

The Counterculture Era: Five Protest Songs (1965-70)

The Counterculture Movement was an unorganized and varied attack by young people (called “beatniks” and “hippies”) against “the Establishment.” The conformity, materialism, and patriotism which typified the 1950s met head-on with “do your own thing” and “don’t trust anyone over 30.” It was a true clash of American eras—perhaps unequaled in United States history—and the immediate result was utter chaos. In the long term, hippies made important history by accident.

Hippies unabashedly challenged traditional American cultural values, including attitudes toward sexual experience, experimentation with mind-altering drugs, and rejection of consumerism and compliance (manifested by communal living, long hair, shabby clothing, and loose speech).

America’s youth were disgusted by slick disingenuous politicians, tired of idle political rhetoric, appalled by American racism, sickened by the brutality of Vietnam, leery of possible Cold War repercussions, and contemptuous of social smugness. Kids were at odds with the older generation about what exactly the “American dream” was and how to achieve it. The result was a marked “generation gap” filled with misunderstanding, intolerance, impatience, and distrust.

The chief vehicle for the Counterculture assault on the Establishment was music, the most wholesome part of the hippies’ triadic credo of “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll.” Indeed, the 1969 Woodstock Concert (officially “Woodstock Music & Art Fair”) has been referred to as the “Counterculture National Convention.”

The following five selections, classic Counterculture Era music, are among those recognized foremost in the 1960s protest songs genre.



“Eve of Destruction” by Barry McGuire

[Words and music by P. F. Sloan. Copyright © 1965 by Dunhill Records.]

The earliest protest song associated with the Counterculture movement is “Blowin’ in the Wind,” recorded by Bob Dylan in 1963. Dylan’s words are perplexedly vague—described by some as “impenetrably ambiguous.” He avoids mention of specific people and events. “Eve of Destruction” takes a similar broad topic approach. It reached #1 on Billboard and, as it turned out, was Barry McGuire’s only big hit of his relatively uncelebrated musical career. Still, “Eve of Destruction” is considered to be the hippie protest anthem. McGuire’s raspy voice seems perfectly matched with the song’s warning of impending apocalypse. Additionally, the lyrics attempt to show the paradoxical absurdity of 1960s America: *Hate your next door neighbor, But don’t forget to say grace.*

“I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-To-Die Rag” by Country Joe McDonald

[Words and music by Country Joe McDonald. Copyright © 1965 by Alkatraz Corner Music Company.]

The song is one of the handful most historically identified from the “three days of peace and music” at Woodstock (August 15-18, 1969). By radio standards, it was not a huge hit, but would be Country Joe’s most memorable song in an otherwise ho-hum musical career. (According to story, it took McDonald just half an hour to compose it.) Due to the traffic-related disarray at Woodstock, the catchy tune was performed unscheduled and solo—McDonald went on stage without his band to fill a gap between performers early in the concert’s second day. The words are a mordant plea for young men to enlist and parents to urge their kids to do so: *Well, come on mothers throughout the land, Pack your boys off to Vietnam. Come on fathers, don’t hesitate, Send ‘em off before it’s too late. Be the first ones on your block, To have your boy come home in a box!*

“Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival

[Words and music by John Fogerty. Copyright © 1968 by Jondora Music Company.]

According to the song’s writer, “Fortunate Son” was inspired by the marriage of David Eisenhower, grandson of former President Dwight D. Eisenhower, to President Richard Nixon’s youngest daughter Julie in 1968. The song, released in the midst of a three-year hits barrage by Creedence Clearwater Revival, is one of four Creedence tunes—all written by lead singer and guitarist John Fogerty—among the “500 Greatest Songs of All Time” compiled by *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2004. “Fortunate Son” is a notable departure from CCR’s Fogertyesque “swamp rock” agenda of Southern iconography. The song suggests the injustices of the draft: *It ain’t me, it ain’t me, I ain’t no senator’s son...It ain’t me, it ain’t me, I ain’t no millionaire’s son...It ain’t me, it ain’t me, I ain’t no military son...It ain’t me, it ain’t me; I ain’t no fortunate one.*

“Ball of Confusion” by The Temptations

[Words and music by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong. Copyright © 1970 by Motown Records.]

“Ball of Confusion (That’s What the World is Today)” was another installment in the 1968 repertoire shift of The Temptations from the conventional “Motown sound” (a blend of black rhythm and blues mixed with elements of white pop music) to the hard-driving style called “psychedelic soul.” Two other ultimate protest songs performed by black musicians shortly followed “Ball of Confusion”—the 1970 charging, up-tempo “War” by Edwin Starr and the 1971 whimsical, melancholy “What’s Going On” by Marvin Gaye. “Ball of Confusion” takes a shotgun approach in its attack on a variety of political and social issues plaguing America during the 1960s: *Well, the only person talking about love thy brother is the preacher. And it seems nobody’s interested in learning but the teacher. Segregation, determination, demonstration, integration; Aggravation, humiliation, obligation to our nation. Ball of confusion, Oh yeah, that’s what the world is today—hey, hey.*

“Ohio” by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young

[Words and music by Neil Young. Copyright © 1970 by Atlantic Records.]

“Ohio” was recorded by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. Two of the foursome—Stephen Stills and Neil Young—released a powerful protest song entitled “For What It’s Worth” in 1967 as members of Buffalo Springfield. CSNY, already among the most identifiable Counterculture musicians owing to their well-received performance in front of half a million hippies at Woodstock a year earlier, “Ohio” solidified the group’s place of prominence in the Counterculture legacy. Supposedly, Young wrote the lyrics after seeing photos of the Kent State shootings (May 4, 1970) in *Life* magazine. The song hauntingly conjures the turbulent mood mixed of anger, disbelief, and helplessness: *Tin soldiers and Nixon’s comin’, We’re finally on our own. This summer I hear the drummin’, Four dead in Ohio.*

Barry McGuire: “Eve of Destruction”

The Eastern world, it is exploding
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'
And even the Jordan River has bodies floatin'

But you tell me
Over and over and over again, my friend
Ah, you don't believe
We're on the eve of destruction.

Don't you understand what I'm tryin' to say
Can't you feel the fears I'm feelin' today?
If the button is pushed, there's no runnin' away
There'll be no one to save, with the world in a grave
Take a look around ya boy, it's bound to scare ya boy

But you tell me
Over and over and over again, my friend
Ah, you don't believe
We're on the eve of destruction.

Yeah, my blood's so mad feels like coagulatin'
I'm sitting here just contemplatin'
I can't twist the truth, it knows no regulation.
Handful of senators don't pass legislation
And marches alone can't bring integration
When human respect is disintegratin'
This whole crazy world is just too frustratin'

But you tell me
Over and over and over again, my friend
Ah, you don't believe
We're on the eve of destruction.

Think of all the hate there is in Red China
Then take a look around to Selma, Alabama
You may leave here for four days in space
But when you return, it's the same old place
The poundin' of the drums, the pride and disgrace
You can bury your dead, but don't leave a trace
Hate your next-door neighbor, but don't forget to say grace

And... tell me over and over and over and over again, my friend
You don't believe
We're on the eve of destruction
Mm, no no, you don't believe
We're on the eve of destruction.

Words and music by P. F. Sloan.
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Country Joe McDonald: “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-To-Die Rag”

Yeah, come on all of you big strong men,
Uncle Sam needs your help again.
He’s got himself in a terrible jam
Way down yonder in Vietnam.
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,
Whoopie! we’re all gonna die!

Well, come on generals, let’s move fast,
Your big chance has come at last.
Gotta go out and get those reds;
The only good commie is the one who’s dead.
And you know that peace can only be won
When we’ve blown ‘em all to Kingdom Come!

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,
Whoopie! we’re all gonna die!

Well, come on Wall Street, don’t move slow,
Why man, this is war-a-go-go.

There’s plenty good money to be made
By supplying the Army with the tools of the trade.
Just hope and pray that if they drop the bomb,
They drop it on the Viet Cong!

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,
Whoopie! we’re all gonna die!

Well, come on mothers throughout the land,
Pack your boys off to Vietnam.
Come on fathers, don’t hesitate;
Send ‘em off before it’s too late.
Be the first one on your block
To have your boy come home in a box!

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,
Whoopie! we’re all gonna die!

Words and music by Joe McDonald.
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Creedence Clearwater Revival: “Fortunate Son”

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, son.
It ain't me, it ain't me; I ain't no fortunate one, no.

Some folks are born silver spoon in hand,
Lord, don't they help themselves, oh.
But when the taxman comes to the door,
Lord, the house looks like a rummage sale, yes.

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no millionaire's son, son.
It ain't me, it ain't me; I ain't no fortunate one, no.

Some folks inherit star-spangled eyes,
Ooh, they send you down to war, Lord.
And when you ask them, “How much should we give?”
Ooh, they only answer, “More, more, more!”

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no military son, son.
It ain't me, it ain't me; I ain't no fortunate one, one.

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate one, no no no.
It ain't me, it ain't me; I ain't no fortunate son, no no no.

Words and music by J.C. Fogerty.
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The Temptations: “Ball of Confusion”

People moving out, people moving in.
Why, because of the color of their skin.
Run, run, run but you sure can't hide.
An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.
Vote for me and I'll set you free.
Rap on, brother, rap on.

Well, the only person talking about love thy brother is the...preacher.
And it seems nobody's interested in learning but the...teacher.
Segregation, determination, demonstration, integration,
Aggravation, humiliation, obligation to our nation.
Ball of confusion.
Oh yeah, that's what the world is today; hey, hey.

The sale of pills are at an all time high.
Young folks walking round with their heads in the sky.
The cities ablaze in the summer time.
And oh, the beat goes on.

Evolution, revolution, gun control, sound of soul.
Shooting rockets to the moon, kids growing up too soon.
Politicians say more taxes will solve everything.

And the band played on.
So, round and around and around we go.
Where the world's headed, nobody knows.

Oh, great googalooga, can't you hear me talking to you.
Just a ball of confusion.
Oh yeah, that's what the world is today; hey, hey.

Fear in the air, tension everywhere.
Unemployment rising fast, the Beatles new record's a gas.
And the only safe place to live is on an Indian reservation.
And the band played on.

Eve of destruction, tax deduction, city inspectors, bill collectors,
Mod clothes in demand, population out of hand, suicide, too many bills, hippies moving to the hills.
People all over the world are shouting, 'End the war.'
And the band played on.

Great googalooga, can't you hear me talking to you.
Sayin'...ball of confusion.
That's what the world is today; hey, hey.
Let me hear ya, let me hear ya, let me hear ya.

Words and music by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong.
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Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young: “Ohio”

Tin soldiers and Nixon’s comin’,
We’re finally on our own.
This summer I hear the drummin’,
Four dead in Ohio.

Gotta get down to it.
Soldiers are cutting us down.
Should have been done long ago.
What if you knew her and
Found her dead on the ground?
How can you run when you know?

Gotta get down to it.
Soldiers are cutting us down.
Should have been done long ago.
What if you knew her and
Found her dead on the ground?
How can you run when you know?

Tin soldiers and Nixon’s comin’,
We’re finally on our own.
This summer I hear the drummin’,
Four dead in Ohio.

Words and music by Neil Young.
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The following questions refer to “Eve of Destruction” by Barry McGuire.

- What is the phrase “You’re old enough to kill, but not for voting” referencing?
- What is the significance of Selma, Alabama?
- What is the “four days in space”?
- List some contradictions mentioned in the song.
- What does the song have to say about the Cold War?
- According to the lyrics, what is necessary for integration?

The following questions refer to “I-Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-To-Die Rag” by Country Joe McDonald.

- What is the historical implication of mentioning “Wall Street”?

- What is Uncle Sam's "terrible jam"?
- How does the song state that peace can be obtained?
- Do the lyrics seem to indicate opposition to any war or the Vietnam War specifically?

The following questions refer to "Fortunate Son" by John Fogerty.

- Describe a "fortunate son" according to the song's lyrics.
- If you were to compose a fourth verse, who would the "fortunate son" be?

The following questions refer to "Ball of Confusion" by The Temptations.

- Describe a specific event of the Counterculture Era that you believe represents "segregation, determination, demonstration, integration." Account for all four components in your example.

- What racially-charged 1965 incident fits the description of “cities ablaze in the summer time”?
- Briefly explain what you think is suggested by the following lyrics.
“Aggravation, humiliation, obligation to the nation.”

“Fear in the air.”

“And the band played on.”
- Does “Ball of Confusion” indict only America or all mankind?
- What other protest song is mentioned in “Ball of Confusion”?

The following questions refer to “Ohio” by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young.

- What specific action precipitated the Kent State incident?
- Why “tin soldiers” instead of simply “soldiers”?

- The song asks, “How can you run when you know?” What does this mean?
- What does the Kent State affair have to say about the real toll of the Vietnam War for Americans?
- Do you sense optimism or pessimism in these five protest songs? Which song offers the most optimism? Which song is the most pessimistic? Cite specific lyrics to support your answers.
- What elements, if any, does the Counterculture Era have in common with the Progressive Movement?
- Compare the hippies of the Stormy Sixties with the Roaring Twenties’ flappers.

