

A VETERAN'S SOUNDTRACK TO THE VIETNAM WAR


Est. Time: 90-120 minutes

Subjects: Social Studies/History

Age Range: High School, AP Honors


[View the classroom lesson version](#)


★ *TEACHROCK* ★



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

In this lesson you will:

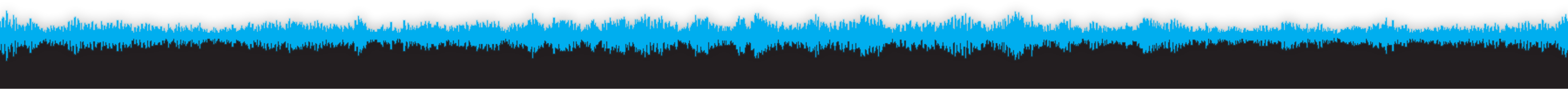
- Explore the diverse experiences and perspectives of American Vietnam War veterans
 - Examine particular songs that informed and represented the experience of Americans serving in the armed forces during the Vietnam War, and their life afterward in the U.S. as veterans
 - Recognize how polarization toward the war affected U.S. service people in Vietnam
 - Identify how Black Americans serving in the U.S. armed forces in Vietnam experienced racism and discrimination from fellow U.S. military personnel
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Talk to a friend or family member that is an veteran of the Vietnam War, or someone who has significant personal memories from the era. Use the following questions as prompts for your conversation and take notes about what they tell you.

- What are some of your memories from your service in the Vietnam War?*
- What music were you listening to during the war?
- What music are you listening to now?
- How did you feel after the war concluded?
- What lessons can be learned from the war?

If possible, pair with a classmate to share what each of you learned. *If interviewing a veteran, be mindful that they may be sensitive to sharing certain memories.




Read [this article](#) about how music shaped the experience of the Vietnam War for those Americans who served in it.





Consider or ask a friend the “5Ws” related to the article:

- 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?
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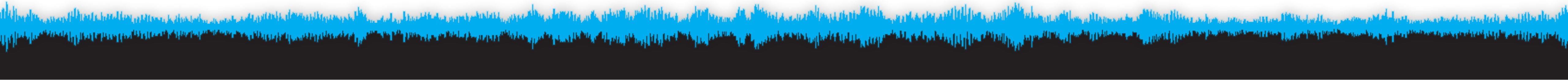



THE BALLAD OF THE GREEN BERETS

Watch [this video](#) about the 1966 hit song, “The Ballad of the Green Berets” by Sgt. Barry Sadler.




Consider or ask a friend:

- How might people supporting U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War interpret this song? How might people opposing interpret the song?
 - What about this song might encourage people to enlist to serve in the military?
 - How might you react to this song if you volunteered to serve?
 - How might you react to this song if you could be drafted to serve? (“Draft” 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.)
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Examine **this poem** by a Vietnam War veteran Jack T. Hartzel, and consider the questions on the following slide. Then, consider or ask a friend:

- What is the author's point of view in this poem?
 - Who is the intended audience?
 - How does this handout relate to the lyrics and message of "The Ballad of the Green Berets"?
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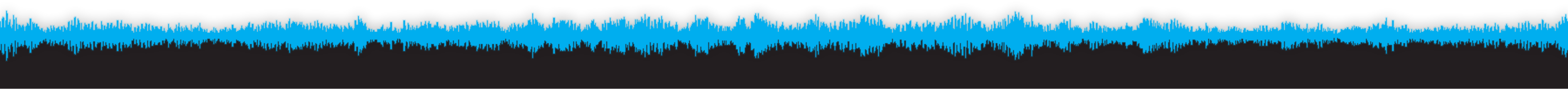



THESE BOOTS ARE MADE FOR WALKN'

Watch [this video](#) about Nancy's Sinatra's iconic song "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" and how her experience in Vietnam informed her opinion of U.S. involvement in the war.





Consider or ask a friend:

- 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?
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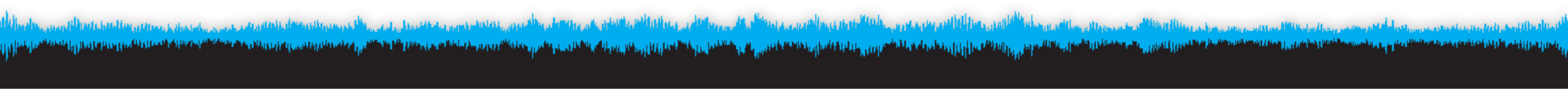


Read **this letter** from Army soldier Stanley Homiski serving in Vietnam to his wife back home in the U.S. In the letter, “Charlie” refers to the Viet Cong forces who were fighting U.S. forces in the war. Then, consider or ask a friend:

- 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?
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Read **this reflection** from Army soldier Jack T. Hartzel about his experience in combat during the Vietnam war. Then, consider or ask a friend:

- 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?
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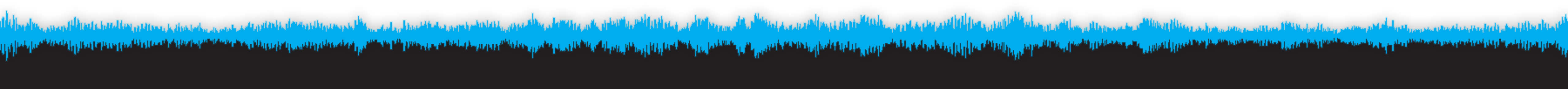


WE GOTTA GET OUT OF THIS PLACE

Watch [this video](#) describing how the song, “We Gotta Get Out of This Place” became an anthem for those in the U.S. military serving in Vietnam during the war.



Consider or ask a friend:

- Why do you think the song, and its lyrics, became 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?
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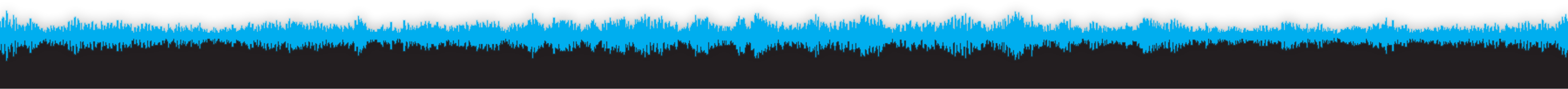


BLACK GIs

Watch [this video](#) featuring interviews with Black Americans serving in the U.S. military in Vietnam.



Consider or ask a friend:

- 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?
 - 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?
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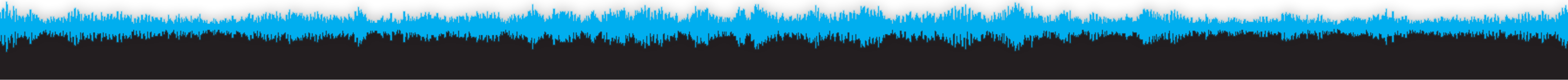


BORN IN THE USA

Watch [this video](#) about the song “Born in the U.S.A.” where interpretations of the lyrics are discussed and the song’s writer, Bruce Springsteen explains why he wrote it.




Consider or ask a friend:

- Is this song from the perspective of someone serving during the war or after they have returned home to the U.S.?
 - Why might some people feel the message of the song has been misinterpreted?
 - What kind of patriotism might the song be expressing?
 - Why did Bruce Springsteen feel he needed to write the song?
 - What do you think is the song's message?
- 



Read **this article** about the experience of American Vietnam War veterans after they returned home from the war. Then, consider or ask a friend:

- How does this handout relate to the lyrics and message of “Born in the U.S.A.” 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?
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SUMMARY

- Popular music shaped the history of the Vietnam War era
- Certain songs were reimagined as social commentary and anthemic expressions of the war experience
- Letters sent back home to family and friends provided another opportunity for Americans servicemembers to describe their experiences
- Black Americans serving in the U.S. military faced racism and discrimination
- Returning home to the U.S. and readjusting to domestic life was particularly challenging for many American Vietnam War veterans



BE CREATIVE

- Create an image to represent one of the songs featured in the earlier slides. Use the song's title, lyrics, and the commentary from the video clip to inform your image. You can use simple paper and pencil/pen or even digital art software to create your image. Present your image to your class.



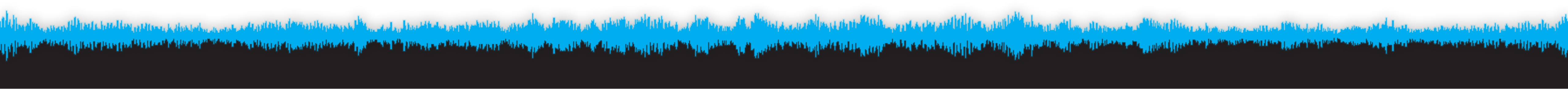
BE CURIOUS

- Explore TeachRock's lesson, **“Musical Reactions to the Vietnam War”** to learn about songs that were written during and about the Vietnam war era. Choose a musician or band featured in the lesson, and conduct research about their history. Present your findings in summary form to your class via a video or audio recording.



CONNECT

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