

Musicians Beat Journalists to the Story of the Sixties

Raylee Foster

Baylor University

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Brad Owens

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The evolution of journalism in America has always been intertwined with the desires of the public majority. As much as the media shapes the public exposed to it, the media is equally shaped by the people they sell to. In the 1960's however, it was not the journalist who influenced the public, but the musician. Artists like Bob Dylan and bands like the Beatles wrote lyrics that spoke to an upset, young generation, and songs like 'We Shall Overcome' encouraged political and social change (Berger, 2000). It was the artists of this time that spoke to what many journalists felt, and in the aftermath of this politically and socially charged era emerged the 'New Journalism' in which journalists were able to participate in the activism of the time. Musicians set the stage, and journalists later followed in their footsteps.

The 1960's were an active time in the history of the United States. With major political events such as the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the rise in feminism, this era was filled with unrest. This era was marked by "protests and violence, whether war, repression, civil unrest, or gross deprivation, but they were also repleted with family values. It was a period of radical protest, both political and cultural, institutional and idiosyncratic," (Heilbrunner, 2016, p. 689). During this time period, it was the younger generation, the 'baby-boomers' who became engaged in advocacy for justice and human rights causes — and it was this generation that the music of the 1960's touched most. With evident social movement, it would be assumed that protest would take place, however the primary method of advocacy was through the messages found in songs (Heilbrunner, 2016). The music of the 1960's was called "Rock n' Roll", and it reflected the young generations "negotiation of and resistance to its conditions of existence, against anything

which is “square”: routine, expected, normative and conformist. In its sounds rock music expresses rage, alienation, anomie, anxiety, anger and fear,” (Regev, 1994, p. 91). This era’s opposition to conformity from younger generations marked the late 1900’s, and “ the counterculture was composed mainly of teenagers and people in their twenties who believed the Establishment was rotten to the core” (Transatlantic, 2013, p. 152).

1960’s Music and the Target Audience

Music during this time underwent a drastic transition, both lyrically and performatively, which reflected the social climate. Rock music in many ways became recognized as ‘protest music’ and, along with those who created the songs, became “an educative or public pedagogical form and practice, seeking to transform society,” (Haycock, 2015, p. 433). While the music itself did not directly result in social action, it did inspire a generation to become conscious of social shortcomings which eventually caused a change in behaviors toward political and social issues (Haycock, 2015). The framing of protest music also strongly effected the results in public response to the messages written.

Lyrical Impact of Music in the 1960’s

Protest songs were written with rhetorical lyrics, which would engage audiences through the use of logos, pathos and ethos. Additionally, rhetorical lyric models “attempt to either convince or to reinforce for the listeners that their topical matter is, or should be, of significant importance to him/her,” (Berger, 2000, p. 59). The rhetorical nature of protest music, however, is not dependent on the intentions of artists when creating and producing their songs, rather it can be observed in the response it gains from listeners (Wilkowski, 2015).

One artist recognized for his lyrical protests during this era was Bob Dylan, a singer-songwriter who began with folk music and transitioned to rock later in his career. The

power and influence of Dylan's music was rooted in his lyrics, as "political music is an accessible form of cultural expression, which has the ability to critically mirror and reflect upon the contemporary reality by way of its lyrics, album covers, and live performances," (Laan, 2020, p. 10). Dylan's music has become a representation of the 60's era for many journalists and historians, and is recognized as the "quintessential "protest" singer" (Dreier, 2011). His work was so influential because in a three year period, he "wrote about two dozen politically oriented songs whose creative lyrics and imagery reflected the changing mood of the postwar baby-boom generation and the urgency of the civil rights and antiwar movements" (Dreier, 2011). One of his most impactful songs, "Blowin' in the Wind" touched the hearts of listeners through lyrics that "reflected a mood of concern about the country's overall direction, including the beating of civil rights demonstrators and the escalating nuclear arms race" (Dreier, 2011). Dylan's music was able to connect with listeners through its clear imagery, which defined and categorized the emotions the listeners were unable to pinpoint (Brandon et al., 2017).

The lyrics of protest music through genres like rock and folk music played an especially crucial role in expanding the amount of politically involved people during the 1960's. Protest music essentially lowered the entrance threshold for activism in the 1960's by making it more appealing to be socially conscious (Haycock, 2015). Instead of seeking out political contents through news media and government officials, an awareness of all that was happening in the world became accessible through the messages in popular songs.

Another way lyrics reached the hearts of listeners was through their presentation during the Freedom Summer of 1964. During this period, songs would "be taught in the moment of performance: one person would serve as the song leader, "lining out" each verse of the song to the group, who would then sing it together," (Vandagriff, 2015, p. 335). People were able to find

a group identity through the songs they were singing, which created stronger support for their beliefs. Music during this era became a means of expression, and artists were the advocates. Music was a tool for sharing a message and promoting change, because “as a universal language that transcends cultural barriers, music is a medium where people and artists alike can have their voices heard in a manner that words alone cannot,” (Higa, n.d.). Through lyrics that became relatable for the individual, people were able to build community around others who sought out similar messages.

Performative Impact of Music in the 1960's

Not only did lyrics inspire engagement, but the performances themselves during the 1960's were set apart from what was traditionally expected. Performances reflected the messages they were conveying, and often became more theatrical and emotional than other performances during that time period. Artists felt the music they created, and they showed this to their audiences during their time on stages. This shift changed musical norms, because “performances at that time became more aggressive, cynical and prone to violence, rejecting conformity. Musical aesthetics and rules were sacrificed for the political message,” (Heilbrunner, 2016, p. 692). With this shift in performance came a shift in listener/viewers ability to connect on an emotional level with the artists, and subsequently connect to their message.

Another key component of the performances in the protest music culture were the festivals. These “formulated the cultural rebellion and counterculture in communal form. The transistor radio and the great rock festivals pulled the counterculture together time and again—as pilgrimages, camp meetings, and revivals of the faithful” (Transatlantic, 2013, p. 165). By providing opportunities to gather, the protest music of the 1960's spurred on the political unrest

of the younger generation. It was not just the message in the lyrics that created social and political change, it was the means by which it was provided.

Journalists and Their Attempt to Follow Music Culture

The 1960's were recognized as "an era of swirling change and social protest, with rock music, as Melody Maker announced in 1968, 'the last medium not totally controlled by business interests'," (Bindas & Houston, 1989, p. 1). While rock artists had the freedom to express their emotions and opinions without regulation, journalists did not share the same luxury. Even rock artists struggled at times to overcome the regulations in the media industry, as "The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) restricted air play of some rock songs, warning radio stations that they could face legal action for airing lyrics deemed inappropriate for broadcast. Radio and TV stations were unwilling to accept any controversial rock songs, especially antiwar songs, for fear of FCC retribution," (Bindas & Houston, 1989, p. 8).

Journalist during the 1960's were creating a movement of their own. The journalism industry had long abided by the standard of objectivity, however the social climate of the 1960's, spurred on by protest music, was inspiring journalists toward what would become a new industry norm.

Anti-Establishment and the Credibility Gap

The 1960's protest music encouraged opposition to the establishment, but some songs contained lyrics that directly opposed the press as an establishment. Songs like 'Waist Deep In The Bugle Muddy' highlighted the ways newspapers only brought rage, and referred to Lyndon Johnson as 'the big fool'. As a result to an impending performance of this song on air in 1967, "CBS executives canceled the performance holding the 'position that the song's reference to the 'big fool' was disrespectful and should not be broadcast on prime time show'," (Miller, 1997, pp.

7–8). This battle between censorship through broadcast and the FCC only added to the distrust of media, and therefore the distrust of journalists and newspapers.

Distrust in the opinions of journalists and media outlets was not new to the social climate in the 1960's. People in the United States have “‘blamed it on the press’ for a long time. They have felt grave doubts about the press long before social media, at times when politics was polarized and times when it was not, and even before the broad disillusionment with established institutional authority that blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s, when young people were urged not to trust anybody ‘over thirty.’” (Schudson, 2022, p. 144). The opposition to older ways of thinking, as well as anti-establishment mentality, was what created a strong ‘credibility gap’ for the journalism industry in the 1960's. Newspapers were struggling financially, and had made every effort to hold on to both business demands and public demands for objectivity (Daly, 2018). However, “like many other established institutions in the late 1960's, the press had become a political battleground. As historians have shown, nearly all sources of traditional authority were being challenged during this era,” (Pressman, 2017, p. 97). It was up to journalists and their editors to regain public trust and remain afloat.

Popular papers began attempting to cover the movement carried by music. These bigger papers, including the New York Times, made an effort to report on anti-establishment perspectives. Internally, there became conflict between young journalists and editors. This challenge was because editors, “generally older, more cautious, and more wedded to the concept of objectivity— had the power to dole assignments, change the text of articles, write headlines and determine how prominently stories were displayed,” (Pressman, 2017, pp. 105–106) while newer, younger journalists sought to join in on the advocacy of the nation.

The Evolution of the Industry

Journalists began to follow in the footsteps of the musicians before them. The reporters sought outlets to share their opinions and inspire a generation hungry for a cause to fight for. While well-known newspapers continued to introduce anti-establishment ideas into their reporting, “other people, operating far from Manhattan and its slick, high-paying magazine world, were creating new publications around the country that would also help to sustain the New Journalism,” (Daly, 2018, p. 342). This New Journalism was one in which journalists were allowed a voice, an opinion, and the ability to become a part of the story. With younger Americans protesting the conformity of the establishment, this revolutionary New Journalism brought back a trust, and “gone was the understatement and detachment of Lippman or Murrow. Instead journalists could have feelings,” (Daly, 2018, p. 343).

These new publications, with new rules, were able to focus primarily on reaching an ‘on fire’ generation. This was a powerful transition for the industry, as “42 percent of eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds were ‘radical’ and that these were ‘the ones who are gaining power; the ones who will lead the group; and the ones who will influence and shape the opinions of the under-18 group’,” (Pressman, 2017, p. 110).

Journalism and Music overlapping

With the prevalence of music in the young culture of the 1960’s, and its deep political and social impacts, some individuals began to believe it deserved a proper place in the papers of the time. Instead of allowing ‘underground’ papers to influence the ‘baby-boomer’ generation, real, trustworthy papers were going to need to begin taking music seriously, however “these ‘underground’ or ‘alternative’ papers were usually printed on cheap newsprint, and they were often sustained by ads for rock concerts, rolling papers, and head shops. In every issue they carried and implied challenge to the straight media,” (Daly, 2018, p. 342). These underground

papers not only had the contents and stories the young audience sought, but had advertisements they would give attention to as well. More official media organizations began to establish themselves with hopes of accomplishing the same mission as the underground press; to challenge the traditional journalism, and to report on music and culture. Publications that focused on music were able to reach their target audience with impressive swiftness, as “young people in this period followed the popular music world’s development with intense interest. Music papers reached an extraordinary number of readers,” (Glen, 2012, p. 6).

These new above ground publications attracted younger audiences, and “in this category were the village Voice strongest in political and personal journalism, and it is attention to life in New York City, and Rolling Stones, which found gold in servicing the rock and youth culture,” (Dickstein, 1976, p. 859). Of the music magazines that appeared during the 1960’s, none were more influential than Jann Wenner’s Rolling Stones, and “for him, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and local bands like the Grateful Dead were hugely important cultural figures who deserved an outlet that took them seriously. ‘There was nothing called rock journalism as a profession,’ Wenner says. ‘If you picked up Billboard, you might get a sense of the music business, but you wouldn’t keep it as part of your regular diet if you were interested in rock & roll’,”(Greene, 2017).

Not only did publications need to adapt to the change, but journalists needed to adapt as well. Reporters like Robert Christgau and Richard Goldstein “navigated the quickly developing rock music industry with a passion that fit with those heady literary times, when writers like Susan Sontag, Tom Wolfe, Ellen Willis, Truman Capote, Pauline Kael, and others were stretching the boundaries of what counted as journalism, fiction, and arts criticism,” (Harvey, 2013). These journalists were able to bring a new tone, a new reach, to the realm of journalism

— and in doing so were able to gain the trust of a new audience. An audience of skeptics, rock-heads, and anti-establishment youths. As journalism expanded its reach to include the music press, journalists in their effort to follow the trend attempted to adapt as best as possible, however, ultimately “there is no one-size-fits-all description of a music journalist’s job, but there is one thing all music journalists spend a great deal of time doing: listening. Whatever their angle, all music journalists aim to absorb, analyze, and evaluate an artist’s work and its place in the culture,” (“Music Journalist,” n.d.).

Conclusion

Journalists have worn many hats in the history of the United States. Sometimes they created stories, sometimes they became stories themselves. During the 1960’s journalists were forced to ‘hold their hats’ and chase a generation who was inspired by stories — however these stories were not found in the pages of a newspaper, rather they were sung on stages. Musicians in the 1960’s were positioned in such a way that they not only had the popularity, but also the freedom, to speak out on their opinions and influence a young generation that had been feeling the same.

Through lyrics that spoke to the injustices overseas in Vietnam, at home with race and women, and everything in between, musicians were able to put words to the feelings of the ‘baby-boomer’ generation. Additionally, these performances were often done in such a way that the artist’s emotions were on display. Through angry movements and painful outcry, musicians were able to connect to their audiences. These performances were also often done in festival settings, giving individuals the opportunity to be brought together and reminded of the fight they were so passionate about. This group identity was heightened through performers use of call/response style groupings.

While musicians carried the cultural change in this time period, journalists struggled to keep up. Many individuals of the younger generation viewed the press as a part of the establishment they so fervently opposed. Journalists and newspapers alike needed to adapt to this newfound opinion and regain the trust of their audience. Reporters decided to turn away from the tradition that won the approval of the conservative-minded older generation and embrace a new reporting that created space for opinions, involvement, and advocacy. This became the New Journalism. Underground press also began appearing, focusing on rock culture and finding funding with similar advertisements. This resulted in the establishment of magazines such as the Rolling Stones, who began reporting on rock culture in an official, respectable way. This change made to the journalism industry in the 1960's has carried into the journalism culture today. Opinion, advocacy and controversy have all become aspects of journalism. While music itself did not directly cause a culture shift, and as a result a shift in journalism, it most certainly spurred on a movement from a spark to a flame.

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