Handout - “I Served in Vietnam. Here’s My Soundtrack”

I Served in Vietnam. Here’s My Soundtrack
Doug Bradley, *The New York Times* (March 13, 2018)

“Vietnam.” The word comes camouflaged in music. Rock ’n’ roll, soul, pop and country. For those who watched the war unfold on the evening news, the music of Vietnam blurred with the sounds rising from the streets of America during a time of momentous challenge and change. For those born after the last helicopters sank beneath the waves of the South China Sea, movies, documentaries and TV shows have repeatedly used music as a sonic background for depicting Vietnam as a tug of war between pro-war hawks and pro-peace doves.

If you weren’t there, it’s possible to imagine this as so much postproduction editing, imposing a relationship between the sounds and the experience of the war. It can all feel a bit trite. Except — it’s true.

More than any other American war, Vietnam had a soundtrack, and you listened to it whether you were marching in the jungle or in the streets. For the men and women like me who served in Southeast Asia, music was what inexorably linked us to “my generation.” We sang along to the Beatles, Nancy Sinatra, Marty Robbins and the Temptations before we went to war, and we listened to them after we came back home.

Music was more than just background for us. It was our lifeline, a link to our existence “back in the world,” connecting us with the things that enabled us, as the Impressions urged us, to “keep on pushing.” From the peaks of the Central Highlands and the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta to the “air-conditioned jungles” of Danang and Long Binh (where I served as an information specialist in 1970-71), soldiers used music to build community, stay connected to the home front and hold on to the humanity the war was trying to take away. The hits were our hits: “I Feel-Like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag,” “Fortunate Son” — and the song more than one Vietnam veteran has called “our national anthem,” the Animals’ “We Gotta Get Out of This Place.”

And once we returned home, music became essential to our healing.

Historians of the ’60s have recognized the importance of music as a lens for understanding movements, attitudes and opinions. For Vietnam veterans and those who listen to their stories, the iconic music of the 1960s and early ’70s provides access to a truer, deeper story of what Vietnam meant, and continues to mean.

It worked the other way, too — Vietnam and the dizzying changes accompanying it in America altered the music, the musicians and the messages. You could hear it in the difference between “I Get Around” and “Good Vibrations”; between “She Loves You” and “Happiness Is a Warm Gun”; between “Please Please Please” and “Say It Loud — I’m Black and I’m Proud”; between the Shangri-Las and Grace Slick.

With the crucial exception of combat, music was ubiquitous in Vietnam, reaching soldiers via albums, cassettes and tapes of radio shows sent from home; on the Armed Forces Vietnam Network, featuring songs from stateside Top 40 stations; and on the legendary, if short-lived, underground broadcasts of Radio First Termer, a pirate station operated out of Saigon. Soldiers played it in their hooches on top-of-the-line tape decks they'd purchase cheap at the PX or via mail order from Japan; they listened to it over headphones in helicopters and planes.
Sometimes the music was live: soldiers strumming out Bob Dylan and Curtis Mayfield songs at base camps; Filipino bands pounding out "Proud Mary" and "Soul Man" at enlisted-men's clubs and Saigon bars; touring acts from Bob Hope and Ann-Margret to Nancy Sinatra and James Brown granting momentary calm. And on many a weary war night, Hanoi Hannah, the North Vietnamese equivalent of World War II's Tokyo Rose, would play classic tunes by Ray Charles and B. B. King as she encouraged G.I.s to lay down their weapons.

They were the same songs our friends were listening to back home, but the music took on different, and often deeper, meanings in Vietnam. Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" became an anthem to the grunts who humped endless miles on patrol in the jungles, adding layers of meaning to the story of a young woman turning the tables on her cheating boyfriend. Likewise, the Jimi Hendrix Experience's "Purple Haze" meant one thing in an LSD-friendly dorm room and another to troops who associated it with the color of the smoke grenades used to guide helicopters into landing zones. "Ring of Fire," "Nowhere to Run," "Riders on the Storm" — all of them shifted shape in relation to the war.

The meaning of songs often changed for individual vets whose personal (and in several cases, political) perspectives underwent seismic shifts in the years during and after the war. The dynamic was complicated by music's peculiar status as both a center of political or cultural resistance and a manifestation of America's high-tech supremacy. That Barry McGuire's hit song "Eve of Destruction," which railed against injustice and nuclear war in 1965, was quickly countered by Sgt. Barry Sadler's "The Ballad of the Green Berets," the No. 1 song of 1966, is as much a reflection of the shifting politics of the country as it is about changes in musical tastes. Likewise, "For What It's Worth" by Buffalo Springfield, the song frequently played to accompany film depictions of antiwar protests, had nothing to do with Vietnam per se — Stephen Stills wrote it about a riot on the Sunset Strip — yet it was as treasured by scores of Vietnam soldiers as it was by protesters in America.

Opposition to the draft helped fuel the sounds of protest — "Draft Dodger Rag," "Universal Soldier," "It Ain't Me Babe." But they were songs we G.I.s knew and often sang in Vietnam. While researching our book, my co-author, Craig Werner, and I heard poignant stories from Vietnam veterans about listening to a fellow soldier play "Masters of War" or "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" in Vietnam. Neil Young's "Ohio" resonated in ways political and personal, too, since many of us Vietnam-era soldiers were the same age as the students killed at Kent State — and the National Guardsmen who fired at them. Just about all the guys I served with in Vietnam in 1970 and 1971 laughed at Edwin Starr's "War" because we knew better than he did that it was good for "absolutely nothin'."

Many of those tensions and crosscurrents came to a head around Country Joe McDonald, the guiding spirit of Country Joe and the Fish, whose unplanned, slightly reluctant performance of "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag" at Woodstock in August 1969 placed a veteran's perspective on Vietnam at the center of musical protest. When Craig and I met Joe at the North Berkeley BART station in 2008 to interview him for our book, he introduced himself by saying, "I consider myself a veteran first and a hippie second."

Although the pro-war "hawks" who flooded him with hate mail — he still receives it — were unaware of the crucial fact that Joe McDonald was a Navy veteran, one who'd realized that, as he put it, "all military experience, all combat experience universally is the same — not good/bad, moral/immoral. I believe if we had the music of all these different armies, all the infantries everywhere, you'd have the same attitude expressed within their songs that we expressed in ours."

Returning to the Bay Area after his discharge from the Navy, Joe threw himself into the growing counterculture. In the summer of 1965 he wrote the song that even today is an anthem of the antiwar movement, yet holds a special resonance for Vietnam veterans, a point we heard again and again from the hundreds of Vietnam veterans we've interviewed.

"The song was irreverent but not political," Joe explained. "It blames leaders and parents, not soldiers. It's not a pacifist song; it's a soldier's song." The most radical line in the song, he added, "is, 'Be the first one on your block to have your boy come home in a box.' It's military humor that only a soldier could get away with. It's a soldier's song from a soldier's background and point of view. It comes out of a tradition of G.I. humor in which people can bitch in a way that will not get them in trouble and that also keeps them from insanity that can be experienced during war."

As the war ground on and the casualties mounted, music became even more essential for troops and veterans struggling to express their feelings and understand the politics of the war, and politics in general. The war was coming to an end, and those of us still there, and the veterans who were already back home, understood that it would be music that helped us reintegrate into civilian life. As Michael Kramer observes in "The Republic of Rock," the music of the 1960s and early '70s gave the generation "a sonic framework for thinking, feeling, discussing and dancing out the vexing problems of democratic togetherness and individual liberation."

If you were fortunate enough to return home from Vietnam, music echoed through those secret places where you stored memories, including some you never shared with your parents, spouse or children for decades. Music was the key to survival and a path to healing, the center of a human story that's too often lost in the haze of politics and myth that surrounds Vietnam.