vietnam War, you will find that it tells the story of the war in its own way. The music genres and artists varied greatly and each had their own impact on the world. Artists used their music to express their thoughts about what was going on in the world, which started the popularity of topical songs. Many of the songs even made their way to the soldiers of Vietnam, many of which could relate to the lyrical meanings of the songs. Even if they could not relate to the songs, soldiers found comfort and entertainment through music when they could. This is just one example of how music has played many significant roles throughout history and continues to do so. It is also continuously changing and new genres are continuing to emerge. These songs only show some of the influences music can have on the world and will continue to do so as it evolves.

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