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# From Woody Guthrie to the Big Muddy: The Evolution of Political Music in America From World War I to the Late 1960s

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*From Woody Guthrie to the Big Muddy*

*The Evolution of Political Music in America  
From World War I to the Late 1960s*

By

Alexander B. Kouwenhoven

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## ABSTRACT

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Throughout the course of American history, music has served as a vital cultural mode for the expression and articulation of the collective American experience. Perhaps the most iconic connection between music and politics in American history occurred during the 1960s in the era of the counterculture and the Vietnam War. During this period, rock 'n' roll musicians became the figureheads for the Anti-War campaign and represented the political objectives of the New Left. However, the iconic status of these political musicians did not arise in a vacuum. These musicians, and their political importance in America can trace its origins to the careers of the Popular Front folk musicians from nearly three decades earlier.

This thesis investigates how the political movements of the left wing in America utilized music as a vehicle for the articulation of cultural and political values throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, beginning in the post World War I period. Between chapter one and chapter three, I illustrate how the growth of American folk music, and its politicization as a popular genre influenced popular American music as a whole. Bob Dylan, and the folk music revival in the early 1960s serves as the pivotal point where folk transferred its political traditions and significance into the tumultuous climate of the 1960s. The trajectory of Dylan's career, and the folk-rock boom of 1965 that followed provides a clear bridge between folk music and rock 'n' roll. Therefore, I aim to assert in this thesis, that the political rock 'n' roll of the late 1960s was a culmination of a musical traditions in America that percolated and developed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## Chapter One

### *Folk Music: A Weapon in the Class Struggle*

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the United States underwent a culturally, politically, and socially tumultuous period, forcing Americans to reconsider the fundamental principles on which their nation's political system rested. During the twentieth century, America established itself as an industrial power, fought two world wars, suffered from dramatic economic fluctuation, and faced its internal racial divisions. As a result of the circumstances the United States faced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political stances of Americans were in constant flux, resulting in the rise, decline, and evolution of unique political movements. During the 1960's the emergence of a specific political movement known as the "counterculture" or the "New Left" represented the culmination of a set of political ideologies that had been brewing since the end of World War I.

The counterculture evolved out of preexisting liberal traditions within the United States, taking root within a disproportionately large population of disillusioned adolescents and intellectuals. However, the politics of the counterculture took form in what was called the New Left, and they were specifically potent and iconic in the context of the twentieth century. In his book *The Movement*, Irwin Unger asserts, "At no time in America's past have more than a handful of young men and women taken strong left activist positions."<sup>1</sup> The ideologies of the counterculture were widespread and significant, varying from general anti-establishment attitudes to active political participation in

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<sup>1</sup> Irwin Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 30.

support of New Left politics. The counterculture movement fundamentally aligned with political attitudes and values that had evolved in American society for over a century. In a basic sense, the counterculture constituted an “altered consciousness”<sup>2</sup> surrounding the increasingly critical attitudes of young Americans towards their society and democracy.

Although some argue that the counterculture was born in the late fifties and sixties as a reaction to an unprecedented set of social issues faced by Americans, it is important to consider its roots both culturally and politically in the traditions of the political left. The social and political issues faced by Americans during the Cold War era reinvigorated and united political movements that had existed within the nation for decades. By examining the origins of the counterculture, and investigating its impact on American culture and art, it is possible to affirm its cultural significance regarding the evolution of American political thought during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines culture as: “the beliefs, customs, arts, etc. of a particular society, group place or time.”<sup>3</sup> While it defines counterculture as “a culture with values and mores that run counter to those of established society.”<sup>4</sup> As the term implies, the counterculture aimed to reject the established and dominant culture in America in the late fifties and early sixties. As it evolved, the counterculture formed its own place in the American New Left, drawing from ideologies, political beliefs, artistic traditions, and social attitudes that had existed since the early twentieth century. Arguably the cultural medium through which the counterculture most famously expressed itself

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<sup>2</sup> Unger, *The Movement*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Merriam Webster*, “Culture” (Date Accessed: 10/15/2017), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>.

<sup>4</sup> *Merriam Webster*, “Counterculture” (Date Accessed: 3/10/2017), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>.

during the late fifties and early sixties was through music. The evolution of music during the era of the New Left counterculture is inseparable from the evolution of the political ideologies and cultural attitudes of the American people at the time. The popularization of rock 'n' roll, and the political status rock musicians adopted in the 1960s, affirms rock 'n' roll's iconic social significance to the counterculture. However, like the ideologies from which the New Left counterculture can trace its origins, the origins of the politics of rock can be traced to earlier musical movements.

This thesis will investigate how the American folk movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century incorporated the political ideologies of the American left, eventually influencing the development and politicization of rock 'n' roll in the mid 1960s. I will demonstrate how these two musical movements expressed the continuity of a set of political objectives and values held by Americans throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and how certain historical events, specifically the Vietnam War, brought them to the forefront of American society in the politically contentious climate of the sixties. In order to make this connection, this chapter will explore the historical circumstances that contributed to the politicization of the American folk movement, and examine its fundamental significance as a genre that influenced the course popular American music throughout the twentieth century.

In the wake of World War I America became an international power whose ideological convictions were to play a role in reestablishing the political foundations of other global powers. Under the leadership of Woodrow Wilson, America participated in the war ostensibly to defend liberalism and democracy. After World War I, America found itself in a position where its political ideologies held unprecedented global

significance in the context of the post war political climate. Capitalism and democracy had proven successful and America aimed to proliferate its ideologies globally. Two years before Woodrow Wilson began the negotiations at Versailles, however, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 sent ripples across the globe, in many ways calling the virtues of the world's newest superpower into question. The ideologies of Lenin and Marx contradicted fundamental American principles, including democracy and capitalism, providing a new conception of how to establish an effective society. Because of its prominent international status after World War I, America was forced to compete with these ideologies, and they began to influence American thought in the early 1920's.

The economic prosperity in the 1920's largely subdued the spread of Marxist ideologies on American soil. The dualistic class emphasized by communism, and its condemnation of capitalism seemed irrelevant as American society flourished what was called the "roaring 20s." Amidst this prosperity intellectuals like Jay Lovestone and Bertram Wolfe popularized the concept of "American Exceptionalism", suggesting that the United States was immune to the class struggles professed by Lenin and Marx.<sup>5</sup> As America entered the Great Depression, however, American exceptionalism was forced into question. In many ways, the American people realized that their capitalist system was flawed, and the Great Depression began to intensify class divisions in American society. For many, "the collapse of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed seemed to confirm the direst predictions of Marxism."<sup>6</sup> During this time period, communist ideologies started to appeal to many class conscious Americans. As a result, between 1934 and 1939, membership in the communist party increased five fold, growing from

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<sup>5</sup> Unger, *The Movement*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Unger, *The Movement* 6.



around 25,000 people to over 120,000.<sup>7</sup> Although it had existed since the early 1920's, following the economic collapse of 1929, America's Communist Party began to acquire broad popularity, and manifest political legitimacy.

Although domestic American communism gained momentum as a result of the failing economy and a rising disparity of wealth, the Communist Party itself also gained momentum with the help of intellectuals, scholars and professionals. During this period "sensitive and humane artists, writers, professors, students and professional men could now see with their own eyes the prescience and wisdom of the Marxist analysis of capitalist failure."<sup>8</sup> Attracted by communism, American intellectuals began to advocate for the rights of the nations oppressed working class, and, American artists and musicians began to embrace radical leftist and Marxist ideologies. Concurrently, between 1920 and 1950, technological advancements ushered in the "golden age" of radio in America. General access to radio throughout the country enabled musicians and intellectuals to disseminate their ideas broadly. Although folk music during the period was largely concentrated in rural communities, the political messages of early folk artists supporting workers rights and peace began to take form in the public sphere.

In 1935, American communism had gained a foothold with the American people, however, its place in institutional American politics itself was uncertain and precarious. Communism at the time was radical and controversial ideology, and it faced issues assimilating into a political environment that had been comprised of a basic set of political principles for centuries. However, developments in the mid thirties enabled

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<sup>7</sup> Maurice Isserman, *If I had a Hammer. . . The Death of the Old Left and The Birth of the New Left*. (New York: Basic Books Inc, 1987), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Unger, *The Movement*, 6.

communism to impact American politics. During the Seventh World Congress of the Communist Party in 1935, Georgi Dimitrov, a prominent Bulgarian communist and leader presented a strategy through which communism could find its place in the politics of the western world. In 1935 “Communists everywhere were called upon to abandon temporarily their goal of a revolutionary conquest of power and join with socialists, trade unionists, and liberals in a broad ‘peoples front.’”<sup>9</sup> The advent of the “peoples front” gave communism a place as an ally of the pre-established American political left, enabling it to influence American politics more significantly. By 1935 the efforts of international communism in promoting the “peoples front” culminated in the creation of the “Popular Front” in domestic American politics. Although the Popular Front was a political coalition of socialists, liberals and communists, “the particular shape and tone that the Popular Front took in the United States was largely the work of the Communists. It was they who gave it coherence and expression, who inspired its activities and formulated its slogans.”<sup>10</sup>

The Popular Front enabled the political ideologies of the American left to synthesize communism. As this movement grew, it drew in considerable portion of the American left, developing a significant following and establishing its place in American politics. During the mid 1930’s the Popular Front, driven by the American Communist Party, fostered their own social and cultural institutions, developing an early form of counterculture in America. The political values held by this sub-culture embraced

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<sup>9</sup> Robbie Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon, Peoples Song, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture 1930-1959*, (Chicago. University of Illinois Press, 1989), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Howe and Coser Cited in: Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 168.

communist ideologies, and took on an anti-fascist attitude regarding politics. Lieberman writes:

In many ways the Communist movement culture took on a life of its own. But the point is not that the children of the Left grew up so differently from their counterparts outside the movement. The movement culture – its beliefs and expectations, its vocabulary, institutions and networks – contrasted with the dominant culture, but the process of socialization was very similar. Children growing up in the movement culture absorbed ideas that they did not fully understand until later in much the same way as did their nonmovement counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

During the 1930's, the Popular Front and the American Left forged its own intellectual subculture, inspiring unique developments in the arts. In the thirties, “not only did the Soviet model hold sway in politics, promising full employment, productivity and hope, but it also had an important influence in culture, promising revolutionary new content and techniques in the arts.”<sup>12</sup> As the Popular Front grew during these years it developed a form of “Proletarian culture” on American soil. This culture utilized art “as a weapon in the class struggle”<sup>13</sup>, influencing intellectuals and artists across the United States. Furthermore, the culture of the Popular Front in America aimed to combat fascism and oppression on American soil and abroad. The link between the politics of the American Left and art during the mid 1930's is crucial to understand as it contributed heavily to the emergence of the folk movement less than a decade later.

In the waning years of the 1930's, Americans in the Popular Front began to comprehend and embrace the importance of music as a vehicle for protesting political oppression and civil injustice. During this period “The emphasis on the Negro's

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<sup>11</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 25.

contribution to American life was central to the Popular Front ethos and the growing interest in folk music.”<sup>14</sup> Left wing musicians and musicologists during these years affirmed music’s political significance in American society. Lawrence Gellert’s collection *Negroes Song of Protest* was partially responsible for establishing the importance of indigenous folk music as political protest in the late 1930s.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the Popular Front supported African American artists like Paul Robeson, whose music encapsulated a similar political struggle, and firmly drew from the folk tradition. Consequently, “By the late 1930s, then, folk music began to be promoted as indigenous, progress ‘people’s music.’” The association between folk music and the concept of the “peoples struggle” that formed during this period would go on to become a crucial connection as it became a class-conscious genre in later years.

During the pre WWII period, the “sensitive and humane artists, writers, professors, students and professional men”<sup>16</sup> who had witnessed the rise of communism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the failure of capitalism during the Great Depression passed on their ideas to their children. Pete Seeger, who was born in 1919 to a folk musicologist named Charles Seeger is an example of how the ideologies of the Popular Front were passed on to a younger generation of intellectuals entering adulthood during the thirties and forties. Charles Seeger’s work as a musicologist pertained to examining and asserting music’s purpose in society, and he possessed a particular interest in indigenous American musical movements. Furthermore, his work affected his son’s life as he matured. During his youth, “Pete Seeger read Communist cultural critic Mike Gold’s columns at the age of

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<sup>14</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> Unger, *The Movement*, 6.

thirteen. He was conscious of the relationship between art and politics because of his readings of *New Masses*, to say nothing of family discussions at the dinner table.”<sup>17</sup>

Through the life of Pete Seeger, it is possible to see how many of the intellectuals and artists who came of age in the forties and fifties were influenced by the ideologies of their parents, transferring the ideas of the Popular Front and the American communist party into the political climate of the World War II period. However, this younger left wing generation would meet far more political adversity than their parents of the Popular Front, as communism's role in America shifted dramatically during the 1940s.

Between 1939 and 1945, the Second World War shook the political foundations of the globe. It was triggered by the military aggression of the Axis powers, led by Germany, Japan and Italy. The aggression of the Axis Powers was led by a group of fascist dictators, including Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini, who dismantled the Treaty of Versailles in an attempt to conquer Europe. In Asia, Japan and its allies sought to assert military dominance over their continent based on a similar fascist ideological impetus. The Allied Forces during World War II coalesced in response to this despotic menace, and across Europe, Asia, and North Africa, they fought the forces of despotic fascism in an attempt to defend the virtues of democracy and liberalism, which were at stake. *The Washington Post*, Frank Graham in 1942 described the ideologies the Allied nations sought to preserve as they combatted Axis forces at a key point in the war.

The democracies exhibit much that is unworthy, even elements of fascism, master-racialism and barbarism. Yet the peoples of America, Britain, China and Russia, fighting magnificently and struggling stubbornly toward a better day, the peoples of the democracies, conquered and unconquered, with all their faults and failures, still aspire toward the human, the ethical, the individual, the universal, and the spiritual. The conquering Axis powers have crushed or silenced their

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<sup>17</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 23.

noblest spirits and openly renounce the human, ethical individual and the spiritual.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the Second World War, the Allies fought the fascist menace, who threatened to dismantle and destroy the ideologies of the Western World. During the War, the Soviet Union became the United States' most important military ally, enabling the allied forces to subdue the Axis powers and eventually defeat them. For the American left wing, and the American Communist Party, the alliance with the USSR inspired hope for their political objectives. This optimism was driven by the hope that after the Allies won the war, American politics would direct their focus towards domestic issues, and potentially incorporate the ideologies of the Communist Party. As Frank Graham mentioned in his 1942 article, the Allied democracies during the World War II had many "faults and failures."<sup>19</sup> Communism provided a variety of potential solutions to domestic issues in America following the war. Although the alliance with the Soviet Union had inspired hope for many who identified with the Popular Front and the American Communist party, in the aftermath of World War II, the United States' attitudes towards the Soviet Union and Communism shifted.

As tensions between the United States and the USSR came to the forefront after 1945, the American Communist Party's place in American Politics grew increasingly precarious. Consequently, the aftereffects of World War II had a severe impact on the political demographic of Americans who had come to embrace the Popular Front and the communist ideologies that had flourished during the thirties. As a result of their support

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<sup>18</sup> Frank P Graham. 1942. "The World Revolution." *The Washington Post*, (1923-1954), 1, (Date Accessed 10/5/17),

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/151530652?accountid=14637>.

<sup>19</sup> Graham, "The World Revolution." *The Washington Post*, 1942.

of the USSR during World War II, and the growth of domestic American Communism, the American Left suffered greatly as well in the wake of World War II. By 1945, “the prestige and goodwill of both the Soviet Union and the American left were quickly dissipated. The Cold War, already anticipated by strains within the wartime Grand Alliance, soon came to overshadow Soviet-American Relations.”<sup>20</sup> As a result, Americans who had aligned with the Old Left and the Popular Front during and before World War II became victimized by the America’s “obsession with loyalty and fears of subversion and treason.”<sup>21</sup> Consequently, during the period, thousands of left wing Americans “lost their jobs, their reputations and their peace of mind”<sup>22</sup> in the emerging political climate of the Cold War.

As left wing political attitudes in America came under attack as a result of rising Cold War tensions, the party’s political prominence and legitimacy waned, and it was forced to survive within a smaller, less politically influential demographic. During this period, the political values of left wing coalitions, like the Popular Front, which had thrived during the 1930s remained “strong among intellectuals, people in the media, and certain ethnic groups, especially Jews and middle class Negroes.”<sup>23</sup> Although it had been greatly weakened by the emergence of the Cold War, the intellectual bridge that had formed between communism and the American left, and the emphasis this subculture put on art remained in American society. During this period, the children of the Popular Front, like Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, who had absorbed the political ideologies of

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<sup>20</sup> Unger, *The Movement*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Unger, *The Movement*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Unger, *The Movement*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Unger, *The Movement*, 7.

the 1930s began to express their political attitudes in the context of a radically different socio-political climate in America.

The career of Woody Guthrie gives us a clear idea of how the ideologies of the Popular Front, and the political growth of the folk movement during the World War II years were inextricably linked. Guthrie was born in Okemah, Oklahoma in 1912, and his career as a folk musician spanned from the late 20's to the 1960's. Guthrie came of age during the 1930's in rural, working class America, and his folk songs embodied the struggle of lower class Americans in a profound sense. He was a member of the Popular Front from an early point in his life, and identified with the American Communist Party throughout his career as a musician and a journalist. His class-conscious folk music during the period protested the class divisions of agrarian America. While throughout the thirties, Guthrie's music also demonstrated the anti-fascist attitudes held by many left wing Americans during the period. In 1937, Woody Guthrie signed a radio contract in LA at a station called KVFD, affirming the importance of radio as a means of disseminating folk music to the American people. In 1939, Guthrie was fired from KVFD for singing his song "More War News" on the radio, where he expressed his opinions regarding Hitler's annexation of Poland in a public broadcast.<sup>24</sup> The lyrics to Guthrie's song go as follows:

I see where Hitler is a-talking peace  
Since Russia met him face to face-  
He had got his war machine a rollin'  
Coasting along, and taking Poland  
Stalin stepped in, took a big strip of Poland and give  
The farm lands back to the farmers.  
A lot of little countries to Russia ran

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<sup>24</sup> Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 1.



To get away from this Hitler man -  
If I'd been living in Poland then  
I'd been Glad Stalin stepped in –  
Swap my rifle for a farm. Trade my helmet for a sweetheart.<sup>25</sup>

“More War News” was Guthrie’s public response to the Hitler-Stalin Pact signed in August of 1939. Also known as the “German-Soviet Treaty of Nonaggression”, the treaty between Hitler and Stalin was a response to Hitler’s unauthorized military annexation of Poland. In “More War News”, Woody Guthrie demonstrated his political support of Stalin, and his distaste for Hitler, the fascist German dictator. Although this song was released during first year of World War II, while America’s alliance with the Soviet Union was in it’s embryonic stage, the overtly political message of Guthrie’s folk music was unprecedented and significant. Furthermore, Guthrie’s song “More War News” demonstrated how the connection between folk musicians and the politics of the Popular Front manifested itself in the late 1930s, as Guthrie began “singing the news” over American radio waves. Guthrie was fired from the radio station for playing “More War News”, because its political ethos endorsed Stalin, the USSR, and communism too blatantly.

After being fired from KFVD, Woody Guthrie continued to compose songs supporting communism. While “More War News” related to communism’s international status, Guthrie’s communist folk music also approached domestic issues in the United States. His songs in the late thirties often advocated for America’s labor unions, and rallied against fascism, private property and the exploitation of the working class. The

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<sup>25</sup> Woody Guthrie, “More War News” Cited in: Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 1.

class-conscious, Popular Front commentary on politics was a trademark of Guthrie's early folk music.

In 1940, Guthrie released "This Land is Your Land," a song that thematically supported American communism, and would become a cornerstone of the People's Songs movement in the years to come. In the original song, Guthrie interwove elements of communism and the peoples struggle, which have since been cut out, as the song became a popular anthem for the United States Government after its release in the early forties. Guthrie's original lyrics reveal the political significance of "This Land is Your Land." In the fifth verse Guthrie sings:

As I went walking I saw a sign there  
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."  
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,  
That side was made for you and me.<sup>26</sup>

In "This Land is Your Land" Guthrie overtly criticizes private property and capitalism in his lyrics. During this period, Guthrie had amassed considerable influence and a reasonable amount of wealth due to his success as a folk musician in California, and had moved to New York City where he began to write a column called "Woody Sez" for the *People's World*, the national newspaper of the American Communist Party. In his column, Guthrie's criticism of the distribution of wealth in New York represents a broader issue in the whole of the United States. His rhetoric illuminates his negative perceptions of Americas capitalist system. In 1940, Guthrie described New York City as follows. "The best of the least for the most, and the most of the best for the least, and the biggest bunch of people on earth that work like dogs for a living, and the

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<sup>26</sup> Woody Guthrie, "This Land Is Your Land", (Date Accessed: 10/23/17), [http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This\\_Land.htm](http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/This_Land.htm).

biggest bunch that live a whole lifetime and never hit a lick of work.”<sup>27</sup> Guthrie’s poetry of the social inequality in New York City illuminates his criticism of American society as a whole, a criticism that became a key characteristic of his folk music throughout the 1940s.

Guthrie’s departure from the West Coast and his move to New York City in the early forties was also crucial in the development of People’s Songs Inc, a political folk organization that came together five years later. The arrival of an internationally famous folk musician and political icon like Woody Guthrie in 1940 in New York City would not go unnoticed by the city’s local folk musicians and left wing intellectuals. During the early forties, Pete Seeger and Lee Hays, two left wing New York folk singers, “looked to Guthrie for their early inspiration”<sup>28</sup> and invited him to join them in their efforts to perform folk music to a broad American audience. Guthrie obliged, leading to the creation of the Almanac Singers, a political folk group based in downtown Manhattan whose objective was to “write new songs of your own and parodies and poetry, and sing them so loudly that all the warmakers and native fascists and enemies of peace will hear you and tremble in their counting houses.”<sup>29</sup> The Almanac Singer’s manifesto represents their clear alignment with the politics of the American left and Popular Front. Specifically, it demonstrates the anti-fascist and anti-capitalist attitudes folk musicians sought to convey in their music. The Almanac singers were made of group of musicians who were products of the Popular Front subculture in America that existed in the thirties. Their political interests were firmly rooted in the Old Left as they incorporated those of

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<sup>27</sup> Woody Guthrie cited in: Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 67.

Guthrie, specifically relating to “trade unionism, political machinations in Europe, and the economy.”<sup>30</sup> The majority of the members of the Almanac Singers identified with the American Communist Party, including its leaders, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger.

Although the Almanac Singers only lasted from 1940 to 1943, they greatly influenced the growth of American folk music, as their music became extremely popular during their lifespan. In the early 1940s, left wing folk groups like the Almanac singers played a large part in enabling the ideologies of Popular Front to survive in American society despite the increasing political adversity faced by the left wing, which occurred as a result of the shifting political climate. After the Almanac singers dissolved in 1943, its members remained active, establishing People’s Songs Inc. in 1945. The organization comprised a “small group of left-wing cultural workers organized to sing out for labor, civil rights, civil liberties, and peace.”<sup>31</sup> Their music and cultural objectives embodied the emphasis on the importance of “art as a weapon in the class struggle”<sup>32</sup> asserted by the American Communist Party in 1935, carrying on the left wing traditions from early 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

People’s Songs Inc. was an organizational extension of the Almanac Singers, as it was founded by a group of Old Left folk musicians who aimed to incorporate and adapt folk music to fit the political context of the period. The organization was based in Manhattan, and its founders included influential singers and songwriters like Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Lee Hays, Josh White, and Bess Hays. Peoples’ Songs aimed to establish, institutionalize and legitimize the cultural importance of American folk music

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<sup>30</sup> Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 66.

<sup>31</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, xiv.

through “the purposeful blending of democracy, music and politics.”<sup>33</sup> The organization expressed its fundamental political objectives in its constitution, released shortly after its establishment in 1945.

We extend a welcoming hand to anyone, no matter what religion or creed or race of nation, who believes with us that songs must bring about a stronger unity between all people to fight for peace, for a better life for all and for the brotherhood of man.<sup>34</sup>

In many ways, the egalitarian language in People’s Songs International Constitution aligned firmly with the ideologies of the Popular Front. This is likely tied to the fact that many of its founding members were products of the Popular Front subculture formed a decade earlier. Although they were not all communists, their liberal and progressive agenda interfused their political purpose with the ideologies of the Popular Front, and the American Communist Party of the late 1930s. Lieberman writes: “People’s Songs’ broad outlook and folksy language indicate the group’s roots in the Popular Front, its distance from postwar political and cultural trends, and its naïve faith in the power of song.”<sup>35</sup> As a result of People’s Songs fundamental political ties to the Old Left, their efforts to create and proliferate folk music across the United States during the 1940’s redefined folk music’s national identity, associating it with the Popular Front and the Communist Party.

During the 1940’s the collaboration of folk artists, musicians and intellectuals that culminated in the creation of People’s Songs Inc. revolutionized folk music’s place in American society, and vitalized its political purpose. People’s Songs’ multifaceted efforts

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<sup>33</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 70.

<sup>34</sup> “Peoples Songs International Constitution”, *Peoples Songs Inc.*, New York cited in: Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 72.

surrounded a variety of different objectives. “The national office in New York led the way by collecting songs and keeping a library; producing the monthly *Bulletin* and songs books, song sheets, film strips, and records; and organizing concerts, hootenannies and local engagement tours.”<sup>36</sup> Never before had folk music been collected, investigated and disseminated so thoroughly and cohesively. Furthermore, the organization had nationwide reach, as by 1946 it had offices in a handful of major American cities. Through the publication of the *Bulletin*, People’s Songs’ quarterly newsletter, the organization developed a unified and widespread ideological purpose. Pete Seeger wrote the introduction to the first newsletter released by Peoples Songs in February 1946 representing the organization’s fundamentally political objectives:

The people are on the march and must have songs to sing. Now in 1946, the truth must reassert itself in many singing voices. There are thousands of unions, peoples organizations, singers and choruses who would gladly use more songs. There are many songwriters, amateur and professional who are writing these songs. It is clear that there must be an organization to make and send songs of labor and the American people through the land. To do this job we formed Peoples songs Inc. We invite you to join us.<sup>37</sup>

Pete Seeger’s words express a clear political purpose: the aim to support “the people” through song, and protest civil injustices. By popularizing folk music on the national stage these artists aimed to influence the political consciousness of the American people in a broad sense. Ernie Lieberman, a folk musician from the 1950’s asserted that the objective of People’s Songs Inc. involved “reaching the masses of America with our

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<sup>36</sup> Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Peoples Songs Inc. *Peoples Songs Newsletter*, Vol 1, No 1. 1945. (Old Town School of Folk music resource center collection.)

political message through the vehicle of folk songs.”<sup>38</sup> As a result, People’s Songs Inc. constituted folk music as a distinctively political musical genre in the mid 1940’s.

To Woody Guthrie, the widespread success of People’s Songs Inc. in the late 40’s was a culmination of his political and musical efforts throughout the 1930’s and 40’s. In the early stages of his career, Guthrie had felt as though he was an isolated “lone radical” in American society. However, the establishment of this organization, dedicated to realizing his societal vision was a “godsend”<sup>39</sup>, and it provided Guthrie with the potential to impact American society and politics on a broad scale. In 1946, Guthrie described his interpretation of People’s Songs overarching political mission.

We are trying not to sell ourselves nor our services over onto the right wing scales and display windows. We are trying to actually fight to rid this world of capitalism among artists, performers, and every other place. We are like guns and cannons, we must be polished, oiled, loaded and loved, to work our best.<sup>40</sup>

While Guthrie’s politics during the 1930’s often supported communism at home and abroad, in 1946, he professed a broader anti-establishment and anti-capitalist message. This likely occurred as a result of the political climate of the United States during the Cold War, alongside Guthrie’s detachment from the suffering of rural America’s working class that followed his move to New York City. As communism came under significant scrutiny during the Cold War Period, Peoples’ Songs adapted its political messages to survive in a new political climate by creating music that didn’t overtly relate to communism. For Guthrie, this shift in his musical ethos occurred because of the anti-communist climate of the United States during the period, alongside other driving factors,

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<sup>38</sup> Cited in: Lieberman, *My Song is My Weapon*, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 122.

<sup>40</sup> Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 122.

such as a series atrocities committed by Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union in the late 1940s.

In the years before folk music gained popular legitimacy in the mid forties with the establishment of People's Songs Inc., it was characteristically a genre of the rural working class. American folk music had been passed down through oral tradition, and it predominantly expressed the suffering of working class and oppressed social groups. However, the organization and popularization of folk around clear political objectives that occurred in New York City imported the art form into an urban environment, transforming the genre. Alan Lomax described this phenomenon to the Almanac Singers, during their early development. "What you are doing is one of the most important things that could be done in the field of American music. You are introducing folk songs from the countryside to a new city audience, and you are learning how to do this."<sup>41</sup>

The importation of folk into the urban sphere occurred alongside a series of large-scale urban migrations that defined the World War II era, and it led to the transformation and popularization of the genre. As a result, folk music began to expand its political message and amass popularity. Folk music's transition from rural to urban was greatly influence by the life of Woody Guthrie. Although in the beginning People's Songs ethos attached folk music to the "peoples' struggle", using the art form as a vehicle for supporting communism, as it grew in size, and communism came under scrutiny in America, folk music adapted its political message. By 1950 Guthrie's words "We are trying to actually fight to rid this world of capitalism among artists, performers, and every

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<sup>41</sup> Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 66.



other place” represented a broader purpose for the proliferation of folk music. It is in this quote that the origins of the counterculture movement become apparent.

The development of folk music during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century aligned closely with the political and ideological growth of the left wing political movements in the United States. By the 1950’s folk music had become widely popular, and on the national stage, it was linked inextricably with political ideologies of the left wing. In many ways, prominent folk musicians, like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, who were responsible for the popularization of folk music, had successfully created a vehicle for the dissemination of left wing political ideologies. In doing so, they attracted the attention of many people across America, inspiring a new generation of artists and musicians who would go on to adapt their musical and political accomplishments. The national breadth of the folk movement in the 1950’s can be ascertained by its impact on one young musician in particular, a college student at the University of Minnesota by the name of Robert Allen Zimmerman. In 1960, Zimmerman, who had caught wind of the folk movement in his rural home in Minnesota, dropped out of school and packed his bags for Manhattan, aiming to follow in the footsteps of his idol, Woody Guthrie. Arriving in Greenwich Village as a 20-year-old aspiring folk musician, Zimmerman took on the name Bob Dylan, and began a career that would significantly influence the course of popular American music during the 1960s.

## **Chapter Two**

### *Bob Dylan ushers Folk Music into the Sixties*

In the late 1950's, the folk music movement, which had emerged and been popularized by musicians like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger during the mid 1940's had become widely popular across America. During this period, young musicians across the country began to examine and adapt folk music, recognizing its unrivaled political and cultural significance in the context of contemporary America. During this period, the early career of Bob Dylan and the influences he attributes to his development as a teenage musician in the late 1950's indicate how he inherited the folk tradition.

Eventually, his growth as a musician and his idolization of Woody Guthrie would lead him to move to New York City in 1960, bringing him into the epicenter of the American folk movement. His early career as a folk musician, which began in 1960 when he moved to Greenwich Village, played an enormous role in directing the course of American folk music during the sixties. Dylan's songwriting and music influenced the folk music revival of the 1960s, which imported the genres political significance into a new era, and impacted popular American music's relationship with the politics of the period.

Bob Dylan was born Robert Allen Zimmerman to a Jewish family in Duluth Minnesota in 1941. In his youth, Zimmerman displayed an acute interest and aptitude for music and poetry, demonstrating poetic talent from an early age. As a high school student in Kibbing, Minnesota, Dylan began experimenting with, composing and performing music in a variety of bands. In his formative years as a musician, Dylan performed simple

renditions of pop music and rock 'n' roll artists like Little Richard and Elvis Presley.<sup>42</sup> In an interview Dylan described his earliest musical style as the following. "I wrote songs when I was younger, say fifteen, but they were pop songs. The songs I wrote at that age were just four chords, rhythm and blues songs. Based on the things that the Diamonds would sing, or the Crewcuts . . . You know, in-the-still-of-the-night kinda songs."<sup>43</sup> Dylan's initial development as a musician with rock and blues styles is valuable to note in the context of his broader career. However, as he matured at this early stage, he began to become attracted by the complexity and cultural significance of folk music, which inspired his development as a folk musician.

Documented evidence of Dylan's music from his year spent as student at the University of Minnesota in 1959-60 reveals Dylan's stylistic evolution, as his work became influenced by a folk traditions. In 1959-60, the records Dylan composed began to incorporate folk traditions, specifically drawing from the work of Woody Guthrie. In Dylan's "Song to Bonny" apparently written in around 1960, Dylan uses the tune from Guthrie's famous song "1913 Massacre". The song also draws lyrical themes from folk conventions as "Song to Bonny" demonstrates how he was inspired by the kind of "hard travellin' that Guthrie had so romantically expounded in *Bound for Glory*."<sup>44</sup> Consequently "Song to Bonny" affirms Dylan's embrace of the folk style at a developmental stage in his career, while also revealing folk music's national popularity in America.

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<sup>42</sup> Clinton Heylin, *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan 1957-1973*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press Inc, 2009), 28.

<sup>43</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 33.

In the twilight of the 1950s, Bob Dylan's maturing talent as a musician, and his admiration of Woody Guthrie, led to his stylistic embrace of folk music. Dylan described the impact Guthrie's work had on him later in his autobiography *Bob Dylan Chronicles*. About Guthrie's work, Dylan writes, "The songs themselves had the infinite sweep of humanity in them, he was the true voice of the American spirit. I said to myself I was going to be Guthrie's greatest disciple."<sup>45</sup> Here, Dylan's embrace of Guthrie's musical talent signifies his self-identification as folk artist. Furthermore, Dylan's reflection on this transformative period in his life indicates how he had largely abandoned rock 'n' roll due to its lack of significant and profound lyrical content. In a 1985 interview recorded in the Liner Notes of Dylan's *Biograph* collection he is quoted saying the following about his transition to folk music:

The thing about Rock'n'Roll is that for me anyway it wasn't enough... There were great catch-phrases and driving pulse rhythms... but the songs weren't serious or didn't reflect life in a realistic way. I knew that when I got into folk music, it was more of a serious type of thing. The songs are filled with more despair, more sadness, more triumph, more faith in the supernatural, much deeper feelings.<sup>46</sup>

As Dylan adopted folk, he moved to New York City in late 1960 to follow in the footsteps of his idols, hoping to begin an apprenticeship with Woody Guthrie. Dylan's transition from pop-rock to folk occurred as he sought to join a musical tradition that offered the capacity for greater complexity and depth. Potentially, Dylan's transformation into a folk artist was driven by his aim to create music that would possess political significance.

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<sup>45</sup> Bob Dylan, *Bob Dylan Chronicles*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 244.

<sup>46</sup> Cameron Crowe cited in: *Biograph*, (Columbia Records, 1985).

Sure enough, as a budding folk musician, Dylan's work rapidly incorporated political themes, likely as a result of his interaction with the politically oriented folk musicians and intellectuals he encountered during his early years in New York City. In late 1960, as a 19-year-old, Bob Dylan travelled to New York City to visit Guthrie in Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital, where he was suffering from Huntington's disease. Dylan's "Song to Woody" is likely the first song he composed after arriving in New York.<sup>47</sup> The folk ballad, written in Greenwich Village, pays tribute to Guthrie, as it was an adaptation of one of Guthrie's original songs. This revealed Dylan's aim to establish continuity between his work and that of his mentor, Guthrie. He accomplished this by incorporating the thematic elements of Guthrie's work based on folk traditions. In the song, Dylan explains his perception of "Guthrie's world", as in the first verse Dylan sings:

I'm out here a thousand miles from my home  
Walkin' a road other men have gone down  
I'm seein' your world of people and things  
Your paupers and peasants and princes and kings<sup>48</sup>

In "Song to Woody" Dylan accomplishes a similar objective to Guthrie through folk his music. According to Dylan "Woody's songs were about everything at the same time. They were about rich and poor, black and white, the highs and lows of life."<sup>49</sup> This early piece by Dylan illuminates his personal aim to portray himself as Guthrie's successor by seeking to capture the thematic complexity and political significance Guthrie accomplished in his folk music.

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<sup>47</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 37.

<sup>48</sup> Bob Dylan "Song to Woody", (Date accessed: 10/30/16), <http://bobdylan.com/songs/song-woody/>,

<sup>49</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 37.

In his first year as a folk musician in New York City in 1961, Bob Dylan lived in Greenwich Village, which was a hotbed for left-wing folk musicians, artists and intellectuals Manhattan at the time. Throughout this year Dylan interacted with many folk artists and studied Guthrie's work vigilantly, visiting him frequently. "At the same time, he continued assimilating everything he could from Guthrie's recordings and songbooks and from interrogating those who'd known him in his prime."<sup>50</sup> 1961 is considered by many to be one of Dylan's prolific songwriting years, and Dylan's intense examination of Guthrie's work played an enormous role in influencing his development as a folk musician during this formative stage. In 1961, Dylan "would write his first set of songs, establish himself at the leading Village folk clubs, sign to Columbia Records, and record his first album."<sup>51</sup> In 1962 after signing to Columbia Records, Dylan released his first album, *Bob Dylan*, containing many songs he had written during his first year in Manhattan that expressed a clear line to the folk tradition. Furthermore, Dylan signing a record deal in 1962 reveals that a commercial demand for folk musicians was growing in the early 1960s, as the genre was becoming popular for a new generation.

On *Bob Dylan*, Dylan recycled many of the traditional folk ballads Guthrie sang throughout his career, putting a contemporary spin on themes that had existed in folk since the late twenties. The lyrics and format for Dylan's Song "Talkin' New York" can be traced back to the "talkin' blues" folk style that had existed since 1926 with Chris Bouchillon's record "Original Talking Blues."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the song offers a direct reflection of the Woody Guthrie's 1940 description of social New York City in his

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<sup>50</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 38.

<sup>51</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 43.

column of *People's World*. Over two decades before Dylan released the song, Guthrie wrote about New York City: "The best of the least for the most, and the most of the best for the least, and the biggest bunch of people on earth that work like dogs for a living, and the biggest bunch that live a hole lifetime and never hit a lick of work."<sup>53</sup> Dylan's themes in "Talkin' New York", written in 1961 are reminiscent of Guthrie's own reflections on New York City:

Now, a very great man once said  
That some people rob you with a fountain pen  
It didn't take too long to find out  
Just what he was talkin' about  
A lot of people don't have much food on their table  
But they got a lot of forks 'n' knives  
And they gotta cut somethin'<sup>54</sup>

Dylan's lyrics negatively portray the cutthroat capitalism that defined New York City at the time. As outsiders in Manhattan, from rural midwestern backgrounds, Guthrie and Dylan similarly criticized the social inequality that defined life in the big city. "Talkin New York" demonstrated Dylan's early ability to compose folk music that incorporated the protest themes of folk, and the politics of the Popular Front folk musicians, such as class divisions and social inequality. Conversely, however, "Talkin' New York" also revealed Dylan's effort to "put his own spin on earlier morés"<sup>55</sup> as it satirized his personal struggle as a poor folk musician in the unforgiving atmosphere of New York City in the early sixties.

In September of 1961, an article written by *New York Times* music critic Robert Shelton covered one of Dylan's early performances at a famous folk venue in Greenwich

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<sup>53</sup> Woody Guthrie Cited in: Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Bob Dylan "Talkin' New York", (Date Accessed: 11/03/2017), <http://bobdylan.com/songs/talkin-new-york/>,

<sup>55</sup> Clinton Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 50.

Village. While Shelton doesn't pinpoint the twenty-year-old Dylan's goals at the time, the article does affirm that Dylan's presence was being felt on the folk scene as early as 1961. Shelton writes, "A bright new face in folk music is appearing at Gerde's Folk City. Although only 20 years old, Bob Dylan is one of the most distinctive stylists to play a Manhattan cabaret in months."<sup>56</sup> Later in the article, Shelton considered how Dylan was rapidly evolving as a result of the folk artists he was encountering during the period.

Mr. Dylan's highly personalized approach toward folk song is still evolving. He has been sopping up influences like a sponge. At times, the drama he aims at is off-target melodrama and his stylization threatens to topple over as mannered excess. But if not for every taste, his music-making has the mark of originality and inspiration, all the more noteworthy for his youth.<sup>57</sup>

Shelton's 1961 article in the *New York Times* confirms that at this early stage in his career, Dylan was becoming rapidly popular, his music was evolving, and his individual songwriting talent and originality was beginning to influence the folk scene in Manhattan.

Throughout 1961, as Dylan was "sopping up influences like a sponge", he drew songwriting inspiration from many different elements of his environment. Consequently, his songwriting evolved to incorporate new themes. In an interview in 1962, conducted by Cynthia Gooding for WBAI, Dylan expressed his aim to consider the political issues of his environment in the folk music he was writing during the period. In the interview, Gooding asked Dylan to describe his songs and the goal behind his music. Dylan responded by saying "I don't claim they're folk songs or anything. I just call them

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<sup>56</sup> Robert Shelton. 1961. "Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Folk-Song Stylist." *New York Times*, (1923-Current File), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/115512422?accountid=14637>.

<sup>57</sup> Shelton. 1961. "Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Folk-Song Stylist." *New York Times*.



contemporary songs I guess.”<sup>58</sup> Here, Dylan expressed his aim to bring the themes contemplated by the folk artists before him into the contemporary sphere. His reluctance to identify himself as a traditional folk artist reveals that during this period, Dylan hoped his music would incorporate the political issues relevant to the times. Another interview for a radio station in 1963, affirms this objective regarding his music. In this interview Dylan said the following:

I think maybe in 1930, from talking with Woody and Pete Seeger and some other people I know, it seems like everything back then was good and bad and black and white and whatever, you only had one or two. When you stand on one side and you know people are either for or against you, with you or behind whatever you have. Nowadays, it’s just I don’t know how it got that way but it doesn’t seem so simple. There are more than two sides, it’s not black and white anymore.<sup>59</sup>

By 1963, it became evident that Dylan had evolved as a folk artist, and he was paying acute attention to the political atmosphere around him. During his first two years in Manhattan, Dylan fervently studied folk traditions, learning everything he could from the artists who popularized the genre, and using their recipes to establish himself as a popular musician. He did so by incorporating the themes and styles of traditions of folk into his own work, and aligning himself firmly with their traditions. However, Dylan’s words from this 1963 demonstrate that, in Dylan’s eyes, the political significance of folk music that existed during the thirties and forties surrounding communism and class struggle had lost their relevance in the political context of the early 1960s. Dylan’s identification as a “contemporary artist” in 1962, revealed his goal to revive folk music to express the political issues and attitudes of his environment.

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<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan, The Essential Interviews* (New York: Wenner Media, 2006), 3.

<sup>59</sup> Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan, The Essential Interviews*, 7.

In 1962 and 1963, technological advancements in the record industry enabled the folk musicians of New York City to distribute their music to a broader audience. During this period, New York City based folk artists, like Dylan, were producing prolific amount of music that were reaching a larger audience than ever before, and consequently, the genre was amassing popularity. In an article published in the *New York Times* in April of 1963 entitled, "Fad to Staple: Disks Reflect 'Arrival' of Folk Music as Part of the Country's Popular Arts", Robert Shelton considered the growing popularity of folk, and the rapid strides folk music made during the early 1960s. Shelton writes,

It appears from a distance of a few months that 1962 was the year when the folk-music revival outline its period as a fad and became an established staple in the popular-music diet of this country's listeners. Last year many recording companies were adding artist and repertory men who specialized in folk music. Concert attendance and recording sales confirmed the fact that the banjo-and-ballad set had "arrived."<sup>60</sup>

In 1962, Dylan had signed to Columbia Records, becoming one of the principle artists responsible for popularizing folk music in the early 1960s, consequently he played an influential part in bringing about what Shelton, and many others called "the folk-music revival." In another *New York Times* article published in the same months as Shelton's, the journalist considered Dylan's original songs to be "among the best written in this country's folk vein since Woody Guthrie stopped composing."<sup>61</sup> Later in the article, the author attributes Dylan's individual talent to his expression of pertinent socio-political themes in his music in 1963. The article reads, "Despite the singer's age, he is very deeply concerned with the world around him. He cares about war, poverty, injustice and

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Shelton, 1963, "Fad To Staple." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/116359184?accountid=14637>.

<sup>61</sup> "Bob Dylan Sings His Compositions." 1963. *New York Times (1923-Current File)* <https://search.proquest.com/docview/116445407?accountid=14637>.

discrimination.”<sup>62</sup> In this article, the journalist confirmed that in 1963, Dylan’s original folk music had become a medium for the expression of a political commentary.

In the mid 1960’s Dylan’s partnership with Joan Baez, another folk musician, and their participation in the March on Washington in 1963 during the Civil Rights movement provides an example Dylan’s objective to translate his folk music into the contemporary political idiom. In 1963, Dylan and Baez left New York City to protest for Civil Rights in the March on Washington, where Martin Luther King Jr. would deliver his famous “I Have A Dream” speech. This was an enormous public political gesture for the young Dylan, as during the March he shared the stage with King, and was “called upon to rally the troops with the lyrical equivalent of ‘I Have A Dream.’”<sup>63</sup> Throughout its history, folk music had always protested injustice in American society, and this moment in Washington represented both a triumph for folk music as a whole, and an affirmation of Dylan’s role as a political musician. In the 1940’s Peoples’ Songs and the Almanac Singers made folk music a vehicle for political protest in American society. As a result of their participation in the Civil Rights movement, and their growing popularity, Dylan and Baez began to represent a new school of folk artists, who revived and popularized folk music to face contemporary political issues in the 1960s, such as Civil Rights.

Joan Baez was a major figure in the folk revival, and she shared a similar set of political goals to Dylan as a musician. In a 1964 article in *The New Yorker* entitled “The Crackin’, Shakin’, Breakin’ Sounds”, Nat Hentoff describes folk music’s status in American society in 1964, illustrating the relationship between Baez and Dylan as the primary impetus driving the evolution of folk in the mid 1960’s. In 1964, Hentoff

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<sup>62</sup> “Bob Dylan Sings His Compositions.” 1963. *New York Times*.

<sup>63</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 154.

described folk musicians, “They are often city-bred converts to the folk style; and, after an apprenticeship during which they try to imitate rural models from the older approach to folk music, they write and perform their own songs out of their own concerns and preoccupations.”<sup>64</sup> This quote from *The New Yorker* exemplifies how Dylan and Baez caused a shift in folk’s place in American society, as they reinvigorated its political significance in America. Furthermore, Hentoff asserts that Dylan and Baez had become the figureheads of American folk music by 1964. He writes “The restless young, who have been the primary support of the rise of this kind of folk music over the past five years, regard two performers as their preeminent spokesmen.”<sup>65</sup>

Hentoff’s description of Dylan and Baez as the newfound “preeminent spokesmen” of the folk movement reveals that by 1964, the folk movement had been revived to represent and voice the opinions and attitudes of a new political demographic. In the article, Hentoff described Baez: “One is a twenty-three-year-old Joan Baez. She does not write her own material and she includes a considerable proportion of traditional, communally created songs in her programs. But Miss Baez does speak out explicitly against racial prejudice and militarism.”<sup>66</sup> This profile of Baez depicts her as a parallel figure to Dylan, portraying an artist that is deeply grounded in the traditions and conventions of folk music, yet is looking to offer commentary on contemporary issues. Furthermore, his mention of Baez’s opposition towards “militarism” foreshadowed the political stances folk musicians would take as the sixties progressed.

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<sup>64</sup> Nat Hentoff Cited in: Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan, The Essential Interviews*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Nat Hentoff Cited in: Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan, The Essential Interviews*, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Nat Hentoff Cited in: Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan, The Essential Interviews*, 13.

Later in the article, Hentoff introduces Dylan as the “more influential demiurge of the folk-music microcosm”<sup>67</sup>, and interviews a key figure from Dylan’s career at the time to assert Dylan’s place in the context of the folk music revival. In the article Hentoff interviewed Tom Wilson, Dylan’s recording producer at the time. Hentoff questioned Wilson about Dylan’s politics, referencing his first album and his active involvement in the Civil Rights movement. In the interview Wilson described how rapidly his artist was evolving during the early 1960’s. Wilson said about Dylan, “Basically, he’s in the tradition of all lasting folk music. I mean he’s not a singer of protest so much as he is a singer of concern about people.”<sup>68</sup> Here, it becomes clear that Dylan’s folk music in the mid 1960’s was accomplishing something similar to the folk artists of the thirties and forties. Like Woody Guthrie had done in the thirties and forties, in the mid sixties, Bob Dylan became the voice of opposition towards a variety of different civil injustices in America.

By 1964, Dylan became the preeminent spokesperson for a growing socio-political demographic, as he served as the chief influence for folk music’s revival in the sixties. In 1964, Dylan’s accomplice Joan Baez described how Dylan was rapidly becoming a political icon for many young people in America. Baez’s description of Dylan represents the massive influence he had, and the political significance he represented for many Americans. “Bobby is expressing what I – and many other young people – feel, what we want to say. Most of the ‘protest’ songs about the bomb and race prejudice and conformity are stupid. They have no beauty. But Bobby’s song are

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<sup>67</sup> Nat Hentoff Cited in: Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan, The Essential Interviews*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Nat Hentoff Cited in: Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan, The Essential Interviews*, 17.

powerful as poetry and powerful as music.”<sup>69</sup> In the mid 1960s Dylan was doing more than singing outdated traditional folk ballads. He was writing poetry and music about the political issues of the times. As a result of Dylan’s accomplishments during this period he was becoming the voice of a maturing generation of left wing Americans.

Dylan’s song “The Times They are a-Changin’” perfectly illustrates his growth as a folk musician during the early 1960’s, while embodying his own evolution as a political figure in America. Written in 1963 “The Times . . .” was Dylan’s response to his participation in the March on Washington, and it expresses his disillusionment with the political situation in the United States at the time.<sup>70</sup> The song itself became an anthem that received enormous attention in the United States and Britain on the Billboard Charts.<sup>71</sup> Based on old folk ballad, the song criticizes American society and preaches change in the context of the politically tumultuous period, in many ways achieving the political impact folk artists like Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger strove for in the 1940’s. In Dylan’s lyrics, he voices the demand for progress, and the necessity for change within America’s political institutions, addressing politicians directly. He sings,

Come senators, congressmen  
Please heed the call  
Don’t stand in the doorway  
Don’t block up the hall  
For he that gets hurt  
Will be he who has stalled  
There’s a battle outside and it’s ragin’  
It’ll soon shake your windows and rattle your walls  
For the times they are a-changin’<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Nat Hentoff Cited in: Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan, The Essential Interviews*, 14.

<sup>70</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 156.

<sup>71</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 155.

<sup>72</sup> Bob Dylan “The Times, They are a Changin’”, (Date Accessed: 12/15/17), <http://bobdylan.com/songs/times-they-are-changin/>

While widely controversial, “The Times . . .” provides a direct example of how Dylan was using folk as a political weapon during the period. However, although “The Times . . .” expressed an over political message, Dylan’s reflection on the song’s political impact during the period revealed a different set of attitudes.

On January 13<sup>th</sup> 1964 Dylan released his album entitled *The Times They Are a Changin’* affirming the significance of the message he conveyed in the song he wrote in 1963. Although it had been received across the nation as a controversially political anthem, Dylan viewed the song in a more general sense. In a conversation between Dylan and music journalist Ray Coleman eighteen months after he wrote the song, Dylan described his purpose in writing “The Times They are a Changin.”

This is what is was about, maybe – a bitterness towards authority – the type of person who stuck his nose down and doesn’t take you seriously, but expects YOU to take him seriously. I wanted to say . . . that if you have something you don’t want to lose and people threaten you, you are not really free. I don’t know if the song is true, but the feeling is true . . . it’s nothing to do with a political party or religion.<sup>73</sup>

In his interview with Coleman, Dylan’s words solidified him as the “spokesmen for a generation.”<sup>74</sup> In 1964, Dylan had moved past the “goods and bad and black and white”<sup>75</sup> of Seeger and Guthrie, which related to their music’s class-conscious response to the political atmosphere of the Old Left. In “The Times They are a-Changin” Dylan professed the political ideology of what would become the New Left. Its message predominantly encircled an anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment approach to social issues, and a demand for civil justice.

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<sup>73</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 156.

<sup>74</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 156.

<sup>75</sup> Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan, The Essential Interviews*, 7.

As Dylan became the voice of the New Left, his popularity grew alongside the emergence of this young socio-political demographic. Another verse from “The Times They are a Changin’” speaks to the exact demographic Dylan had come to represent during the mid 1960’s. Dylan’s direct address of American youth in the song, many of whom were dissatisfied with the state of their nation, confirms his awareness of the counterculture, and it represents a popular expression of its political outlook.

Come mothers and fathers  
Throughout the land  
And don’t criticize  
What you can’t understand  
Your sons and your daughters  
Are beyond your command  
Your old road is rapidly agin’  
Please get out of the new one if you can’t lend your hand  
For the times they are a-changin’<sup>76</sup>

Although Dylan often refused to identify with political movements, for many young Americans at the time, Dylan’s words in “The Times They Are A Changin’” became a manifesto that expressed their attitudes towards the generational conflict that began to take hold on American society at this time. During the mid 1960s, the commercialization and technological advancements contributed to the folk music revival. Consequently, in 1964, Dylan had transported himself onto the main stage of the American political sphere as a political folk icon.

While folk was becoming a popular nationwide genre during the 1960s with Dylan as its icon, a paradigm was emerging among young Americans that would dictate the course of American politics, culture and art throughout the 1960’s. The counterculture

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<sup>76</sup> Bob Dylan “The Times, They are a Changin’”, (Date Accessed: 12/15/17), <http://bobdylan.com/songs/times-they-are-changin/>



was raised in the prosperous society of post World War II America. In this era “unparalleled economic growth, a steady migration to the suburbs and some amazing advances in technology brought utopia within reach of the middle-class family.”<sup>77</sup>

However, as children of the post war period matured in this “mass culture” they began to question the lives they lived. Omar Swartz describes the counterculture in his book

*Culture Wars* in a general sense. Swartz writes:

The general term “counterculture” came into use during a period from the late 1950’s into the late 1970’s that was characterized by cultural, political, and economic behaviors very different from those of the mainstream. The counterculture, actually a number of loosely connected left wing or alternative lifestyle movements involving primarily young people, was an attempt at cultural criticism and reinvention.<sup>78</sup>

By 1963, the counterculture was a nationwide phenomenon, and Bob Dylan had become the symbolic prophet for this movement as a result of his status as an influential folk musician. Although Dylan was embraced by Americans in this political demographic for his originality and authenticity, it is important to note that the attitudes of the counterculture expressed by Dylan can be traced back to earlier folk traditions. In the mid 1940’s Woody Guthrie’s declaration of ideological objectives of Peoples’ Songs Inc. illuminates a clear link between the counterculture, and the political objectives of the folk musicians from the earlier period. In the mid 1940’s, Guthrie professed the political objectives of Peoples’ Songs, conveying anti-establishment and anti-capitalist objectives. In the early sixties Guthrie’s influence on Dylan shaped his development as a musician.

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<sup>77</sup> Morris Dickstein, "Counterculture." In *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, ed. Simon Bronner. (Baltimore Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.)

<sup>78</sup> Omar Swartz, "Counterculture." In *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, ed, Roger Chapman, James Ciment, (Routledge, 2013.)

Consequently, as the New Left and the counterculture coalesced around Dylan in 1964, causing him to amass enormous popularity, it is important to recognize his ideological origins in the folk music and politics of the Old Left.

In late 1964, Dylan wrote a song that provides an emblematic example of his ongoing transition as a folk musician, and his undeniable association with the New Left counterculture during the period. “Subterranean Homesick Blues” was written in late 1964 for Dylan’s album *Bringing It All Back Home*, released in 1965 and it directly addresses the youth demographic who made up the New Left. In the song, Dylan sings about life in American postwar suburbia, conveying the disillusionment experienced by many young Americans. In the second verse, Dylan’s lyrics illuminate what life was like for many in America, portraying a clear skepticism for the establishment and the American government. He sings:

The phone’s tapped anyway  
Maggie says that many say  
They may bust in early May  
Orders from the D.A.  
Look out kid  
Don’t matter what you did  
Walk on your tiptoes  
Don’t try “No-Doz”  
Better Stay away from those  
That carry around a fire hose<sup>79</sup>

In his lyrics Dylan depicts a dismal outlook on life in the suburbs, professing the ideology of the counterculture. In Irwin Unger’s book *The Movement*, which examines the evolution of the New Left between 1959 and 1972, he describes the New Left

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<sup>79</sup> Bob Dylan, “Subterranean Homesick Blues” (Date Accessed: 12/15/2017), <http://bobdylan.com/songs/subterranean-homesick-blues/>.

countercultural attitudes Dylan captured in “Subterranean Homesick Blues.” Unger writes,

It was created by the new perception of their society that young people in the Western capitalist world and in America in particular had developed, and by a new attitude concerning the proper way of responding to that society. Something in the experience of many young men and women at the end of the 1950s had produced an altered consciousness that made for a critical, disapproving, and hostile view of American – and Western European – life and created a desire to change it in drastic ways.<sup>80</sup>

Dylan’s lyrics in this song conveyed this critical approach toward American life felt by many at the time, causing him to culturally represent the New Left movement. While “Subterranean Homesick Blues” provided an anthem for the attitudes of the New Left, it also demonstrates a pivotal transition in Dylan’s musical development.

In his creation of the song, Dylan combined stylistic conventions from the folk tradition with a fundamentally rock ‘n’ roll musical structure. The song itself was an amalgamation of a Woody Guthrie-Pete Seeger original “Taking it easy” and the rock and roll format of Chuck Berry’s “Too Much Monkey Business”<sup>81</sup>, creating a viscerally poetic musical experience. Furthermore, Dylan recorded the song in electric. Heylin writes: “Subterranean Homesick Blues’ was electric all the way down to its obvious R&B roots. No traditional ballad provided this song with its underlying infrastructure. Acoustic or electric, it had been taken at quite a different clip from any folk ballad.”<sup>82</sup> The song was essentially a combination of folk and rock at the time, providing a clear bridge between the two genres. As Dylan’s first top 40 Billboard Hit on the U.S Pop Charts,

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<sup>80</sup> Unger, *The Movement*, 29.

<sup>81</sup> *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, vs. “Subterranean Homesick Blues” (Date Accessed 2/18/17), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subterranean\\_Homesick\\_Blues](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subterranean_Homesick_Blues).

<sup>82</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 221.

“Subterranean Homesick Blues” foreshadowed the combination of Dylan’s political folk and the rock and roll format during late 1964.<sup>83</sup>

When music critics approached Dylan about the song later, he expressed the cause that drove him to adopt the rock and roll format for the song. “I couldn’t go on being the lone folkie out there, strumming ‘Blowin’ in the Wind’ for three hours every night. I hear my songs as part of the music, the musical background.”<sup>84</sup> Dylan’s words affirm that “Subterranean Homesick Blues” in many ways, served as a pivotal point in his career, as he began to incorporate other genres as he composed music, specifically rock ‘n’ roll. Furthermore, Dylan’s incorporation of the electric style was likely linked to his goal to further his commercial popularity. Although his music retained its political folk message, as Dylan’s began to incorporate the stylistic potency of rock and roll in 1964, he altered the trajectory of folk music as a genre irreversibly. In 1965, following the release of *Bringing it all Home* Dylan went on tour, and in a series of concerts he forged an unbreakable bond between the two genres.

In the summer of 1965 Dylan had become the indisputable icon and leader of what people were calling the “folk revival” of the 1960’s. Across the country, old folk music enthusiasts rejoiced at the revived status of the genre, while the American youth were quick to embrace Dylan as the voice of their generation. In July of 1965, Dylan was set to perform at the Newport Folk Festival in Rhode Island, where he would be received as a sort of messiah by many folk fans. Dylan, however, had spent the first part of 1965 experimenting with the rock and roll type conventions of “Subterranean Homesick Blues” and was beginning to fracture from his role as a definitively folk musician.

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<sup>83</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 221.

<sup>84</sup> Heylin, *Revolution in the Air*, 221.

Therefor, in 1965, when he took the stage at the Newport Folk Festival, wielding an electric Stratocaster, his opening performance of his new song “Like a Rolling Stone”, would send reverberations across the nation, forming a symbolic bridge between folk and rock in the most overt and controversial fashion possible.

The Newport Folk Festival in 1965 was coined “the day Dylan went electric” by newspapers. Across the folk community folk purists were horrified, and Dylan was met with booing and betrayal among masses who stood in awe, as their hero trampled the optimism that arisen during the period of the folk music revival. Lawrence Epstein describes the reaction to Dylan’s set at Newport in his book *Political Folk Music in America*. “There are many accounts of the events of July 25, of Dylan appearing on stage with a band and breaking into a loud electric three-song set before leaving the stage. Of Pete Seeger sitting in a car and covering his ears after being unable to stop the noise, of Alan Lomax and others being infuriated with Dylan.”<sup>85</sup> For folk purists, it appeared that Dylan had abandoned their cause in one sweeping gesture, which enraged many of the genres leaders, like Pete Seeger. An article in the *Village Voice* by Arthur Kretchmer from August, 1965 entitled “Newport: It’s All Right Ma, I’m only playing R&R” expressed a more optimistic outlook on Dylan’s gesture asserting that his success had been widely misunderstood. About Newport, he writes:

The festival committee tried to force-feed a may day atmosphere complete with militant socialist attractiveness to a generation that doesn’t trust anybody who wants to run a machine. There ain’t no poetry in bureaucracy, baby. And yet the greatest poet of this young generation for scorned for hewing to todays different

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<sup>85</sup> Lawrence J. Epstein, *Political Folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan*. (Jefferson NC, US: McFarland, 2010), 168.

but just was well scored line: Sunday night Bob Dylan was booed for linking rhythm and blues to the paranoid nightmares of his vision.<sup>86</sup>

Arthur Kretchmer's words in the *Village Voice* published in the immediate aftermath of The Newport Folk Festival reveal another outlook on Dylan's incorporation of electric sound. Dylan's performance symbolized his understanding of the visceral power of rock 'n' roll, and the uproarious reaction affirmed his theory. Furthermore, his defiance of the folk purists was a gesture that inspired support from America's youth, who had become Dylan's dominant fan base. Dylan was aware that the folk purists depended on him as the new leader of their movement, and while their politics and objectives influenced him, he realized that his political place American society was different than those of the World War II period. About Dylan, Epstein writes, "he knew the 30's and 40's still loitered in their minds, and he wanted to sing his declaration of independence."<sup>87</sup> Regardless of whether or not they support Dylan "going electric" at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, the entire audience knew they were witnessing music history, as folk music and rock 'n' roll became permanently interlinked as a result of his action.<sup>88</sup>

Later that year Dylan would go on to perform at Forest Hills in New York, where he would continue to incorporate electric instruments into his music, in what were essentially early rock 'n' roll concerts. Throughout 1965 and 1966 Dylan continued to adapt and refine his folk to rock and roll's musical conventions and formats. Epstein

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<sup>86</sup> Arthur Kretchmer, 1965 "Newport: It's All Right, Ma, I'm Only Playin' R&R" *The Village Voice*, 6. (Date Accessed 2/10/2017), [https://www.scribd.com/doc/272188427/From-the-Village-Voice-Bob-Dylan-at-Newport-1965-by-Arthur-Kretchmer#fullscreen&from\\_embed](https://www.scribd.com/doc/272188427/From-the-Village-Voice-Bob-Dylan-at-Newport-1965-by-Arthur-Kretchmer#fullscreen&from_embed) Epstein 170.

<sup>87</sup> Epstein, *Political Folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan*, 168.

<sup>88</sup> Epstein, *Political Folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan*, 169.

asserts that Dylan was pursuing this rock and roll style due to his realization of its powerful potential in America in the short term. He writes,

Dylan saw the connection between traditional music and rock in a way some of his listeners didn't. He understood its beauty and its power, as he had in Hibbing, and he would not let what he saw as the pompous and unimaginative reluctance of the folk movement to embrace rock and roll stand in his way. He knew rock was the future, and he was unafraid to let everyone else know.<sup>89</sup>

Epstein's words affirm that by 1965 Dylan had successfully fused his poetic folk style with rock 'n' roll. Before Dylan went electric, rock 'n' roll was a simple genre, consisting of predominantly songs about lost or gained love. Before Dylan provided a bridge between the two genres, they served distinct and differing purposes. "Folk provided an intellectual and emotional experience, not a physical one like rock."<sup>90</sup>

However, when Dylan electrified his folk, as the greatest creative poet of his generation, he linked "rhythm and blues to the paranoid nightmare of his vision."<sup>91</sup> In doing so, Dylan essentially gave rock 'n' roll the lyrical and political capability it required to evolve and mature in the political climate of the sixties. Furthermore, the massive following Dylan had generated during the early sixties, within the counterculture and the New Left, were eager to embrace the new style of music Dylan was forging.

After Dylan went electric, folk-rock and rock 'n' roll rapidly became the genre of the counterculture. During the mid 1960's "Dylan's departure from folk music coincided with the start of enormous social changes."<sup>92</sup> As the social and political atmosphere of the 1960's grew tumultuous, Dylan's influence on rock and roll enabled it to evolve into

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<sup>89</sup> Epstein, *Political Folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan*, 169.

<sup>90</sup> Epstein, *Political Folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan*, 169.

<sup>91</sup> Arthur Kretchmer. 1965. "Newport: It's All Right, Ma, I'm Only Playin' R&R" *The Village Voice*, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Epstein, *Political Folk Music in America from Its Origins to Bob Dylan*, 170.

political force that would express the voice of the counterculture. Whether or not he had done it on purpose, Dylan had adapted folk music to encompass the political issues of the 1960s, altering the trajectory of American music at a crucial time in its cultural history. During this period, Dylan's musical influence culminated in the growth of the counterculture, and the establishment of American rock 'n' roll as a political genre.



## Chapter 3

### *Rock 'n' Roll Adopts Protest in the Vietnam Era*

In the early 1960's, Dylan's folk music revived the political elements of the folk tradition to incorporate the political issues of the times. In his book *The American Counterculture*, Christopher Gair writes, "the folk music boom of the late 1950s and early '60s provides perhaps the strongest link between Old and New Left, but its more political dynamics resurfaced nationally with its affiliation to civil rights, the first of a series of single –issue struggles that would characterize New – Left identity."<sup>93</sup> As Dylan made his transition from folk to rock and roll in 1965, he enabled different left wing political groups to coalesce in support of a commercially popular, and innovative musical movement, dubbed "folk-rock." Rock's newfound political significance during this period reveals its fundamental link to the folk traditions of political protest dating back to the Old Left of 1930's. Gair writes,

Dylan is a pivotal figure in the transformation of the counterculture from groups like the Beats – who constituted a small minority of the population, largely limited to enclaves in New York, San Francisco and a few other large cities – into a collection of larger movements with shared agendas. These groups, though still a minority, had a significant public profile that was often the centre of national attention.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Christopher Gair, *The American Counterculture*, (Edinburgh, GB: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 125.

<sup>94</sup> Gair, *The American Counterculture*, 125.

As Dylan began playing rock and roll, he birthed folk-rock, which combined the “meaningfulness of folk lyrics with the vitality of rock ‘n’ roll.”<sup>95</sup> In the middle of the 1960’s, it is clear that Dylan played an enormous role in the “fusion of art and politics”<sup>96</sup> specifically relating to the evolution of rock and roll, and the creation of the folk-rock movement. In this chapter, I will investigate how Dylan’s influence on the emergence of folk-rock in 1965 led rock ‘n’ roll to become an anti-Vietnam war genre in the second half of the 1960s, which promoted the cohesion of left-wing political activism through the later half of the decade.

During the 1950s, the New Left took form in America as a variety of left-wing movements amalgamated during the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout the fifties, the radical organizations of the Old Left, which had been around since the early 1930s, survived on college campuses. The Students League for Industrial Democracy (SLID) was one of these surviving Old Left student organizations. “In 1935 SLID merged with another student group, and the two became the American Student Union. In 1945 SLID reassumed its earlier name, and during the 1950s, it was one of the few radical groups that continued to limp along on American campuses.”<sup>97</sup> The political New Left, which took form in the SDS, shared qualities with the Old Left. Unger writes, “One quality the New Left would share with both old-fashioned libertarians and adherents of Anarchist Black International was its distaste for institutions and bureaucracies. This distaste even extended to the structures of the New Left itself.”<sup>98</sup> However, as the political climate of

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<sup>95</sup> Robert Shelton. 1966. "On Records: The Folk-Rock Rage." *New York Times*, (1923-Current File), 2.

<sup>96</sup> Gair, *The American Counterculture*, 126.

<sup>97</sup> Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, 51.

<sup>98</sup> Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, 53.

the fifties shifted, this New Left, which had taken form in the organizations of the Old Left, adapted its approach to American politics.

As these radical Old Left student organizations, like the SLID, faced a new set of issues, they assembled and changed their name into the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The origins of the SDS existed in the political student organizations of the American Old Left, and were linked to communism. However, for students in the late fifties “the world was not what it had been in their childhood, the students declared. Racism, the Cold War, the threat of nuclear holocaust, and poverty in the midst of plenty had tarnished their image of American virtue.”<sup>99</sup> While the student organizations of the Old Left were ingrained in revolutionary Socialist and Communist politics, New Left politics of the SDS emphasized the role of participatory democracy as a means for achieving social progress. Unger writes,

From the outset the student New Left sought to avoid the idea of a ‘vanguard party’ that would lead and direct the revolution. The role that the young radicals would actually play in the changes they wanted would be a matter of extended and inconclusive debate, but it was clear that they did not wish to repeat the mistakes of either Lenin or the American Communists.<sup>100</sup>

Although its origins existed in the Old Left, as the New Left took form on campuses it emphasized a different approach to achieving its political goals, severing from its parent organizations. The New Left would participate in the Civil Rights movement, and assert its anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian attitudes by participating in the American democracy. This was something their radical Communist predecessors were incapable of as a result of Cold War tensions and anti-Communist sentiment in America.

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<sup>99</sup> Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, 53.

<sup>100</sup> Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, 54.

On campuses across the country the SDS groups “would encounter in microcosm all the guile, cupidity, and manipulateness of the larger society outside, and here they could learn how to confront and defeat these despicable forces.”<sup>101</sup> Although a product of the Old Left, by 1961, the advent of the SDS dispelled its Communist link, enabling the New Left to incorporate a wider political demographic. The Civil Rights movement invigorated the growth and radicalization of New Left during the first half the sixties. Many New Left Americans participated in protests organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee where they witnessed the brutality at the hands of the American Government first hand. Yet according to a census taken in the mid sixties “the New Left was composed predominantly of well-educated, middle class youth.”<sup>102</sup> New Left participation in the Civil Rights Movement had radicalized many, yet they were fundamentally removed from the struggle of southern blacks as a result of their prevailing white middle-class identity.

As the sixties progressed, the New Left began to shift its focus towards a different issue facing the American People, the Vietnam War. Driven by its primary national institution, the SDS, New Left students at the University of Michigan helped organize “teach-ins.” These “teach-ins, “devoted to discussing and condemning the Vietnam War soon caught on all over the country. Within a few weeks similar meetings were held on more than thirty campuses.”<sup>103</sup> Propelled by its growing presence in on college campuses the New Left and the SDS “saw in American foreign policy an opportunity to awaken the

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<sup>101</sup> Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, 82.

<sup>102</sup> Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, 31.

<sup>103</sup> Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, 84.

American public to the need for an active dissenting movement.”<sup>104</sup> As the sixties progressed, young Americans of the New Left began to shift their focus towards opposing the Vietnam War, and as their voices grew louder, they influenced developments in the music they listened to.

In 1965, the same year Dylan “went electric” giving birth to the folk-rock genre, the Vietnam War had emerged as the preeminent uniting political issue for many Americans coming of age during this period. While New Left involvement in Civil Rights had revealed their predominantly white middle class identity, the Vietnam War was a political issue that pulled together all Americans, regardless of race. Unger writes, “Anti-Vietnam opinion was far more wide-spread in the country than a strong left perspective on domestic affairs. It encompassed pacifists, liberals, conservative isolationists, and every variety of old radical groups that the nation could exhibit.”<sup>105</sup> In 1965, the National SDS movements recognized the potential for anti-Vietnam war opinions to unify the New Left, which at the time was fragmented. In 1965, “President Johnson handed the student left a perfect issue by ordering American planes to bomb North Vietnam.”<sup>106</sup> As the children of the World War II “baby boom” came of age, the Vietnam War gave them a cause to oppose that would propel their New Left movement significantly. Consequently, art forms that expressed the attitudes of this demographic, like folk-rock, emerged alongside this political movement.

During the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, folk music had served as a political vehicle for protesting civil injustices in American society, and its supporters “constituted

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<sup>104</sup> Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, 84.

<sup>105</sup> Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, 85.

<sup>106</sup> Unger, *The Movement: A History of the American New Left 1959-1972*, 84.

a small minority of the population, largely limited to enclaves in New York, San Francisco and a few other large cities.”<sup>107</sup> However, in 1965, the escalation of the Vietnam War radicalized a significant number of young Americans, creating a “climate of political revulsion”<sup>108</sup> that was prominent and widespread among young Americans. This triggered the growth of New Left, and its presence on college campuses gave these educated Americans the opportunity to express and refine their politics. During this period, as the New Left gained momentum in America, the Top 100 Billboard Charts began to see songs that were amalgamations of folk and rock styles. Not only does the popularity of these songs confirm the significance of the folk-rock convergence, it promoted social cohesion within the New Left movement, and supported its politics.

In 1965 and 1966, the blending of folk protest and rock and roll was met with the rapid emergence of many folk-rock bands across the country. As a result of the widespread and popular anti-war sentiment among the founders of the New Left, folk musicians and rock and rollers alike began to protest the war through music. The Byrds electric cover of Dylan’s folk song “Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man” provides an early example of how folk-rock achieved greater popularity in 1965, as it was the first Dylan original to top both the British and American Billboard top 100 charts.<sup>109</sup> It also is widely regarded as the original folk-rock anthem.

Although not overtly anti-war, The Byrds “Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man” was considered to be an anthem of the emerging counterculture. The counterculture during the

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<sup>107</sup> Gair, *The American Counterculture*, 125.

<sup>108</sup> Morris Dickstein, "Counterculture." in *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, ed. Simon Bronner. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.)

<sup>109</sup> Warwick, N.; Brown, T.; Kutner, J, *The Complete Book of the British Charts* (Third ed.). (Omnibus Press, 2004), 6.

early sixties was a social and ideological extension of the New Left's politics. *The New York Times*, Robert Shelton, noted the significance of "Mr. Tambourine Man" as marking the convergence of folk and rock. "Folk-rock was born when the Byrds, a rock 'n' roll group, recorded Bob Dylan's "Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man." But it got its biggest push by Dylan himself, who set aside his soft-spoken guitar for a boisterous amplified one, introducing the rock 'n' roll style into his social conscious folk approach."<sup>110</sup> The Byrds cover of "Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man", and its widespread success on the pop charts, indicates that already had become a politically driven genre that was achieving commercial success. In 1965, *Billboard Magazine's* headline considered the popularity of The Byrds cover of the Dylan tune. "Folk+Rock+Protest= An erupting new sound."<sup>111</sup>

After 1965, folk-rock had enabled rock 'n' roll to take a crucial step from "youth into adulthood."<sup>112</sup> In *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk Rock in the 1960s* Richie Unterberger writes about the genre: "It was a step into greater lyrical depth, whether poetical and introspective or political and outward looking. It was a step into new instrumental possibilities. It was a step into melody. In fact, it was more than a step – it was a giant leap."<sup>113</sup> During the period, folk-rock gained enormous popularity, and many bands sprung up around the country eager to explore the potential of this new genre. Between 1965 and 1966, The Byrds, The Animals, The Band, and many other musical groups embraced the folk-rock style, as it offered the potential for commercial success while enabling artists to channel political popular political attitudes. Meanwhile in early 1966,

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<sup>110</sup> Robert, Shelton. 1966. "On Records: The Folk-Rock Rage." *New York Times*, 2.

<sup>111</sup> Richie Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, (San Francisco: Richie Unterberger, 2013), 9.

<sup>112</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 7.

<sup>113</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 8.

Dylan embarked on a worldwide tour with his electric band, The Hawks, playing his popular folk-rock anthems including “Like A Rolling Stone” and “Ballad of a Thin Man.”

Providing a concrete definition of folk-rock is an exercise that intellectuals have grappled with for decades. However, it is important to assert a definition for the sake of understanding folk-rock in the context of this work. At the outset of the folk-rock boom in 1965, Unterberger defines it as any “folk song, or a folk-like song, played on electric instruments with an electric rhythm section, combining prominent features of both folk and rock.”<sup>114</sup> Although music is often ambiguous, this definition offers a firm notion of what folk-rock was during its emergence.

As the political situation in America grew more turbulent, many young Americans began to participate in increasingly contentious political climate of the period. “The year 1965 was precisely when most of those at the leading edge of the baby boom were entering college, leaving home and thinking at length (and without direct parental guidance and authority) for the first time about more serious issues than sports and going steady.”<sup>115</sup> Simultaneously, as this generation came of age between 1965 and 1966, the Johnson administration began to dramatically escalate the war effort in Vietnam, announcing on July 28 that call-ups would double to 35,000 a month. By the end of 1966, almost 400,000 Americans were involved in the conflict overseas.<sup>116</sup> The escalating war effort politicized many young Americans, driving them to join the rapidly growing New Left in the Anti-War Campaign. This campaign would popularize and influence the

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<sup>114</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 12.

<sup>115</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 304.

<sup>116</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 304.



generational music New Left American created and listened to, like folk-rock.

Unterberger writes,

Antiwar songs, whether directed at war in general or American involvement in Vietnam specifically, would only be one aspect of folk-rock throughout the rest of the decade, and a few folk-rockers entirely avoided such issues. But fear of death in Vietnam, and death by nuclear obliteration, cannot be overestimated as factors that made both listeners and musicians grow up faster, and with a live-for-the-moment perspective they might not have had in calmer times.<sup>117</sup>

As the war effort grew, and the draft escalated, it forced young Americans to participate in their democracy and consider its future. Concurrently, folk-rock was blossoming as a musical format that provided a “whole new area of rhythmic up-beat music that couples the meaningfulness of folk lyrics with the vitality of rock ‘n’ roll.”<sup>118</sup> As rising waves of anti-war sentiment grew across America, folk-rock artists began to express anti-war sentiment.

Country Joe and the Fish was one of the bands that fit the folk-rock mold, comprised of a group of young Californians who identified with the emerging counterculture and New Left politics. Their song “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin-To-Die-Rag” was written between 1965 and 1966, as the war in Vietnam escalated, and it effectively captured the anti-draft and anti-war attitudes of many Americans during the period. The song fit into the context of the folk-rock boom and its lyrics reveal an overt political message, which they conveyed satirically. Lyrics in the first and second verse go as follows:

Uncle Sam needs your help again.  
He’s got himself in a terrible Jam  
Way down yonder in Vietnam

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<sup>117</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 304.

<sup>118</sup> Robert, Shelton. 1966. "On Records: The Folk-Rock Rage." *New York Times*, 2.

So put down your books and pick up a gun  
We're gonna have a whole lotta fun.  
And it's one two, three,  
What are we fighting for?  
Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,  
Next stop is Vietnam;  
And it's five, six, seven  
Open up the pearly gates,  
Well there ain't no time to wonder why  
Whoopee! We're all gonna die.<sup>119</sup>

Country Joe and the Fish explored folk-rock's capacity to be a vehicle for direct political action for the rapidly developing New Left and counterculture, which was gaining a massive cultural presence as a result of anti-war sentiment.

In 1965, Arlo Guthrie, Woody Guthrie's son, a budding folk artist at the time, considered the significance of folk-rock to his generation in the political atmosphere of the mid 1960's. Guthrie writes, "That volatile combination of what we called folk-rock was about the only means of communication open to people who were otherwise powerless around the world."<sup>120</sup> Guthrie's asserted the importance of folk-rock as a political art form during the mid 1960's, when he was only 18 years old. He goes on to suggest that the blossoming genre in 1965 played a vital role in the musical developments that followed. Guthrie writes,

That's what folk-rock was all about. It communicated and expressed all of the stuff we were talking (and) thinking about. Whether it was sex, whether it was drugs, whether it was rock 'n' roll, whether it was the end of the war, clean the air, fix this, do that. All of it combined. The whole thing all of a sudden was open. A floodgate had opened, because we were using a language that couldn't be understood over whose system we were using to communicate it.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup>Country Joe and the Fish, "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin-To-Die-Rag", (Date Accessed: 2/20/17),[http://www.lyricsfreak.com/c/country+joe+the+fish/i+feel+like+im+fixin+to+die+rag\\_20540976.html](http://www.lyricsfreak.com/c/country+joe+the+fish/i+feel+like+im+fixin+to+die+rag_20540976.html)

<sup>120</sup> Arlo Guthrie cited in: Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 304.

<sup>121</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 306.

Guthrie's words illustrate how folk-rock – which can be traced to his father's influence – became a vital method for the counterculture to communicate its political attitudes and social ideologies to itself and to the broader American public. Folk had been less commercially broadcasted in the early sixties, as it was the musical expression of a series of isolated and radical political. Folk-rock, however, as Guthrie affirmed had wider reach.

While Guthrie asserts folk-rock was a sole expression of the generational New Left and the counterculture, folk-rock's greatest success was its ability to import these attitudes into America's popular mainstream. This occurred because folk-rock expressed and incorporated the politics of the flourishing New Left, a large demographic, which generated massive commercial demand for the music. As a result, folk-rock was “particularly effective at spreading its messages because it marked one of those rare instances where social activism and mainstream commercial interests merged, each furthering the agenda of the other.”<sup>122</sup> Although Arlo Guthrie's assertion that folk rock was a device for communication among the American counterculture, its presence in mainstream established culture played a large role in its political development.

In 1966 and 67', folk-rock commercialized rapidly to meet national demand for anti-war music, proving as a recipe for success, as it both “spearheaded the counterculture and sell both albums and singles.”<sup>123</sup> Consequently, folk-rock bands rapidly began to make music for the pop charts, marking the genre's severance from the insular folk scene in which it had formed. “The Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, and Barry McGuire may have been landing hit records with social protest both gentle and incendiary,

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<sup>122</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 10.

<sup>123</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 415.

but they were tethered to a corporate media establishment in order to deliver those messages.”<sup>124</sup> Part of folk-rock’s alignment with commercial interests and success revolved around its growth in Los Angeles, California, a city that provided musical groups with the opportunity for enormous success as a result of its influence on the American entertainment industry. In 1966, Barry McGuire’s song “Eve of Destruction” provided clear example of how folk-rock had transformed as a result of commercial interests, as it aimed at the pop charts.

McGuire’s song, which was released in 1965, was enormously controversial, as it was a direct example of how many artists were cashing in on the folk-rock protest trend to achieve success on the pop charts. In the summer of 1965, “Eve of Destruction” reached number one on the U.S. Billboard top 100 charts.<sup>125</sup> Unterberger writes: “Eve of Destruction’ is sometimes dismissed as protest pop at its most exploitative today, but at the time, controversy over its impact was enormous.”<sup>126</sup> In an interview after the song was released, Paul McCartney considered its impact on pop music developments during the period. McCartney said, “I don’t like ‘Eve of Destruction’ very much. It seems to be cashing in on a trend. Somebody like Bob Dylan comes up and people say ‘let’s copy him, he’s good’ and then the whole market gets saturated.”<sup>127</sup> In the song, McGuire protests Vietnam, aiming to cash in on the counterculture clichés of the period. The lyrics of the first verse go as follows.

The eastern world, it’s exploding

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<sup>124</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 417.

<sup>125</sup> *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Eve Of Destruction (song)”, (Date Accessed: 2/17/17), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eve\\_of\\_Destruction\\_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eve_of_Destruction_(song))

<sup>126</sup> Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 317.

<sup>127</sup> Paul McCartney cited in: Unterberger, *Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s*, 317.

Violence flarin', bullets loadin'  
You're old enough to kill but not for votin'  
You don't believe in war, but what's that gun you're totin',<sup>128</sup>

Although controversial, McGuire's pop song demonstrates how by 1966, the protest element of folk-rock had been appropriated by opportunistic pop musicians as a means of achieving commercial success. Consequently, the message of anti-war protest increasingly permeated a variety of different popular genres. Folk-rock's ability to achieve commercial success while expounding the politics of the New Left in America was its greatest accomplishment, and as a result, it had a massive impact on the commercial music industry during the period.

As war protest became a popular thematic element of pop music in mainstream America, rock 'n' roll groups increasingly adopted an anti-war posture. In 1965 *The New York Times*, Robert Shelton considered how folk-rock politicized and transformed rock 'n' roll in the mid sixties. Shelton writes, "More is happening in rock 'n' roll than those who do not appreciate it might suspect. Perhaps most encouraging is the emergence of more meaningful lyrics, long a point of attack for hostile critics. Although not-reflected in Beatles records, there are more and more 'message songs' in rock 'n' roll."<sup>129</sup> Shelton goes on to argue that the convergence of folk with pop and rock music enabled the popular rock 'n' roll groups of the era, many of whom were British, to progress thematically beyond the unsophisticated rock format that had characterized the past decade. He attributes these developments in rock and roll to the influence of folk-rock.

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<sup>128</sup> Barry McGuire, "Eve of Destruction", (Date Accessed: 2/18/17), <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/barrymcguire/eveofdestruction.html>,

<sup>129</sup> Robert Shelton. 1965. "The Beatles Will make the Scene here again, but the Scene has Changed," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, 40, (Date Accessed: 2/20/17), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/116943214?accountid=14637>.

“Although folk purists regard ‘folk rock’ as opportunism now, it can be only to the good that rock ‘n’ roll lyrics are moving away from banality. In whatever form, rock ‘n’ roll appears to be with us for a long time.”<sup>130</sup>

In 1967, a New Left political alliance known as the “National Mobilization Committee to End the War In Vietnam” organized a series of demonstrations to protest the rapidly escalating war. These protests, informally referred to as “the Mobe”, took form in New York and DC in the spring of 1967, uniting a variety of left wing leaders to participate in rallies from Central Park to the UN. Among the protesters were prominent left wing figureheads including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Harry Belafonte, James Bevel and Dr. Benjamin Spock, who gave speeches during the demonstrations.<sup>131</sup> Over 400,000 protesters, activists and civilians participated in the anti-war demonstration.<sup>132</sup> During the marches, many politically enraged Americans burned draft cards, revealing that by 1967, the Anti-War Campaign had gained national prominence, and the New Left had unified many different factions of the left wing. *New York Times*, Douglas Robinson affirmed the political cohesion the Anti-War Campaign had generated. He writes, “Despite the differences, however, most of the radical, pacifist and moderate groups were expected to join today’s parade.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Shelton. 1965. "The Beatles Will make the Scene here again, but the Scene has Changed," *New York Times*, 40.

<sup>131</sup> *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam” (Date Accessed: 2/22/2017), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Mobilization\\_Committee\\_to\\_End\\_the\\_War\\_in\\_Vietnam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Mobilization_Committee_to_End_the_War_in_Vietnam)

<sup>132</sup> Douglas Robinson. 1967. "Throngs to Parade to the U.N. Today for Antiwar Rally." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, (Date Accessed: 2/23/17). <https://search.proquest.com/docview/118131738?accountid=14637>.

<sup>133</sup> Douglas Robinson. 1967. "Throngs to Parade to the U.N. Today for Antiwar Rally." *New York Times*.

In 1967, Buffalo Springfield's single "For What It's Worth" climbed the Billboard top 100 charts, providing evidence of rock 'n' roll's significance as an expression of anti-war sentiment. Its lyrics described the climate of political protest experienced by many involved in "The Mobe" demonstrations, and its popularity affirmed rock and rolls prominent status regarding left-wing activism. Lyrics from the second verse of "For What It's Worth" go as follows.

There's battle lines being drawn  
Nobody's right if everybody's wrong  
Young people speaking their minds  
Getting so much resistance from behind  
It's time we stop, hey, what's that sound  
Everybody look what's going down<sup>134</sup>

Buffalo Springfield's mention of "battle lines being drawn", and the burning of draft cards that occurred during the protests indicated that by 1967, the anti-War campaign was transitioning from civil protest to active resistance.

Rock 'n' roll music, like that of Buffalo Springfield incorporated the protest themes of the period into their music and during "The Mobe" protests; marchers were accompanied by musical performances and speeches. These artists conveyed the bitter political attitudes of many of the protestors, overtly resisting the War. Robinson writes "Between 9 A.M and noon, participants will be entertained in the park at a so-called 'peace fair,' featuring rock 'n' roll bands, folk singers, and dramatic readings."<sup>135</sup> Robinson's primary mention of the rock 'n' roll performances during these anti-war marches reveals that rock 'n' roll had become an important genre of protest for the Anti-

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<sup>134</sup> Buffalo Springfield "For What It's Worth", (Date Accessed: 3/13/17), <https://genius.com/Buffalo-springfield-for-what-its-worth-lyrics>

<sup>135</sup> Douglas Robinson. 1967. "Throngs to Parade to the U.N. Today for Antiwar Rally." *New York Times*.

War campaign. One of the rock bands that performed during the March on the Pentagon was The Fugs, a group of rock and rollers who became popular for their protest music, which bashed American involvement in Vietnam.

In 1967, The Fugs song “War Song” achieved widespread popularity. It exemplified how the political protest of rock and roll had evolved alongside escalating of the atrocities occurring in Vietnam, specifically relating the U.S army’s use of Napalm. In the second verse of the song, The Fugs sing “burn my belly with napalm jelly and rape my brain with a torch full of fire” representing an aggressive and violent portrayal of the War. An article from the period written by a journalist named Tom Phillips entitled “Vietnam Blues” considered how “War Song” demonstrated a shift in rock ‘n’ roll’s political themes from peaceful protest to violent resistance.

War Song starts off as a rock ‘n’ roll travesty: *Strafe them creeps in the rice paddy paddy, didi didi womp . . .* But it doesn’t stay funny for long: *The Vultures drool on the skush, hissing drops of blood burn inside the smashed babe’s face, o napalm rotisserie! Cook the world a TV dinner. The Earth Drinks Blood. War War War, the meat goes to war.*<sup>136</sup>

In 1967, rock ‘n’ roll already had shifted its tone to express the intensifying distaste for the Vietnam War among young protesters. Later in the article, Philips predicted the course that the protest themes of rock ‘n’ roll would likely take if escalation of the Vietnam War persisted. He writes, “Nevertheless, there is reason to expect that musical output will keep pace with the war, and if escalation continues, the tone of protest songs would be come even more bitter. This has certainly been the trend.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Tom Phillips. 1967. "Vietnam Blues." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, (Date Accessed: 3/1/17), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/117898067?accountid=14637>.

<sup>137</sup> Tom Phillips. 1967. "Vietnam Blues", *New York Times*.



In January of 1968, the Vietnam War reached a turning point that significantly turned Americans against the war. During late January, over 85,000 Viet Cong soldiers attacked 100 key cities, including Saigon, in what was known as the “Tet Offensive.” The American response to the Tet Offensive was brutal, quickly subduing the NLK forces, and slaughtering many innocent civilians in the process. However, the Tet Offensive had enormous repercussions on the Johnson administration, causing many members of America’s government and military to question the purpose behind involvement in Vietnam. An article from *The Washington Post* published in February of 1968 provides evidence of the shift the Tet Offensive triggered among the United States Military, Government, and public.

As a result of the Communists’ Tet offensive four weeks ago and the outlook ahead, Administration officials variously describe the government’s mood as ‘murky’ and as ‘jumpy and jittery.’ The ‘mood is one of uncertainty’ said one official . . . In short, while president Johnson has proclaimed that American determination to ‘stick it out’ will bring success, the number of officials who privately concede the possibility of failure for current U.S Strategy is soaring.<sup>138</sup>

The Tet Offensive dealt a crucial blow to American support of the Vietnam War, which was already lagging in 1968. American opposition to the war re-erupted in the wake of the conflict, as news leaked that General William Westmoreland, commander of the U.S forces in Southeast Asia, planned to request 200,000 additional troops to be sent to Vietnam.<sup>139</sup> Westmoreland lost significant approval among the American people as a result of his response to the Tet Offensive. Six weeks after the conflict, Westmoreland’s popularity plummeted as “public approval of his overall performance dropped from 48

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<sup>138</sup> Murrey Marder and Chalmers M Roberts. 1968. "Reds' Offensive Leaves U.S. with Maze of Uncertainties." *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, (Date Accessed: 3/13/17), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/143621697?accountid=14637>.

<sup>139</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 546.

percent to 36 percent – and, more dramatically, endorsement for his handling of the war fell from 40 percent to 46 percent.”<sup>140</sup> In the year of 1968, many of anti-war rock songs populated American airwaves, voicing vehement opposition towards involvement in Vietnam and the American Military response to the Tet Offensive. This confirmed Tom Phillip’s prediction in 1967, “to expect that musical output will keep pace with the war, and if escalation continues, the tone of protest songs would be come even more bitter.”<sup>141</sup>

In 1968, as American attitudes regarding involvement in Vietnam turned negative, many radical rock ‘n’ roll groups released music expressing widespread political disillusionment with the American government and military. The Doors song “Unknown Soldier” released in the winter of 1968 captured American sentiment regarding the war effort in 1968, reaching the top 40 on the Billboard Charts months later. The song offers Jim Morrison’s dismal portrayal of the conflict, as he perceived it through the American media at the time.

Breakfast where the news is read  
Television children fed  
Unborn living, living, dead  
Bullets strike the helmet’s head  
And it’s all over  
For the unknown soldier<sup>142</sup>

In 1968, Jim Morrison had become a radical figure in the rock ‘n’ roll world. A *Washington Post* article about the doors released in 1968 affirmed Morrison’s significance to the rock movement. “Their lead singer, Jim Morrison, has, in fact, more of the latter commodity than anyone in the business. As a result he is the Mystic Love God

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<sup>140</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 546.

<sup>141</sup> Tom Phillip. 1967. "Vietnam Blues", *New York Times*.

<sup>142</sup> The Doors, “The Unknown Soldier”, (Date Accessed: 3/18/17), <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/doors/theunknownsoldier.html>

to hordes of turned-on teeny boppers. His is a style of calculated arrogance, complete but controlled bestiality, total maleness, and ‘Up against the Wall. Establishment!’ behavior in all forms.”<sup>143</sup> The radical rock ‘n’ roll tone of “The Unknown Soldier” matched the shift in New Left politics from protest to resistance, which occurred after the Tet Offensive. It also demonstrates intensifying resistance towards the Vietnam War was being captured by aggressively political rock musicians.

As the year of 1968 progressed, the radicalization of rock that was occurring in the wake of the Tet Offensive appeared in the music of the genres most influential band, The Beatles. Although Jim Morrison and The Doors had amassed a considerable following among adherents to the counterculture and the New Left, their music predominantly appealed to young Americans. The Beatles, however, had dictated the direction of rock ‘n’ roll since the late 50s, and their music had come to express a broader global paradigm. In 1968, Richard Goldstein, a journalist for the *New York Times*, explained The Beatles political significance for the period.

The Beatles are capable of parody, profundity and poise, but they also epitomize the pretenses of their culture. For, more than anyone in the pop hegemony, the Beatles involve themselves in the times. Unlike Dylan, who wanders across the fiery plains of his own imagination, the Beatles are inspired groovers, equally at home in the *haute monde* (which cherishes them as clever rakes) and the underground (where they are loved as magical rebels).<sup>144</sup>

Goldstein’s assertion that The Beatles epitomized the broader culture of the period is crucial regarding their release of “Revolution” in 1968. The song itself was a

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<sup>143</sup> Reed Hundt. 1968. “Doors’ New Disc has Style,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), (Date Accessed: 3/17/17), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/143366973?accountid=14637>.

<sup>144</sup> Richard Goldstein. 1968. "The Beatles: Inspired Groovers." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, (Date Accessed: 3/18/17), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/118417369?accountid=14637>.

response to a series of anti-Vietnam riots that had occurred across the globe, including a violent clash between war protesters and police in Grosvenor Square, London. While the lyrics are somewhat ambiguous regarding the war, “Revolution” indicated that in 1968, as a result of the intensifying political climate, rock ‘n’ roll had become the primary expression of these global socio-political conflicts. In the song Lennon demands for a peaceful solution for the anti-War protestors, subtly condemning the violent resistance that was occurring during the anti-War protests. In lyrics from verses one and three, Lennon’s addresses the anti-War protestors.

You say you want a revolution  
Well, you know, we all want to change the world  
You tell me that it’s evolution,  
Well, you know, we all want to change the world.  
You say you got a real solution, well you know,  
We’d all love to see the plan  
You ask me for a contribution, well you know,  
We’re doing what we can<sup>145</sup>

Lennon’s peaceful approach to the politics of the late sixties revealed the global scope of anti-Vietnam war movements, and rock ‘n’ roll as a whole. While The Beatles message in “Revolution” was peaceful, other prominent and influential rock bands, like The Rolling Stones, grew increasingly radical and angry as a result of the intensifying violence, in which they were sometimes involved. As they were drawn into the political issues of the times, their music became influenced by the aggressive and bitter attitudes of American rock bands like The Fugs and Doors. The violent nature of the anti-war protests and riots that broke out across Europe during 1968 played a large part in radicalizing popular bands like The Rolling Stones.

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<sup>145</sup> The Beatles, “Revolution”, (Date Accessed: 3/15/17), <https://genius.com/The-beatles-revolution-lyrics>.

In an article about the anti-war riots that took place in London, a British journalist named Leo Burley described the increasingly violent nature of the demonstrations. In 1968 in London, thousands of angry protestors marched on the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square to express their opposition towards Americas War in Vietnam following the Tet Offensive. Among the masses of protestors was the lead singer of The Rolling Stones, Mick Jagger. A journalist named Barry Miles who spent time with Mick Jagger during the riots considered the singers possible motives in participating. Miles writes, “He was there because he felt angry and rebellious but he had no way of formulating this, of giving it any kind of structure, and in a sense he was looking for anything to rebel against.”<sup>146</sup> Mick Jagger’s protesting of the war exemplified how many young people felt in the wake of the Tet Offensive. Burley goes on to describe the violence that ensued during the protests, depicting a clash between protesters and police. “It swiftly descends into chaos. Mounted police charge the demonstrators, smoke-bombs explode, rocks are thrown and hundreds are arrested.”<sup>147</sup> A closer look into the riots, and the involvement of Jagger, reveals the participation of one of rock ‘n’ rolls leading figures in an anti-war protest. Burley writes,

The Grosvenor Square riots are a footnote in the story of 1968. But in the Stones and the Beatles, Britain has given rise to the two biggest bands in the world, and rock ‘n’ roll has become an immensely powerful medium – a medium best understood by the young and the angry, the very people who are revolting the world over.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Leo Burley. 2008. “Jagger vs Lennon: London’s riots of 1968 provided the backdrop to a rock ‘n’ roll battle royale”, *Independent*, (Date Accessed: 3/20/17), <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/jagger-vs-lennon-londons-riots-of-1968-provided-the-backdrop-to-a-rocknroll-battle-royale-792450.html>.

<sup>147</sup> Burley. 2008. “Jagger vs Lennon”, *Independent*.

<sup>148</sup> Burley. 2008. “Jagger vs Lennon”, *Independent*.

While The Beatles had taken a removed perspective on the London riots, Mick Jagger, the lead singer of the second most famous rock band during the period, had participated in the riots himself to express his personal anger towards the establishment. The riots were a manifestation of the widespread anger and political resentment, like that felt by Jagger, proliferating from America across the globe. Burley argues that these radical anti-war attitudes impacted the popular rock and roll music of the period as he writes, “The North Vietnamese Tet offensive of January 1968 and the American response have created a special kind of outrage among the young; it is this that Jagger is feeding on as he and thousands of other approach the mounted police at Grosvenor Square.”<sup>149</sup> In the wake of the riots The Rolling Stones wrote and recorded “Gimme Shelter”, one of the most famous anti-war anthems (and rock songs, for that matter) released during the late 1960’s. “Gimme Shelter” was released in 1969 on The Rolling Stones album *Let It Bleed*, and it captured the widespread rebellious anger many young people felt towards the War and the establishment in general during the end of the sixties. In the first and second verse, Mick Jagger viscerally declares:

Oh, a storm is threat’ning  
My very life today  
If I don’t get some shelter  
Ooh yeah, I’m gonna fade away  
War, children  
It’s just a shot away, it’s just a shot away  
War, children  
It’s just a shot away<sup>150</sup>

Mick Jagger’s lyrics may be interpreted as Anti Vietnam War, while they also can be understood as referring to the general war between young people and the establishment

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<sup>149</sup> Burley. 2008. “Jagger vs Lennon”, *Independent*.

<sup>150</sup> The Rolling Stones, “Gimme Shelter” (Date Accessed: 3/15/2017)  
<https://genius.com/The-rolling-stones-gimme-shelter-lyrics>.

that was occurring during the Anti-War campaign. In 1968, global resistance to the Vietnam War intensified, and rock musicians, like Jagger experienced the brutality between anti-war protestors and the establishment, which influenced their music.

In the years that followed 1968, rock 'n' roll became the loudest and most popular political vehicle for the Ant-War campaign, which had achieved success in influencing American politics by the end of 1968. In 1969, The Rolling Stones toured across America, professing the anger and resentment about the Vietnam War and the American Government, capturing the attitudes of many young Americans, and clashing with police. During these months, many rock songs opposing the war like Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son" climbed the pop charts, expressing vehement opposition towards the war. The lyrics of "Fortunate Son" were Creedence Clearwater's lead singer, John Fogerty's response to the wedding of Dwight Eisenhower's son David and President Richard Nixon's daughter, Julie. In 1968, Fogerty told *Rolling Stone Magazine*, "Julie Nixon was hanging around with David Eisenhower, and you just had the feeling that none of these people were going to be involved in the war."<sup>151</sup> Lyrics from the song condemn the fact that the children of those responsible for motivating the unjust War in Vietnam never had to suffer from it directly, while the majority of Americans, who opposed the War, were forced to fight in their place. Lyrics from the first verse and the chorus expound Fogerty's political message.

Some Folks are born made to wave the flag  
Ooh they're red, white and blue  
And when the band plays Hail to the Chief  
Ooh, they point the cannon at you, Lord  
It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no senator's son

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<sup>151</sup> Gleason, Ralph J. 1970. "John Fogerty: The Rolling Stone Interview," *Rolling Stone*. (Date Accessed: 3/15/17).

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate one, no<sup>152</sup>

In January of 1969, Richard Nixon was elected into office on his promise to withdrawal American troops from Vietnam, representing an ostensible victory for the Anti-War Campaign. However, Nixon's promises surrounding the war in Vietnam rapidly came into question, as he failed to take immediate action. After assessing the situation in Vietnam, and negotiating policies and treaties with Lyndon Johnson and the North Vietnamese Government, President Nixon gave a long awaited address to the American people. An article that followed Nixon's address reveals that his efforts in withdrawing from Vietnam faced a variety of issues.

If a settlement cannot be negotiated, Mr. Nixon reiterated, then the nation's responsibility to its allies and to the peace of the world requires a measured pace of disengagement. That pace, the president said again, will be geared to the ability of the South Vietnamese forces to take over combat duties and to the level of combat imposed by the enemy.<sup>153</sup>

While many who opposed the Vietnam War believed the election of Richard Nixon in early 1969 meant the end of American involvement in Vietnam, the early days of his presidency indicated otherwise. Consequently, citizens and politicians throughout the United States began to perceive the Nixon promise to end the war as an empty one. As a result of the changing perceptions of the Nixon administration regarding the war in the first part of 1969, Americans became worried that Nixon's foreign policy regarding Vietnam would be an extension of Lyndon Johnson's. An article published in the

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<sup>152</sup> Creedence Clearwater Revival "Fortunate Son", (Date Accessed: 3/16/2017), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fortunate\\_Son#cite\\_note-8](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fortunate_Son#cite_note-8)

<sup>153</sup> Max Frankel, 1969. "Nixon Calls For Public Support As He Pursues his Vietnam Plan On a Secret Pullout Timetable," *The New York Times (1923-Current File)*, (Date Accessed: 3/12/17), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/118646516?accountid=14637>.



*Chicago Tribune* entitled “Withdraw GIs from VietNam Findley Urges”, captured the anti-war sentiment of one Republican Government Representative from Chicago. Findley is quoted in the article, “The United States made a fundamental mistake in committing troops in the first place, the rational corrective action is to withdraw, rather than compound the original error. If military policies, with or without escalation, inherited from President Johnson are continued much longer, they will become Nixon policies.”<sup>154</sup> In essence, by the spring of 1969, the Nixon administration continued to neglect its promise to withdraw American troops from Vietnam, and consequently the anti-war campaign raged on.

While American troops continued to die under the authority of a new administration in Vietnam, the anti-war movement rapidly approached what would become its cultural climax. Throughout 1969, politically driven rock concerts served as the hotbeds for political protest and expression. Rock concerts were venues where hundreds of thousands of like-minded individuals could gather to support the symbolic leaders of their movement. Rock musicians had gained this cultural significance, as their music had become the preeminent weapon channeling opposition towards the Vietnam War. As the promises of the Nixon administration floundered in 1969, and the war raged on in Vietnam, the organization of these concerts became extremely culturally significant, as they encapsulated the political climate of the era. Although there were many political rock concerts in 1968 and 1969, one particular concert that took place during the summer of 1969 would transcend all others, the Woodstock Music Festival.

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<sup>154</sup> "Withdraw GIs from VietNam, Findley Urges." 1969. *Chicago Tribune (1963-Current File)*, (Date Accessed: 3/10/17), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/168890819?accountid=14637>.

In his book *Defining Moments: Woodstock*, Kevin Hillstrom considered the unparalleled cultural significance of the rock concert that took place in upstate New York in the summer of 1969. He writes, “The Woodstock Music Festival was in many ways a natural outgrowth of the social turbulence and musical creativity of the Sixties. The concert’s slogan, which promised attendees ‘three days of peace and music,’ sent a clear message: This was an event for young people who opposed the Vietnam War.”<sup>155</sup> The musical lineup at Woodstock was diverse, including folk musicians like Joan Baez and Arlo Guthrie, folk-rock bands like Country Joe and the Fish, and Jefferson Airplane. However, Woodstock, in its very foundations, was a rock ‘n’ roll concert. It had been organized by two rock and roll promoters, Michael Lang and Artie Kornfeld, and was headlined by Creedance Clearwater, a fundamentally rock group.<sup>156</sup> Hillstrom writes, “Most of all, though, Woodstock called out to a younger generation that was excited about the phenomenon of rock and roll – and the rebellious, countercultural lifestyle that many top rock stars were living and singing about.”<sup>157</sup>

Around 500,000 fans showed up to Woodstock to express their common opposition towards the Vietnam War, and to revel in the midst of their cultural icons. However, popular rock groups like The Rolling Stones and The Doors weren’t included in the concert, as their “the angry confrontational music of Stones was seen as a poor fit with the ‘peace and love’ ethos of the festival.”<sup>158</sup> In many ways, the promoters of the festival succeeded in maintaining a peaceful atmosphere at Woodstock. An article from

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<sup>155</sup> Kevin Hillstrom, *Defining Moments: Woodstock*, (Detroit, US: Omnigraphics, 2012), ProQuest ebrary. Web. 7 March 2017, 37.

<sup>156</sup> Hillstrom, *Defining Moments: Woodstock*, 38.

<sup>157</sup> Hillstrom, *Defining Moments: Woodstock*, 37.

<sup>158</sup> Hillstrom, *Defining Moments: Woodstock*, 36.

the *New York Times* published days after the festival considers its magnitude and its peaceful nature. “The Police and the festival’s promoters both expressed amazement that despite the size of the crowd – the largest gather of its kind ever held – there had been neither violence not any serious incident.”<sup>159</sup> Although Woodstock identified itself as a rock concert, while many rock artists during the period had taken on an aggressive and violent approach to political protest, Woodstock offered promise for peace and progress. Instead of striking out against the war violently, Woodstock begged for peace and progress, aligning itself more clearly with the protest traditions of folk music than the rock ‘n’ roll of the period.

The concert’s slogan “three days of peace and music”<sup>160</sup> was reminiscent of the political protests and “hootenannies” organized by Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie during the 1940s and 50s. The presence of folk musicians, like Woody Guthrie’s son Arlo, and Dylan’s contemporary Joan Baez, demonstrated in many ways that the peaceful protest ethos of folk early folk had come full circle, as it continued to impact rock ‘n’ roll as late as 1969. However, most importantly, Woodstock served as a clear culmination of the musical developments that occurred throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the pure folk music of Joan Baez, to the folk-rock of Country Joe McDonald, all the way to the electric reverberations that blasted off of Jimi Hendrix’s Stratocaster, Woodstock was a microcosm for the politicization and evolution of popular music that occurred throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America.

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<sup>159</sup> Barnard Collier. 1969. "200,000 Thronging to Rock Festival Jam Roads Upstate." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, (Date Accessed: 3/15/2017), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/118584592?accountid=14637>.

<sup>160</sup> Hillstrom, *Defining Moments: Woodstock*, 37.

I affirm that I have carried out all of my academic endeavors with full academic honesty.

Signed: *Alexander Bennett Kouwenhoven*

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