



SOUNDTRACKS

SONGS THAT DEFINED HISTORY

A Veteran's Soundtrack to the Vietnam War

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did popular music amplify the voices and experiences of Americans serving in the United States Armed Forces during the Vietnam War?

OVERVIEW

(Note: this lesson contains words and imagery that may be considered disturbing or offensive. Teacher discretion advised.)



Photo: National Archives

In this lesson, students will learn how a number of songs released during and after the Vietnam War articulated the experiences of Americans who served in the United States Armed Forces during the war. Students will analyze popular songs that have resonated with veterans, and many other Americans, since the time they were released. While analyzing the songs, students will examine newspaper editorials, first-hand accounts, and personal reflections from Vietnam veterans. Finally, students will watch clips from the CNN Soundtracks series to provide additional context and information to inform their discussion and activities.

According to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, between 1964 and 1973, nearly nine million Americans served in the U.S. Armed Forces during the Vietnam War. About 3.5 million men and women were deployed to Southeast Asia where hostilities took place. 58,200 American armed service members died while serving in the war, and of those, 40,934 are classified as “Killed in Action,” with an additional several thousand dying from wounds and illness during the time of the war. Many of those who survived their service in Southeast Asia and returned home to the U.S. were traumatized by the experience in a variety of ways. Today, it is estimated that 400 American Vietnam War veterans die each day.

The Vietnam War reflected, and in many ways defined, one of the most turbulent time periods in U.S. history. The war caused deep divisions within American society. The split was often represented as a binary conflict between anti-war and pro-war citizens at home, characterized respectively as “doves” and “hawks.” The public discord and voices within those movements was covered extensively by the U.S. media at home. However, the feelings and opinions American service members overseas had towards the war, either of protest, approval, or somewhere in between, were often muted or unheard. Soon popular music provided a voice for soldiers and other service men and women, and a message that expressed how they felt.

During the Vietnam War, popular songs provided a cultural connection for those serving overseas to what was being heard back home in the U.S., and certain songs represented the messages and movements of the “doves” and “hawks.” The popularity of these tunes in and around the



battlefield in Vietnam allowed the voice and experience of armed service personnel to be amplified and illuminated. Whether it was the patriotic anthem, “The Ballad of the Green Berets,” by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler, or the disillusioned plea of “We Gotta Get Out of This Place” by the Animals, songs evoked a variety of emotions and opinions.

In the years since the war ended, songs like Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” have sought to reflect the complicated experience of the Vietnam War veteran after they returned home. Decades now removed from this era, select songs are considered a cultural component of that time period. As a powerful soundtrack, the songs inform the story of how the nation, and in particular the veteran, experienced the war, and its aftermath.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The diverse experiences and perspectives of American Vietnam War veterans
- How popular music connected Americans serving in Vietnam to life back home in the U.S.
- Particular songs that informed and represented the experience of Americans serving in the armed forces during the Vietnam War, and their life afterward in the U.S. as veterans
- How polarization toward the war affected U.S. service people in Vietnam, as it did American society in the U.S.

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to gain a deeper awareness of the experiences and perspectives of Vietnam War veterans by exploring first-hand accounts, music, song lyrics, and video clips.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Pass out **Handout - “I Served in Vietnam. Here’s My Soundtrack.”** Have students read the article aloud as a class, in small groups, or individually. Then ask students to clarify the “5Ws”:
 - **What** is the document?
 - **Who** wrote the article?
 - **When** was the article published in The New York Times?
 - **Why** was it published?
 - **Where** did the information come from?



2. Conduct a Think, Pair, Square, Share activity with students. Arrange students in pairs, and instruct pairs to discuss the article and take notes in a set amount of time. Then, pair one group of students with another, creating groups of four. Ask each pair within that group to share what they discussed while the other takes notes. Then, have the group of four students develop a presentation for the rest of the class.

PROCEDURE

1. Divide students again into pairs. Tell students that as a class they will be watching video clips from the “Kent State and the Vietnam War” episode of the CNN Soundtracks series and analyzing lyrics to certain songs heard in each clip in pairs.

2. Pass out **Handout - Song Lyrics Analysis** to each pair. Ask each pair to meet and fill out Part 1 on page 1 of the handout.

3. Play **Clip 1 - “The Ballad of the Green Berets.”** Instruct pairs to complete the lyric analysis for the song by filling out Part 2 on page 1 of the handout. Have each pair share their analysis with the whole class. Once completed, ask students:

- How might people supportive of U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War interpret this song? What about people opposed to the war?
- The pro-war side used this song to bolster their efforts to attract more people to enlist in the U.S. Armed Forces. What about this song and its lyrics might encourage people to enlist?
- How might you react to this song if you volunteered to enlist for military service in the war?
- How might you react to this song if you were subject to being drafted for military service in the war? (“Draft”, formally known as conscription, is a long-standing U.S. government policy compelling adult-aged males to enroll

for military service. During the Vietnam War era and prior to the current all-volunteer status of the U.S. Armed Forces, it meant enrollees could possibly be ordered to serve in the Vietnam War.)

- Can you guess the percentage of people that volunteered to serve in the military during the Vietnam War? (*About seventy-five percent of those serving in the Vietnam War were volunteers. However, with the possibility of being conscripted into service, many eligible men chose to volunteer to serve in order to have more choice in the division of the military they served in.*)

4. Pass out **Handout - “For protecting their right, to say things that are wrong.”** Have students read the article aloud as a class, in small groups, or individually, then ask:

- What is the author’s point of view in this article?
- Who is the intended audience?
- How does this handout relate to the lyrics and message of “The Ballad of the Green Berets”?

5. Play **Clip 2 - “These Boots are Made for Walkin’.”** Then ask students:

- Are you familiar with this song? If so, how are you familiar with it?
- How would you describe the song to someone?



- Why might the song have been popular with those serving in the military during the Vietnam War?
 - How did Nancy Sinatra's attitude about the war evolve as a result of her visits?
 - Can you support the troops while protesting the war? In what ways?
 - How did the resulting tension between Nancy and her father, Frank Sinatra, a major celebrity for the older generation, reflect the generational divide in the country?
 - How might a hit song contribute to and nurture a common experience shared by service people overseas and civilians at home?
6. Pass out **Handout - "A Letter to My Wife."** Have students read the article aloud as a class, in small groups, or individually, then ask:
- How can a personal correspondence provide insight into an experience?
 - Why might writing letters home be important to someone serving in the military overseas?
 - What details about the author's experience in Vietnam are discussed?
 - How does the author feel about his experience?
7. Pass out **Handout - "The Meatgrinder."** Have students read the article aloud as a class, in small groups, or individually, and instruct them to highlight any terms that are not understood. Then ask students:
- What was the author's purpose of writing this reflection?
 - What details about the author's experience in Vietnam are discussed?
 - How does the author feel about his experience?
 - How might this account of the horrors of war build personal empathy for all of those involved?
8. Play **Clip 3 - "We Gotta Get Out of this Place."** Then ask students:
- What specific lyrics in the song may have contributed to it becoming a universally acknowledged anthem for many U.S. military personnel serving in Vietnam during the war?
 - Comparing the experiences described in "The Meatgrinder" to this song's main message, how do they inform and affect your opinions, attitudes, and feelings about war?
9. Play **Clip 4 - "Music and Black Servicemen,"** taken from the Smithsonian film *The Black G.I.*, which presents interviews with Black soldiers in Vietnam. Ask students:
- What particular difficulties did these servicemen experience when trying to listen to the music they preferred in Vietnam? Would you say their "Soundtrack" to the war was censored?
 - In what ways did the racism common in the U.S. affect Black service members in Vietnam? What specific examples did those interviewed give?
 - How did military leadership respond to their demands to be able to listen to Soul music?
 - In what ways might the fight over music in Vietnam represent greater

issues of racism and discrimination that affected Black service members and civilians?

- James Brown performed for U.S. troops in June 1968, shortly after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1968, Brown released his hit single “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud”. In the context of this video, how do you imagine he was received by service members?

10. Ask students to retrieve the **Song Lyrics Analysis** handout, and fill out Part 1 of page 3 of the handout.

11. Play **Clip 4 - “Born in the U.S.A.”** Instruct students to reconvene as pairs to complete the lyric analysis for the song by filling out Part 2 on page 3 of the handout. Have each pair share their analysis with the whole class.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Pass out **Handout - “The Bitter Homecoming.”** Have students read the article aloud as a class, in small groups, or individually, then ask:
 - How does this handout relate to the lyrics and message of “Born in the USA” and all of the songs heard?
 - How might you describe the veteran’s experience after returning home from the Vietnam War?
 - What happened during the Vietnam veteran’s reunion in Washington, D.C.?
 - How did the reunion affect the author?
 - Did the event provide any resolution to the author’s experience of serving in the Vietnam War?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Explore TeachRock’s companion lesson, “Musical Reactions to the Vietnam War” (<https://teachrock.org/lesson/musical-reactions-to-the-vietnam-war/>) to support an expanded examination of this tumultuous period in U.S. History.
2. Watch the film *The Black G.I.* from the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (warning: explicit language). Then write an essay outlining the ways the perspectives of Black Veterans might be unique.
3. Explore the Vietnam Veterans Memorial either in-person in Washington, D.C. or via the memorial’s website (<https://www.vvmf.org/About-The-Wall/>). In particular, note the virtual Wall of Faces page (<https://www.vvmf.org/Wall-of-Faces/>) that is “dedicated to honoring and remembering every person whose name is inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial” and its commitment “to finding a photo to go with each of the more than 58,000 names on The Wall. The Wall of Faces allows family and friends to share memories, post pictures and connect with each other.” (*Please note that these are offsite websites that you may want to load prior to class.*)

4. **Community Open House with American Vietnam Veterans and Student-Led Panel Discussion.** While there is much to learn from artifacts, documents, songs, and videos, the greatest resource resides in our communities: grandfathers and grandmothers, mothers and fathers, family members and friends who lived the experience we are examining. An 18 year old service member in 1965 is now in their 70s. Welcome these veterans and affected family and friends into our classroom community, listen to them as they share about their experiences, and then engage with thoughtful conversation about what they experienced.
- Have students brainstorm, plan, and implement the open house, including a student-led discussion panel.
 - Begin by inviting veteran family members of students in your classroom and expand to family members of other students in the school.
 - Provide them with a website link to view the Soundtracks episode prior to the event for a basis of conversation during the student-led panel discussion.
 - Welcome them to your school and classroom, acknowledge their service, emphasize gratitude and appreciation while honoring the visiting veterans and their affected family and friends.
 - Have students ask questions from a student-led panel discussion. Questions should include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - Was their experience accurately depicted in the Soundtracks episode?
 - What music did they listening to during the Vietnam War?
 - What music are they listening to now?
 - How did they feel when they returned home from the war?
 - What lessons can be learned from the war?
 - After you've had them in your class one time, invite them back.



STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Craft and Structure 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Craft and Structure 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)

Text Types and Purposes 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.



College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in a word meaning.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance



Theme 9 : Global Connections

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.



RESOURCES

VIDEOS

- CNN Soundtracks: "The Ballad of the Green Berets"
- CNN Soundtracks: "The Boots are Made for Walkin'"
- CNN Soundtracks: "We Gotta Get Out of This Place"
- CNN Soundtracks: "Born in the U.S.A"
- "Music and Black Servicemen"

HANDOUTS

- Handout - "I Served in Vietnam. Here's My Soundtrack"
- Handout - Song Lyrics Analysis
- Handout - "For protecting their right, to say things that are wrong."
- Handout - "A Letter to My Wife"
- Handout - "The Meatgrinder"
- Handout - "The Bitter Homecoming"