The Sixties between the Microgrooves:
Using Folk and Protest Music to Understand
American History, 1963-1973

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For those trying to find American history in its topical music, the 1960s were (with apologies to Charles Dickens) the best of times and the worst of times. The best part was how directly music was tied to social change and how emotionally close Americans were to sixties music. The worst aspect involves sifting through the largest profusion of topical music before or since, to find what really characterized the 1960s. There’s little agreement on whose music to center on, once you get past a few icons such as folk legends Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs. There is also little agreement on what folk music is. Perhaps Pete Seeger got as close as anyone did. When asked to define folk music, Seeger replied: “If folks sing them, they’re folksongs” (Seeger 9).

One now can at least find relative agreement that the sixties decade occurred historically (if not chronologically) from 1963 to 1973, rather than from 1960 to 1970. The sixties started slow and ended slow, but topical music kept the beat. Although pacifist and antiwar music wound down with the Vietnam War after 1970, feminist and ecology music just hit their stride in 1973, while backlash against the 1960s counterculture accelerated until the Watergate hearings. Throughout every decade since the sixties, however, music continued its mesmerizing grip on American youth. Frank Zappa said it best in 1967 when he noted that many youths were loyal to neither “flag, country or doctrine, but only to music” (Kofsky 256).

Folk music led the way toward relevant 1960s music. Protest songs were always a part of American folk music, and showcasing them within the entire folk spectrum gave them a wholesome image. In this all-American guise, folksingers invaded the musical vacuum on college campuses during the late 1950s. While jazz had become increasingly complex and abstract and rock-and-roll had become more nonsensical and meaningless, folk songs were filled with meaning and integrity.

The 1960s brought events that called folk guitarists to arms and the civil rights movement was the catalyst. Martin Luther King’s movement
was clearly a sing-in as well as a sit-in campaign. While black Southern activists wrote new songs and “We Shall Overcome” became the civil rights anthem, Northern folksingers developed leaders and anthems of their own. Performer-composers such as Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs recorded both general and specific songs against discrimination, the arms race, and the military-industrial establishment. Song titles such as Ochs’s “I Ain’t Marching Anymore” and Dylan’s “Talking World War Three Blues” suggested common concerns.

Young, gifted singers, such as Judy Collins and Joan Baez, reached out for an even wider audience. Pleasant melodic groups such as the Kingston Trio and the Brothers Four popularized folk-protest even more. As commercial success increased, protest characteristics were diluted, but they remained vivid elements of popular music. The syrupy, apolitical Kingston Trio was challenged by the more cynical and irreverent Chad Mitchell Trio, and by 1964 both groups were passed in popularity by the aggressively liberal trio, Peter, Paul and Mary.

An early sixties irony was that the first move toward national political change on campus was a conservative student movement spurred by Barry Goldwater’s campaign for the 1964 presidential nomination. John Kennedy’s 1960 presidential victory stirred left-wing campus radicals such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), but always very indirectly. Goldwater’s effect was more direct and immediate. The best musical example was a 1963 album titled The Goldwaters Sing Folk Songs to Bug the Liberals, which featured a quartet of Southern college students. Songs such as “Barry’s Moving In” and “Win in ’64” celebrate Goldwater, while other songs such as “Bobby Bobby” (directed at Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy) and “It’s over Now” trash the Kennedy-Johnson administration. The most direct liberal musical answer to this was the Chad Mitchell Trio’s 1964 recording of “Barry’s Boys” (Mitchell, Reflecting), which ridiculed Goldwater as a reactionary trying to erase the United Nations and the New Deal. The song’s mood was clearly based on Hubert Humphrey’s wisecrack that Goldwater was so handsome, he had been offered “a movie contract by 18th-Century Fox.” The Chad Mitchell Trio had earlier taken broad satiric swipes at the Right with their 1962 recording of “The John Birch Society” (The Chad Mitchell Trio at the Bitter End) and later with their 1965 ditty, “Your Friendly Neighborhood Ku Klux Klan” (Mitchell, Violets of the Dawn).

Both songs exemplify the standard, liberal-leaning folk groups such as the Chad Mitchell Trio and the more popular folk trio, Peter, Paul and Mary, who shied away from specific political songs, yet personally identified themselves with liberal candidates and causes. Peter, Paul and Mary did record very general left-wing songs, such as “If I Had a
Hammer" (Peter, Paul and Mary) and Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" (from his The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan). Both songs were clearly pacifist and pro-civil rights. Their cover of Dylan's song was a big hit single that helped make the relatively unknown young Dylan nationally famous. Indeed, in 1964 Peter Yarrow bragged that his trio could "mobilize the youth of America in a way that nobody else could" and perhaps even sway an election by traveling with a presidential candidate. He added, however, that they were not going to use this power. It was enough to know that they had it (Aronowitz 32).

There had been little or no right-wing musical protest against John F. Kennedy. JFK had proven increasingly popular with Americans and, like Abraham Lincoln, his self-deprecatory humor left little room for opponents. Instead, you had gentle satire, such as Vaughn Meader's The First Family album, and mild stand-up comedy routines by comedians such as Mort Sahl.

After JFK's assassination, several memorial songs quickly appeared. The most touching and perceptive was Phil Ochs's "That Was the President," which appeared on his I Ain't Marching Anymore album in 1965. Yet the other album songs, especially "Draft Dodger Rag" and the title song, with their aggressive pacifist messages, illustrated Ochs's radical move to the Left. On the liner notes, Ochs described the title song as bordering between "pacifism and treason, combining the best qualities of both." Commenting on "Draft Dodger Rag," he compared the Viet Cong soldier who screamed his hatred of Americans while being shot by a firing squad, to his American counterpart who stayed "up nights thinking of ways to" escape the army. Ochs's first album, All the News That's Fit to Sing (1964), was a veritable musical newspaper. Songs such as "Thresher" (about an atomic submarine accident), "Too Many Martyrs" (about murdered civil rights leader Medgar Evers), and "Talking Vietnam" took common liberal stands that mirrored sentiments within the Democratic Party's left wing. The 1965 album was a response to the accelerating Vietnam War and the Watts riot in Los Angeles. Ochs's music traced a steady leftward path, marching in unison with the rise of a militant, campus-centered "New Left," and registering increasing contempt for the Kennedy-Johnson New Frontier liberalism. Perhaps his most scathing comment on liberals was the sarcastic "Love Me I'm a Liberal." This song artfully suggested that liberals were comfortable hypocrites who refused to put their bodies where their rhetoric was.

Ochs's warm 1965 JFK memorial ballad, "That Was the President," seemed out of place. Phil explained that his Marxist friends could not understand why he wrote it, and that was probably one reason why he was not a Marxist. However, on the liner notes, Ochs backed away from
the song’s hero worship of John Kennedy by explaining that “after the assassination, Fidel Castro aptly pointed out that only fools could rejoice at such a tragedy, for systems, not men are the enemy.” More likely Ochs, like most Americans, had been emotionally caught up in the JFK Camelot mystique and never really freed himself. JFK seldom received the praise (or blame) he deserved for promoting sixties activism, but clearly his style and rhetoric were the first clear signals for change. In retrospect, however, John Kennedy always appeared more saintly and less blamable than his record would justify. Ochs’s song captures that Kennedy mystique (so central to understanding the early 1960s) best.

Writers have steadily eroded many of the activist sixties mystiques, from satirizing activist dropouts such as Yippie Jerry Rubin, for example, to shedding light on the dark side of JFK’s Camelot. Only the civil rights movement has escaped sixties trashing. The continuing African-American move toward full equality in the 1960s was so righteous that it has resisted debunking. Indeed, even contemporary conservatives commonly suggest that we go back to '60s civil rights goals and rationales as a substitute for affirmative action. Throughout the decade civil rights songs traced the progression from Southern sit-ins to Northern boycotts.

The earliest civil rights songs supported protests against segregation. Pete Seeger was the central figure here, and the best emotional feel for the movement comes from his Carnegie Hall concert in June 1963 (Seeger, We Shall Overcome). This live concert recording features songs such as “If You Miss Me at the Back of the Bus,” “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” “I Ain’t Scared of Your Jail,” “Oh Freedom,” and of course, his audience-participation, concert-closing rendition of “We Shall Overcome.” These songs were written by various activist-songwriters, both white and black. Some had been taught how to write topical songs at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee by Seeger and especially by the school director, Guy Carawan. Indeed, “We Shall Overcome” had been remade from a nineteenth-century Baptist hymn and further refined by Carawan and Seeger into the civil rights anthem. Unfortunately, when President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed “We Shall Overcome” in 1964, the song and slogan lost much of its meaning.

In the early 1960s, Bob Dylan also wrote songs with civil rights themes. They were more abstract, but usually more artful. Good examples are his 1963 song “Oxford Town” (about the first black student at the University of Mississippi) and his 1964 ballad “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll” (about the death of a black maid). Many of Dylan's general 1963-64 protest songs vaguely alluded to the civil rights struggle. Good examples are “When the Ship Comes in,” “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” “The Times They Are a-Changin’,” and of course
“Blowin’ in the Wind” (Dylan, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* and *The Times They Are a-Changin’*). However, in 1965 Dylan suddenly stopped writing protest songs of any kind and about the same time he switched from acoustic to electric guitar. Indeed, Dylan declared his artistic independence from movements and national issues. He made it crystal clear in a remarkable song, “My Back Pages” (*Another Side of Bob Dylan*). Here, Dylan proclaimed that he had oversimplified right and wrong in his earlier songs and become what he hated most—a preacher. One line noted that he had convinced himself that “liberty” only constituted “equality in school.” However, at the end at each verse, Dylan proclaimed that while he was “older” back then, he was a lot “younger” now.

Thus, like so many folk music trends, the movement away from specific, topical protest songs was initiated by Bob Dylan, the most creative and influential American performer of the 1960s. Dylan had already pioneered very general protest songs such as “Blowin’ in the Wind.” In 1965, he merged folk music and rock-and-roll, which the music industry labeled folk-rock. This allowed record companies to merge college and high school markets. This also brought hazy message songs to teenagers and the bestselling singles chart. Throughout the 1960s, folk-rock became heavier and more electric, and those who supported it as teens remained faithful as collegians. In 1965 there was a sudden media hunger for thoughtful songs such as “Universal Soldier,” a pacifist song, written by Sioux Indian Buffy Sainte-Marie and recorded by Donovan (*The Best of Buffy S. Marie*), and idiotic songs such as “Eve of Destruction,” a thermonuclear warning song recorded by Barry McGuire (*Eve of Destruction*). Teenagers were now dancing the latest steps to the newest folk-rock, topical songs, and listening to equally new and frantic folk-rock groups such as the Byrds (*Turn! Turn! Turn!*).

Increasingly, however, the folk-rock protest song radiated general discontent and a vague, anti-establishment mood, as opposed to focusing on specific issues or evils. The protest flavor was still there, and if anything the fervor had increased, yet the lyrics were now less important and often could not be heard clearly over the music anyway. This new psychedelic music registered a protest of form rather than substance. The music often featured sexually explicit lyrics, high creativity, and nonconformist delivery. It presented a hazy but direct protest to white, middle-class America.

Protest songs had been diluted by their success. By 1966, the most popular folk-rock songs of Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, the Byrds, and others had largely evaporated into an existential haze. By trying to be all things to all people, the songs became universal protest ballads. One
could read whatever one wanted into the lines. By saying everything, they in effect said nothing.

In 1965, history and the Vietnam War brought America into more dangerous waters. President Lyndon Johnson had accepted the Pentagon's argument that the war could be won with large numbers of American ground troops and massive air power. Whereas discrimination had been harmful to African Americans and embarrassing to the nation, the Vietnam War was lethal to young Americans, black or white. The Southern civil rights issues had been relatively simple to argue; Vietnam was far more complex and divisive. The war merged issues of patriotism, anticommunism, and world peace; and it splintered traditional American political and class alliances. The clearest division on the war was between young and old. Antiwar slogans such as "Make Love, Not War" and "Don't Trust Anyone over 30" were hardly directed toward the old. The war destroyed Johnson's administration and political career; and it left his successor, Richard Nixon, with a war-torn nation.

Although specific protest songs no longer made the Top 40 chart after 1965, a continuing stream of protest songs were written for smaller, specialized groups of activists. Ironically, the Vietnam War accelerated just as the pacifist song "Universal Soldier" became a nationwide hit. And Glen Campbell, who recorded "Universal Soldier," supported the war and was quoted as saying that "anyone who wouldn't fight for his country was no real man." Later that year the California-based rock duo Jan and Dean parodied "Universal Soldier" in a song titled "Universal Coward," about a coward who ran "from Uncle Sam" and ran "from Vietnam" (Jan and Dean, Folk 'N' Roll). However, as the antiwar movement grew, songwriters such as Phil Ochs, Pete Seeger, and Tom Paxton led the way with very specific anti-Vietnam protest songs. They also encouraged a host of younger protest songwriters.

Perhaps the most famous antiwar song was Pete Seeger's "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" (Waist Deep in the Big Muddy). It told the story of a 1942 Army platoon being pushed by a captain to ford a dangerously deep river. The punch line noted that "the big fool" told his men "to push on." It was clearly a parable about the Vietnam War and the "big fool" was obviously Lyndon Johnson. Seeger sang the song for a 1967 Smothers Brothers television show, but CBS censored it off the scheduled program, because Seeger refused to omit the last verse, which tied the song to Vietnam and Johnson. In response to protests against network censorship, CBS finally permitted the song to be sung in full on a January 1968 Smothers Brothers show. After the CBS nightly news (anchored by Walter Cronkite) became sharply critical of the Vietnam War in 1968, antiwar censorship on television was much less a problem. Thus, on a
1969 Smothers Brothers show, Seeger was allowed to sing “Bring Them Home” (Young Vs. Old), a direct call for America to bring home its troops and to end the war.

Although antiwar songs were generally not played on radio because stations did not wish to alienate any listeners, protest singers continued to record them on albums. Among the best Vietnam protest songs were two of Tom Paxton’s 1966 songs, “Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation,” which satirized Johnson’s duplicity in explaining the war to Americans, and “We Didn’t Know,” which compared Americans’ unawareness of Vietnam atrocities with those Germans who claimed they “didn’t know” about Nazi war crimes (Paxton, Ain’t That News). In addition to the Seeger and Ochs songs already mentioned, especially noteworthy are the little-known 1969 Holly Near song “Hang in There” (Hang in There), which pictures the Vietnamese rebels as long-suffering patriots, and Joe McDonald’s 1966 song “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag,” recorded by his band, Country Joe and the Fish (Country Joe, The Life and Times...). Near had performed on the antiwar G.I. Coffeehouse Circuit with actors Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland. “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag” was featured at Woodstock, but became better known recently when it was covered by the New Bohemians on the soundtrack for the 1989 anti-Vietnam film Born on the Fourth of July.

Although overt antiwar songs no longer reached the top charts or general radio audiences after 1965, a few very general pacifist protest songs did. Good examples are John Lennon’s 1970 “Imagine” (sung dramatically by Joan Baez on Come from the Shadows) and Melanie’s 1970 “Candles in the Rain” (Melanie, Candles in the Rain). Like Lennon’s 1969 protest hit “Give Peace a Chance,” “Imagine” was pacifist, but it also attacked religion and wealth in favor of universal togetherness. “Candles in the Rain” was a description of Melanie Safka’s experience at a candlelight anti-Vietnam protest on a rainy night in the nation’s capital. Since this Top 40 song never makes the context of its vague themes of peace and brotherhood explicit, few listeners knew what it was really about. Lennon felt that peace had “to be sold to the man in the street” and thus John wanted “to make peace big business for everybody.” Evidently, Lennon had some success. For example, “Give Peace a Chance” (Lennon, Live Peace in Toronto) sold 900,000 copies in the United States and another 400,000 units worldwide.

Earlier in the decade, before the Vietnam War had accelerated, general pacifist songs such as Ed McCurdy’s “Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream,” depicting a worldwide peace treaty that ended war forever (Mitchell, The Chad Mitchell Trio at the Bitter End) and Pete Seeger’s “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” (Pete Seeger’s Greatest
Hits), about the general futility of war, lacked the specific topical edge that Vietnam would furnish. Even the nonpolitical Kingston Trio covered “Where Have All the Flowers Gone.” In the abstract, peace was always an acceptable given, like justice. Many of the obscure, yet interesting, anti-Vietnam songs were collected in The Vietnam Songbook in 1969. This volume, compiled by left-wing folk protest professionals Barbara Dane and Irwin Silber, features words and music for more than 100 protest songs against the Vietnam War.

Some hyperemotional pacifist songs of the later 1960s had double-edged lyrics that mirrored the ambivalent nonviolence common to the era’s youthful activists. While these songs spoke eloquently for nonviolence, they also warned of “the fire next time.” Lyrics had veiled images of hellfire and brimstone. Behind the New Testament gentleness was a violent Old Testament sternness—and the image of a wrathful, avenging Jehovah. For example, Phil Ochs’s songs were usually pacifist, yet often harbored a veiled threat of violence in tone and lyrics. In “Links on the Chain” (I Ain’t Marching Anymore), Ochs’s message was that the violent union struggles of the past had taught his generation that “you gotta fight” and strike “to get what you are owed.” More than anyone, Ochs faithfully traced the rising youthful tides of both idealistic pacifism and frustrated, impatient violence, while suggesting the close relationships between the two. As Ochs and others moved closer to the New Left, they reflected the inconsistent position of antimilitarism at home, coupled with a call for revolutionary guerrilla warfare in several developing countries. Even Pete Seeger, who was fervently pacifist in most of his songs, had joined the U.S. Army during World War II. And in his best anti-Vietnam song, “Bring Them Home,” Seeger notes that he was not “really a pacifist” because if his country were invaded as Vietnam had been, you would find him “out on the firing line.”

Most criticism of protest music came from the Right. Since 1945, left-wing songwriters had perpetuated the myth that political songs were always humanitarian attacks against the status quo, authored by the political Left. But clearly the political songs of the Ku Klux Klan did not fit this description. More importantly, in the 1960s conservative country songs made popular music an ideological battleground. However, today, fifty-somethings usually remember antiwar protest songs and acid-rock music, but forget conservative country songs such as Merle Haggard’s “Okie from Muskogee” and “Fightin’ Side of Me” (The Best of Merle Haggard), which crudely put down young war protesters. Haggard’s “Working Man Blues” (The Best of...) and Guy Drake’s “Welfare Cadillac” were also conservative attacks on liberalism from the perspective of blue-collar America. The white, lower-middle-class backlash that these
songs reflected was an integral part of Richard Nixon’s presidential victory in 1968.

Country music did not emerge as a commercially recorded phenomenon until the 1920s, so World War II was its first chance to demonstrate its fervent patriotism. From 1941 through the 1950s, country songs steadfastly supported America’s troops and foreign policy. In the Korean War, country songs by popular singers such as Roy Acuff and Ernest Tubb criticized Communism directly and championed America’s hardline Cold War stance. Not surprisingly, 1960s country song hits supported the Vietnam War. For example, Johnny Wright’s recording of “Hello Vietnam” made the top country chart in 1965. It was followed by such prowar songs such as “What We’re Fightin’ For” and “Vietnam Blues” (all three songs on The Deputies, The Ballad of the Green Berets). “Vietnam Blues” was written by Kris Kristofferson and recorded by Dave Dudley. Pat Boone’s recording of “Wish You Were Here” featured a soldier in Vietnam ridiculing war protesters and threatening to come looking for them after the war.

The biggest prowar hit was Barry Sadler’s “Ballad of the Green Berets.” Sadler, an actual Green Beret, sang it on the Ed Sullivan television show in January 1966 and by March it was number one on the Billboard chart as a country crossover. By the late 1960s, conservative songs no longer mentioned the war specifically, but instead concentrated on criticizing unpatriotic protesters. The previously mentioned Merle Haggard songs are good examples, and so is Ernest Tubb’s 1969 tune “It’s America: Love It or Leave It.” Perhaps the most controversial pro-Vietnam country song was “The Battle Hymn of Lt. Calley,” recorded by Terry Nelson and C Company in 1971 (Wake Up America). The song defended Calley, who was being court-martialed for his part in the 1968 My Lai massacre of Vietnamese civilians. Major record companies refused to release the song; and this gave certain proof that the musical struggle over the war was over.

In the wake of the black civil rights movement, other minority groups organized around their own problems. Two groups that garnered the most national attention were Mexican Americans and American Indians. Mexican Americans called themselves Chicanos and were especially active in Texas, California, and Florida, where Mexican-American farmworkers gave them a base of support. Cesar Chavez, the most visible farmworker leader, touched urban Americans everywhere with his quiet courage and simple, dignified plea for justice. His call for a nationwide boycott of nonunion grapes helped the farmworkers eventually gain union contracts. Texas Chicanos increased their political power in south Texas. Two farmworker songs that catch the movement’s spirit are
“La Lucha Continuara” (the struggle goes on and on), about union battles, and “Thunderbird,” the Black Eagle insignia of the farmworkers (Rose-Redwood, Original Huelga Songs). Folksinger activists such as Pete Seeger and Joan Baez also recorded Woody Guthrie’s 1930s farmworker songs such as “Pastures of Plenty” and “Deportee” to define the sixties struggle. However, the most moving renditions of the two latter songs are by Odetta, an African-American folksinger with a booming voice (Odetta, Odetta Sings of Many Things).

American Indian activists called themselves “Native Americans” and rallied around the American Indian Movement (AIM). Native Americans were helped by Indian folk singers such as Peter La Farge and, especially, by Buffy Sainte-Marie, a Sioux Indian and talented singer-songwriter. Buffy wrote a variety of protest songs, but her two most memorable songs about the mistreatment of Native Americans were “Now That the Buffalo’s Gone” and “My Country ’Tis of Thy People You’re Dying” (The Best of Buffy Sainte-Marie). Both ballads focus on historic persecution of Indians. Another good approach, more closely tied to AIM, was Floyd Westerman’s album, titled Custer Died for Your Sins. Westerman, a Sioux Indian, is now better known for playing the old Lakota Sioux chief, Ten Bears, in the 1990 film Dances with Wolves. Westerman patterned his songs after Vine Deloria’s 1969 book, Custer Died for Your Sins. His ballads catch a lot of Deloria’s Native American activist fervor. The best songs include the title cut and “Missionary” (about the forced Christianizing of Indians).

One sixties movement that drew activists from both the Left and the Right in an uneasy alliance was the ecology or environmental movement. While many advocates worked to save wildlife and wetlands, others warned about the environmental pollution hazards to humans. Several folk singers wrote songs about the environment. But some environmental songs just celebrated current natural beauty, rather than warning about future loss. Also, many of the warning songs about nuclear fallout, such as Bob Dylan’s 1964 “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall,” (The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan) were tied to antiwar themes. Perhaps the earliest and best of this genre was Malvina Reynolds’s much-covered 1963 song “What Have They Done to the Rain” (Malvina Reynolds Sings the Truth). The recording that best combined memories of past natural beauty with apocalyptic visions of possible future ecological destruction was Tom Paxton’s 1970 “Whose Garden Was This” (Tom Paxton 6). A close second would be Billy Edd Wheeler’s “The Coming of the Roads” (about the effects of strip mining), beautifully sung by Judy Collins in 1965 (Judy Collins’s Fifth Album).

The singer-songwriter who most consistently championed ecological causes was Pete Seeger. Environmental songs appear on most of his
albums, and he was a constant environmental activist. Seeger was famous for sailing up and down the Hudson River to publicize efforts to clean that waterway. He also was the first singer to turn Woody Guthrie’s 1930s tune “This Land Is Your Land” (Odetta, *Odetta Sings the Ballad for Americans*) from a socialist political song into the sixties’ major ecology anthem. Guthrie’s song did highlight America’s natural beauty, but his real message was that America belonged to the little people and not just to corporations and politicians. The Seeger album that concentrated most on ecology is *God Bless the Grass*. This 1966 recording devotes eleven songs to environmental issues, including two Malvina Reynolds pieces—“The Faucets Are Dripping” and “70 Miles.” Other highlights are: “The People Are Scratching” (loosely based on Rachel Carson’s warning of ecological interdependence in *Silent Spring*) and Seeger’s song “My Dirty Stream” (about his attempts to clean up the Hudson River).

Of all the sixties activist movements, the one with the most staying power, and perhaps the most important, was the women’s liberation movement. The feminist movement was also the most divisive, since it largely excluded males. Topical music was particularly useful to young feminists, who followed the New Left maxim of organizing around your own oppression. Furthermore, since feminism pioneered consciousness-raising, what better device to accomplish this than topical songs? Women’s liberation music is very diverse—ranging from workers’ songs to ballads of cultural pride and psychological independence. Compared to the previous women’s movement—the suffrage movement—the new mood was much more strident and the goals much more fundamental. Early 1960s feminist songs such as “The Modern Union Maid,” a parody of Guthrie’s 1936 ballad about wives of union men (*Virgo Rising*), “Stand and Be Counted” (a marching song), “The Freedom Ladies,” with its firm but humorous declaration of independence (*Reviving a Dream*), and “Papa,” a put-down of sexist male rock musicians by the Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band (*Mountain Moving Day*) are all adept at capturing the verve and complexity of the early feminist movement. The first feminist singers were usually obscure groups of rather amateur musicians, but they often made up for musical weaknesses with their spirit and sisterly solidarity. More polished individual feminist singers would emerge in the early 1970s.

Actually, women folksingers who did not identify with feminism, such as Joan Baez, Judy Collins, and Malvina Reynolds, were excellent feminist role models in the 1960s. They often sang songs about independent, aggressive women and they ably competed with the best male topical singers. They predated women's liberation—a term first used in 1968. There was a women's movement in the early 1960s—dating either
from John Kennedy’s Federal Commission on the Status of Women in 1960 or from Betty Friedan’s 1963 publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. However, the women’s liberation movement originated in 1966 when young “New Left” activist college women split from male-dominated radical groups such as SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society).

These younger feminists completely transformed the early 1960s women’s movement, with its stress on equal rights, into a diverse countercultural movement that concentrated on capturing and changing the next generation of men and women. Increasingly it found more talented feminist songwriters and musicians who had themselves grown up with the movement. These feminists had also grown up with protest songs, but since they had separated from the New Left just as topical music declined, they escaped the malaise. Feminist songwriters felt everything they wrote broke new ground. Whether they performed traditional songs, wrote topical ballads, or wrote about their own experiences, they felt they were speaking to the conditions of all women. Women’s liberation greatly encouraged women songwriters. In 1976 the introduction to *All Our Lives: A Women’s Songbook* summed up the fruits of the past decade: “As women and as feminists who love folk music and who love to sing, we have produced this book as a reflection of our own struggles in a society which still has so little room for a woman with a mind of her own—even less for a woman with a song of her own” (Cheney et al. 6).

By the early 1970s, the second wave of feminist singers was producing diverse music that reflected the wide world of feminism. For example, *Hazel and Alice*, a 1973 record, featured Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerard—two middle-aged bluegrass musicians with roots deep into traditional rural music. The best of their original songs were two feminist tunes—Gerard’s “Custom Made Woman Blues” and Hazel Dickens’s “Don’t Put Her Down, You Helped Put Her There.” The first song covered the problems of a rural wife trying to follow *Cosmopolitan* magazine advice on how to hold her man, and the second puts the blame for the female bar floozy squarely on her male companions. Hazel and Alice, with their rural, family, working-class orientation, neatly bridged the gap between the consciousness-raising, countercultural feminist records and those of the more overtly political, socialists. The remnants of America’s young Left had increasingly realized the threat that women’s liberation posed to their already declining ranks. After 1972, they began to stress women as uniquely oppressed victims of the capitalist state.

Two good musical examples of this socialist-feminist relationship were Barbara Dane’s 1973 album *I Hate the Capitalist System* and the
Red Star Singers’ 1974 album *The Force of Life*. Dane’s recording proceeded from 1930s union songs, such as the title song, to a ballad about the 1970 Kent State Massacre. Yet the album ended with one of Dane’s songs, “Working Class Woman,” which was filled with socialist women’s liberation themes. The song’s heroine works in a factory and although her “kids are in high school,” the boss still calls her “girl.” Despite her many problems, the song heroine always sees a brighter future for women. One verse ends with the triumphant declaration that she’s “a hard working woman” and the future is hers.

*The Force of Life* was a much livelier album, with a totally contemporary 1960s anger. The Red Star Singers came on as a cross between the Yippies and the Stanford SDS with a few socialist and third-world women thrown in for good measure. The songs were all upbeat and hit hard at the image of an oppressive national State. Songs such as “Pig Nixon” and “Vietnam Will Win” quickly told you where the Red Star Singers were politically. However, each album side also featured a militant women’s liberation song—“I Still Ain’t Satisfied” and “The Women’s Health Song.” These songs mocked the progress of women’s liberation as “co-optation.” One line, for example, declared women weren’t “asking for crumbs”; they wanted “the whole deal.”

The most talented, and hardest to characterize, early feminist singer was Holly Near. Her first two albums, *Hang in There* (1973) and *Holly Near: A Live Album* (1974), showed steady growth and brilliant singer-songwriter talents. *Hang in There* stressed songs against the Vietnam War, but also included two sensitive feminist songs—“It’s More Important to Me” (about how competition for men drives women apart) and “Strong” (a beautiful ballad about women’s social conditioning). On her live album, “Feeling Better” (a satire on high school sex-role expectations) was the best showcase for her feminist ideas.

On balance, early women’s liberation music was far better than one would expect. Art and politics are often joined, but seldom compatible; and women’s liberation music was necessarily political. Yet political mission often fuels the imagination, while audience enthusiasm can provide creative incentives. Considering the political pressures, the most surprising thing about the early feminist movement and its music was its diversity. Feminist critics sometimes patronized women who made music in traditional ways—with acoustic guitars or piano accompaniment. The big challenge was proving that women could play rock and that hard rock need not be sexist to be good. But the best feminist music largely followed women’s traditional musical forms and the traditional feminist singers were not put down in practice. For one thing, the women’s movement stressed the need to support *all* women artists. For
another, feminists realized the potential that quality feminist music
offered for making new recruits think seriously about the women's
movement. The traditional women the movement hoped to attract were
more likely to seriously consider a subtle, sensitive, well-done ballad
than a second-rate, derivative rock number. The woman rock musician
(Bonnie Raitt or Joan Jett, for example) would later get more attention,
but often drew attention to themselves at the expense of their music.
Feminism had quickly concluded that the real power of music was its
ability to communicate rather than its ability to shock or cross male
boundaries. A host of effective feminist singer-songwriters, such as
Willie Tyson, Meg Christian, and Kristin Lems, would follow the exam-
ple of the pioneer feminist singers.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the 1960s was the generation
gap. For the first time American youth claimed a moral superiority over
their elders, on the basis of their positions on current issues, ranging
from race relations to the environment. They pointed to the hypocrisy of
adults who castigated drugs, yet drank alcohol; or who preached sexual
abstinence, while practicing marital infidelity. Youth also often criticized
the joyless materialism of their parents. They accused them of confusing
living with making a living.

As soft rock and the Beatles-led “British invasion” in the mid-six-
ties turned into the folk-rock and hard rock of the later 1960s, rock lyrics
and style dramatically reflected aspects of the generation gap. For exam-
ple, Melanie’s hit “Beautiful People” (Melanie) was an optimistic sixties
endorsement of the natural goodness of people. Another song in this
genre was “People World” (Jim and Jean, People World). Both songs
celebrated a Woodstock nation of communal youth, supposedly later
illustrated by the 1969 Woodstock Music Festival.

Also, the hedonistic, live-for-today attitudes of youth were well
illustrated by the Grassroots’ song “Let’s Live for Today” (Let’s Live for
Today) and Janis Joplin’s recording of “Get It While You Can,” about
taking love when and where you find it (Janis Joplin’s Greatest Hits).
Joplin was a living embodiment of this philosophy. She made it clear
that she would live for the moment. She was not going to save her voice,
cut down on her drinking, or pass by any sexual partner in hopes of
either happier or healthier tomorrows. Joplin had decided that tomorrow
never comes. Many other rock stars and countless sixties youth seemed
to agree.

Some older protest songwriters and advocates were depressed by
the mood and message of late 1960s hard rock. They felt that the general
cultural revolt projected by the music threatened radical reform. Thus,
Irwin Silber, an older folk critic, felt that while hard rock reflected
youthful alienation, it was basically a “middle-class trip” and that “doing your own thing” was a lingering trait of traditional capitalism. He noted that “groovy life-styles” advocated that people ignore the very system that oppressed them, rather than fight to change it (Silber 17). Perhaps Silber had missed the point. With its special connection to youth, rock music became and remains an important cultural early warning system. Like the more specific protest music of the era, it brings back the mood and mania of the 1960s and its counterculture. Thus, if there was a political or social counterculture in the 1960s, surely it lived between the microgrooves of both rock and topical records. Music is still the best guide to understanding a decade that some historians will continue to label “the Age of Protest.”

Identifying songs that reflect 1960s history is one thing; using music in the classroom to enhance historical study is quite another task. Obviously individual teachers will take different approaches that fit their goals, style, and personality. I can only offer some general hints, based on twenty-five years’ experience teaching college history.

Getting the recorded music is the first step, and this has become easier. A teacher still must search used-record stores to find obscure records by relatively unknown singers. However, many of the best 1960s folk and topical record albums have been reissued on compact disc. If an album is not available on CD, often one can find a desired song covered by another singer on CD by searching for the song title from an Internet record seller, such as Amazon.com. If money is a problem, try to get your school library to order the appropriate CDs as historical resources. Also ask your students to help search for hard-to-find albums, either in stores or their parents’ record collections. Students constantly bring topical music to my attention—usually by bringing me a record or tape they have enjoyed or that they feel is historically relevant.

Music can enhance historical study by re-creating social and cultural mood and by illustrating an era’s common ideas and attitudes. Songs are never a substitute for analysis. They often give us a feel for the past, but almost never supply answers. Like history itself, songs must be interpreted. There is one iron-clad rule about using music in history classes—never play a song first and talk about its significance afterward. Topical 1960s music is foreign to most contemporary students. A teacher must get students interested in a song before playing it. If students do not know what to listen for, the music will usually blow past them, and the instructor’s analysis (no matter how perceptive and lively) will exist in a musical vacuum. This technique is in the folk tradition. Folksingers were famous for spending more time introducing and explaining their song than it took to sing it.
For example, when I use songs that protest the Vietnam War, I take great care to note what the national consensus view of the war was when that song appeared and what particular audience the song targeted. Singer backgrounds and mood are also important. For example, the heavy sarcasm of Phil Ochs's antiwar songs such as "Draft Dodger Rag" does not make sense unless one knows that Ochs had given up on the American electorate. And as students listen to Pete Seeger's antiwar song "Bring Them Home," they must read between the lines to really understand it. Seeger and other protesters were not just insisting they had a right to protest the war, they were saying that protesting the war was their duty. Subtle but crucial moods are often lost over time.

Songs preserve and illustrate subtleties better than most historical sources. In the final analysis, one teacher's or student's truth is another's fantasy, and that of course is the charm and danger of history. The songs are tools to illustrate and understand history; they are not a ready-made substitute for history. An instructor who tries to weave a historical narrative with songs alone will function as a disc jockey, not as a teacher.

Works Cited


Discography

Note: An (*) before the title means that the original 12-inch LP record is currently available on CD from Internet services or at music stores. A (+) before a record means that many of the songs on that album are available on a CD collection of that singer's most popular songs.
——. *Turn! Turn! Turn! Turn!* Columbia Records, 1965.
——. *The Times They Are A-Changin'.* Columbia Records, 1964.
Phil Ochs. *All the News That's Fit to Sing.* Elektra Records, 1964.
——. *Odetta Sings the Ballad for Americans.* Vanguard Records, 1960.
Dan and Judy Rose-Redwood. *Original Huelga Songs.* Huelga Records: United
Farmworkers, 1970.
Pete Seeger. *God Bless the Grass.* Columbia Records, 1966
*Virgo Rising: The Once and Future Woman.* (Various Artists.) Thunderbird

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