

THE POWER OF MUSIC DURING THE COLD WAR ERA:
RECOUNTING HISTORY, CALLING OUT INJUSTICE, UNITING PEOPLE, SPARKING
PROTEST, AND INSPIRING REFORM

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History 142

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The Cold War era is often remembered as a period of intense rivalry and geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was fundamentally a clash of differing ideologies, generally categorized as a conflict between American capitalism and Soviet communism. Contemporary American social beliefs can be most commonly found in art, which, especially in this period, became a potent expression of societal values, political sentiments, and American spirit. Many forms of art, like film or painting, are more exclusive, only being available for the wealthy and the upper classes, thus excluding a major part of the population. Examining mediums like these would lead to only a partial understanding of American beliefs of the time. Music, however, offers the ability to communicate with anyone. Consequently, music is the best medium to explore when trying to examine the ideologies represented in this period. The Cold War Era saw the development of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, highlighted in musical expressions of the struggle for equality and justice by Billie Holiday and Bob Dylan, among others. Their rise was accompanied by countercultural anti-war protests and movements, perhaps most famously represented by Creedence Clearwater Revival, an American folk rock band led by John Fogerty, and their song "Fortunate Son." Although the Cold War era is often depicted and remembered as just a clash of superpowers, its true essence within America lies in the ideological battleground it created, reflected in the music of the era. By analyzing the lyrics, themes, audience, and reception of songs from the period, the varying American beliefs and values of this period can be better understood, revealing how music served as a powerful medium for expressing and contesting ideological convictions in a time of immense change. The true Cold War conflict was fought on American soil, between the U.S. government and its people over the direction of the country, through and with music that undermined US legislative tenets by being explicitly anti-racist, anti-war, anti-elitist, and anti-conformist. Music of the Cold War period recounts the history of racism experienced by black people in this country, calls out the

inherent injustice of segregation and unequal draft practices, brings people together to protest these injustices and demand change.

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, music was a vital tool for amplifying the voices of those advocating for racial equality and justice. This era witnessed a surge of musical expressions that told the stories of the marginalized and oppressed African American community, as well capturing the spirit of resistance and resilience. According to David Hsiung in his journal article “Freedom Songs and the Modern Civil Rights Movement,” it was “ordinary people [that] fueled the modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.”¹ Naturally, with ordinary people as the face of a movement, music, as an accessible vehicle for the beliefs of ordinary people, helped to spur this movement forward. Music was used to tell the history of the oppression of black people by white people and the vindication of this by the American government. Billie Holiday famously recorded the song “Strange Fruit,” named the song of the century by Time magazine in 1999. Though her first recording came as early as 1939, she was performing this song up until her death in 1959, making it a well-known anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. The late jazz writer Leonard Feather labeled it “the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism.”² Ahmet Ertegun, a legendary record producer, called it a “declaration of war” and the “beginning of the Civil Rights Movement.”³ This song told the story of the African Americans who had been lynched in the south, their

¹ David Hsiung, “Freedom Songs and the Modern Civil Rights Movement,” *OAH Magazine of History* 19, no. 4 (2005): 23

² David Margolick, “Performance as a Force for Change: The Case of Billie Holiday and ‘Strange Fruit’,” *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 11, no. 1 (1999): 92

³ Margolick, 92

“black bodies swinging in the southern breeze” the “strange fruit” borne on southern trees.⁴ As with other revolutionary songs, “Strange Fruit” was met with resistance by those who opposed what the song stood for: telling the story of the oppression of black people in America. However, for many others, the song offered them a voice. Drummer Max Roach said of Holiday, she “made the statement we all felt as black folks. No one was speaking out.”⁵ Bob Dylan, in “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” similarly tells the story of black American suffering, but through a more personal lens. In the song, Dylan accurately recounts the killing of the 51 year old African American Baltimore native, Hattie Carroll. “William Zantzinger killed poor Hattie Carroll” with a cane and a “shrug of his shoulders.”⁶ Carroll, a barmaid, had told him “just a minute, sir” to his request of a sixth or eighth double whiskey, was promptly called many slurs and struck on her shoulder, leading to her death.⁷ Zantzinger, originally charged with first and second degree murder, was found guilty of manslaughter and assault with a six month sentence. Dylan sarcastically sings that with the pound of the judge’s gavel, they “showed all’s equal and that the courts are on the level,” by handing out the “strong” penalty of a six month sentence.⁸

Though the stories of black suffering in America accomplished a greater sense of representation, that was not the only goal. It was through stories like those told in songs that a greater goal was realized: representation in itself is not enough, the inequality that causes the

⁴ Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit,” recorded April 1939, track 7 on *Billie Holiday*, Commodore.

⁵ Margolick, 92

⁶ Bob Dylan, “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” recorded October 1963, track 9 on *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, Columbia.

⁷ <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/hattie-carroll>

⁸ Dylan, “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll”

suffering in the stories must be stopped. This could only be achieved through a unified movement for justice and freedom. Music during this period served as a unifying force, not only through telling stories but through providing a sense of solidarity and empowerment to those fighting for change. A new generation of melodies and lyrics motivated support for the Civil Rights Movement, compelling listeners to confront the injustices perpetuated by a racially divided society. Anthems like “We Shall Overcome” and “Oh Freedom,” with origins rooted in the African American spiritual tradition and fight for freedom, became rallying cries for activists in defiance of segregation. Artists like Joan Baez and Pete Seeger breathed new life into these songs, infusing them with a sense of urgency and hope that resonated deeply with audiences across the nation. They all felt that their freedom was coming soon. “We Shall Overcome” was originally a gospel song popularized when it was taught to Pete Seeger by music director Zilphia Horton. Seeger, heavily involved in the nonviolent movement for civil rights, sang it at countless protests, rallies, and festivals, making it a song synonymous with the movement. Other artists joined in, including Joan Baez who famously performed both “We Shall Overcome” and “Oh Freedom” at the March on Washington in 1963. “We Shall Overcome” has always been a song of activism, originally used by black tobacco workers on strikes. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists “turned the song into the movement’s anthem, as they embarked on sit-ins and freedom rides.”⁹ The song goes “Oh deep in my heart, I know that I do believe we shall overcome, someday,”¹⁰ It is a song of unification and hope, repeating a collective perspective of “we,” saying “we shall overcome,”¹¹ “we shall be alright,”¹² “we shall

⁹ Peter Dreier and Dick Flacks, “Roots of Rebellion: Music and Movements: The Tradition Continues,” *New Labor Forum* 23, no. 2 (2014): 100

¹⁰ Joan Baez, “We Shall Overcome,” recorded 1971, track 13 on *Carry it On*, Vanguard.

¹¹ Baez, “We Shall Overcome”

¹² Baez, “We Shall Overcome”

live in peace,”¹³ and “we are not afraid.”¹⁴ Songs of the collective pushed for progress through involvement of all of the people in a group towards a common goal, in this case overcoming the prejudice and discrimination inherent in the racist laws of segregation. William G. Roy, professor and author, argues that “the division of labor in making music for the Civil Rights Movement dissolved the distinction between composer, performer, and audience. Meetings were modeled after the template of the black church where members were accustomed to congregational singing.”¹⁵ Many of the songs of the Civil Rights Movement sung at rallies or gatherings, followed a call and response or leader and group style similar to what had been sung in churches for years. Beyond being a form that many black Americans were used to prior to the movement, this style of singing embodied the decentralization of the Civil Rights Movement, often accompanied by the joining of arms, swaying, and harmonization, “binding the participants into a collectivity.”¹⁶ It was through this collectivity and lack of a hierarchy that the Civil Rights Movement was successful, Roy argues, as it created a solidarity that had been lacking in other movements that had different structures, like earlier socialist movements of the 30s and 40s. In other words, storytelling songs and unifying songs of the Civil Rights Movement were both necessary to spur anti-racist change in America. Individual songs telling the stories of black suffering served as a powerful reminder that change was needed. Songs that were sung as a combined group were what drove that change, through a greater realization of collective identity and power through which real change could be created.

¹³ Baez, “We Shall Overcome”

¹⁴ Baez, “We Shall Overcome”

¹⁵ William G. Roy, “How Social Movements Do Culture,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 23, no. 2/3 (2010): 94

¹⁶ Roy, 94

Many of the activists and artists of the Civil Rights Movement were also heavily involved in the anti-war movement which opposed the war in Vietnam. As well as being a key leader for civil rights, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was well known for being involved in the anti-war movement, following the footsteps of his wife, Coretta Scott King, who was active in the movement. The anti-war movement had no shortage of music meant to demonstrate their stance. One of the most notable and memorable songs of this period is Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son." Popular and explicit in its reference to the war, the song "detailed the nation's inequitable draft policy."¹⁷ John Fogerty, lead singer and guitarist of Creedence Clearwater Revival, sings "it ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no senator's son,"¹⁸ and "it ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no millionaire's son."¹⁹ The song calls out the injustice of millionaire's sons and senator's sons avoiding the draft, while those who do not possess the same political or economic power were being sent overseas to risk their lives for the country. While John Fogerty himself labeled the song as anti-war on Creedence Clearwater Revival's website and some believe the song to possess bold anti-war lyrics for the age, others argue that the song is not anti-war, as it does not explicitly mention or criticize the fighting, only the draft. Instead of labeling it as anti-war, some would argue that it is anti-elitist or anti-conformist in nature. John Fogerty wrote it after seeing Dwight Eisenhower's grandson's lavish wedding on television, and thinking about the supposedly equal draft consequences the lower class faced which seemed to be avoided by the upper class. Whether explicitly anti-war or not, the song called out the inequalities in America at the time as they related to the Vietnam draft. There were some songs that were more radical,

¹⁷ Kenneth J. Bindas and Craig Houston, "'Takin' Care of Business': Rock Music, Vietnam and the Protest Myth," *The Historian* 52, no. 1 (1989): 15

¹⁸ Creedence Clearwater Revival, "Fortunate Son," recorded November 1969, track 6 on *Willy And The Poor Boys*, Fantasy.

¹⁹ Creedence Clearwater Revival, "Fortunate Son"

though they were often “less profitable.”²⁰ By 1970 and 1971, a majority of Americans, 56%, saw the war in Vietnam as a mistake and sought the removal of military forces. Anti-war protests were growing to be more common as Americans became increasingly upset with how President Nixon was handling the war. His drive for what he called “peace” included expanding the war into Cambodia. One anti-war demonstration took place at Kent State University in Ohio, where the Ohio National Guard killed four students. In response to this tragedy, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young released their song “Ohio” which detailed the event and criticized the killings and the war. Neil Young was reasonably regretful that he even had to write the song.²¹ He wrote that “soldiers are cutting us down,”²² describing how students were being killed for protesting the war, casualties beyond those abroad. This “should have been gone long ago,”²³ referencing the common belief at the time that the United States should have pulled out of Vietnam long before they actually did. Ohio eventually would become a major hit for Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. The Vietnam War and the circumstances surrounding the draft led to a number of songs representing the American response to these events. Many of these songs revealed themes of protest against the elitist and violent nature surrounding the war, ideological convictions that were anti-conformist and went against the American government at the time, pushing for a more just society and American withdrawal from Vietnam.

One musical constant between all social movements in the Cold War was the presence of folk music. From Bob Dylan’s classic folk sound to the more evolved folk-rock fusion sound that

²⁰ Bindas and Houston, 15

²¹ Bindas and Houston, 16

²² Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, “Ohio,” recorded May 1970, track 5 on *So Far*, Atlantic.

²³ Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, “Ohio”

Creedence Clearwater Revival was famous for, folk music was found everywhere in protest songs of the Cold War. Examining folk music is not just helpful in providing information about folk music, but about the people, who are the “folk” of folk music. Recent accounts of the folk revival of the 1960s, which brought to prominence names including Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, argue that “the political and musical movements were intimately linked.”²⁴ Folk singers and activists were often part of the same circles, with folk music intricately connected with left politics. Pete Seeger was a folk singer who had an incredible talent for relating to people, breaking down the barriers between himself as the performer and his audience. In performances, “Seeger made the audience part of the act,”²⁵ similar to the general audience involvement of many civil rights songs. Grace Elizabeth Hale, a professor of American studies and history, believes that “no one else did more in mid-twentieth century America to tear at the walls the Cold War erected between what many middle-class Americans understood as authentic art and left politics.”²⁶ Hale argues that Seeger, who is often considered as a foil for Bob Dylan or placed beside Woody Guthrie and Joan Baez, was unique, “not for making a connection between art and politics, but for publicly insisting on the union of folk music and left politics in the 1950s and early 1960s.”²⁷ Though Seeger seems to be wrong in that the people’s songs and the people’s politics are not inherently leftist, though they may often lean that way, his “vision of the

²⁴ John Street, “‘Fight the Power’: The Politics of Music and the Music of Politics,” *Government and Opposition* 38, no. 1 (2003): 123

²⁵ Grace Elizabeth Hale, “The Union of Folk Music and Left Politics: Pete Seeger in Cold War America,” In *Liberty and Justice for All?: Rethinking Politics in Cold War America*, ed. Kathleen G. Donohue (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 243

²⁶ Hale, 243

²⁷ Hale, 245

inseparability of art, life, and politics”²⁸ is one that holds weight. The association between art and politics is the lens through which political and social movements can be viewed through music.

The Cold War was an ideological clash between American capitalism and Soviet Communism. The political and social movements of the era can be examined through art, which is a way through which people can share their beliefs, values, and ideas as they relate to the world that they live in. Music, being the most accessible of art mediums, is the best medium to look at when trying to understand the historical beliefs, values, and ideas of the Cold War era in America. The Cold War Era led to the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, highlighted and supported through songs describing the injustices faced by black Americans, and songs through which the movement for legislative changes grew and calls for equality were unified. The success of the Civil Rights Movement saw rise to more social movements as part of a greater social movement toward equality, freedom, and justice. The anti-war movement was portrayed through songs lamenting lives lost in anti-war protests and the American military forces fighting in Vietnam. The draft led to an anti-elitist movement as the socially, politically, and economically powerful remained on American soil. All of these movements were musically supported by folk music, which embodies the idea that art and social movements and politics go hand in hand. Thorough examination of Cold War era music reveals that music in this age served as a means of expressing anger at injustice, unifying social and racial movements, motivating legal reform, and protesting for greater equality in the United States.

²⁸ Hale, 247

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