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**Peace, Love, and Politics: How Woodstock of 1969 Epitomized the Relationship Between
Social Movements and Music**

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Abstract

This research analyzes the role that music plays in social movements in the United States, focusing on Woodstock of 1969 as a pivotal moment. By examining the 1969 Woodstock through an academic lens, I illustrate the intrinsic relationship that exists between music and politics, specifically through social movements. First, I explore the relationship that music and politics have had historically and extrapolate why they are interconnected. Then, I dissect two different movements, paralleling them from their roots to present day, analyzing the integral role that music has had in them. Those movements include the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter, and the Anti-War Movement with the never-ending War on Terror. This project hopes to not only highlight the important role that music plays in a substantive sense as well as expound the ebb and flow in the proliferation of protest music.

Keywords: music, politics, Woodstock, social movements

Introduction

A Whimsical Village and a Legendary Event

Nestled in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains in Upstate New York lies a small arts colony called Woodstock. Established in 1787, the colony attracted painters and musicians alike and quickly garnered a reputation as a hippie arts commune of sorts. It became the home of music festivals such as the Maverick Festivals and the Woodstock Sound-Outs. As time went on,

the small village also served as a secluded oasis for legendary musicians such as folk artist Bob Dylan.¹

In the 1960s, music producer Michael Lang had his interest piqued in a particular growing phenomenon in the music industry—festivals. After planning the relatively successful Miami Pop Festival in 1968, Lang moved to Woodstock and met musician and producer Artie Kornfeld. The two were inspired by the chaotic nature of the 60s and wanted to plan a festival and open a record studio in Woodstock to commemorate the proliferation of events for the decade.

The two linked with industry financiers Joel Rosenman and John Roberts, who thought that a festival would serve as a perfect fundraising opportunity to fund the studio. After some deliberation, the four set on a new path, with their sights now set primarily on the festival. The four formed the Woodstock Ventures Incorporated and started planning. Kornfeld had worked with heavy-hitters like Sonny and Cher, and thus became instrumental in the realization of what would soon be Woodstock of 1969.

At nearly every stage of planning, the Ventures were faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Originally, the men planned to hold the event at a venue located in Wallkill, south of Woodstock. Through Kornfeld's connections, they secured their first big ticket act: Creedence Clearwater Revival (CCR). Once CCR joined the Woodstock lineup, other big names began to trickle in.

¹ "Woodstock, New York," Wikipedia, Wikipedia contributors, accessed July 17, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:CiteThisPage&page=Woodstock%2C New York&id=879456899](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Special:CiteThisPage&page=Woodstock%2C%20New%20York&id=879456899)

As the festival began to look larger than life, town officials in Wallkill got spooked. Consequently, they passed legislation making it impossible for the festival to take place there. With only a month left before the planned start date of August 16th, the Ventures were left without a venue. Without a venue, there would be no Woodstock. Finding a venue, then, became the men's primary focus. All else—security, food, sanitation, proper ticket collection—was secondary. In a wild stroke of luck, a dairy farmer local to Bethel Woods volunteered a small portion of his acreage. Unbeknownst to him, Max Yasgur was sowing himself into the mystifying Woodstock history.

With a venue secured, the men went ahead with planning. Nothing tangible improved, and by the time August 15th rolled around, they were not adequately prepared for the hordes of people about to descend on Yasgur's small dairy farm. Very quickly the Ventures realized that they were in way over their heads. It is estimated that nearly a million people attempted to attend Woodstock, and 500,000 made it to the field in Bethel Woods. The traffic that ensued was so bad that it backed up the Thruway for five days after the festival ended. Once the masses reached the field, Kornfeld and Lang realized they had no way to collect tickets and announced that Woodstock would be a free event. When asked about the funding for planning an event of this nature, Lang was extremely casual about the matter. "I don't know what the returns will be", he said, "up to what it's cost or not, but the point is that it's happening".²

In spite of the incredulous lack of organization and a weekend filled with rain, Woodstock of '69 occurred without any major tragedies. Infrastructure was so terribly planned that there was not even food for the festival—at one point, the Red Cross had to intervene to airdrop food for the festivalgoers. Sanitation also never arrived, meaning there were no proper

² Michael Wadleigh, "Woodstock," March 1970

bathrooms. The weather did not grant the Ventures a break either—it rained horribly, threatening the precarious sound set up and turning the steep hill into a giant mud pit. Allen Hindin, and attendee, described the weather as something sort of ethereal:

You had a whole field of people chanting ‘No Rain’. It was just echoing all over the place. It was classic...There was no way to stop the rain. It was like chanting ‘No War’.³

That anecdote sums up why Woodstock of 1969 ended up being so historic and important. The fruition of the festival did not happen in a vacuum; it was influenced, and ultimately made possible, by the tumultuous decade that preceded it. Among the rubble stems this research.

Most pertinently, was the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. Both of these lent themselves well to the rising Hippie Movement, which was Woodstock’s largest target audience. By the time 1969 had rolled around, the Tet Offensive had shattered the country’s trust in the government about our involvement in the Vietnam War and it seemed the country was finally ready to accept legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1965. The distrust of the government and the ripeness for equality paved the way for Woodstock of 1969 to be the monumental success that it was.

As important as it may have been, though, we know that Woodstock did not stop the Vietnam War, nor did civil injustice end in 1970. Woodstock did, though, serve as an alternative catharsis for the political and social pressures that existed in the country at this time. Woodstock and the music that was a part of it helped keep the country together at a time when many thought that it could fall apart at any moment.

Everything about Woodstock was contrived to cater to those who identified with the Hippie movement, whose centerpiece was withdrawal from Vietnam and dismantling the draft.

³ Wall text, *Woodstock & The Sixties*, Bethel Woods Center for the Arts, Bethel Woods, NY.

Bob Dylan, one of the main inspirations for the music choice at the event, was one of the pioneers of antiwar folk music. His songs had become anthems for both the antiwar movement as well as the Civil Rights Movement.⁴ While CCR being the first name to sign onto the lineup was important for credibility reasons, it was also symbolic. While CCR's Billboard hit "Bad Moon Rising" did not contain a political message, their song "Fortunate Son", which was released the same year, placed them right in the antiwar movement.⁵

The most memorable performances of Woodstock were those which contained a political message. Jimi Hendrix's pained rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner remains one of the most iconic of all time. Fifty years later, we have not had an event come close to the magnitude of Woodstock in terms of political and social power. How did music enable Woodstock, and how does it continue to facilitate other social movements? Woodstock was the perfect storm in many ways, and the oversaturation of politics in music and in the personal lives of Americans in the 60s led to one of the greatest displays of music working in harmony with social movements. Once those in power saw the success of Woodstock, though, capitalism took hold and music has become very separated from the political sphere.

Scholarly work on the importance of Woodstock is scarce, and most academic work that does exist is anecdotal in nature. This paper seeks to explore the different ways in which music can bolster social movements as well as how we can measure what makes any movement successful, using music's transition into the mainstream as a gauge. I do this by analyzing two

⁴ Janou Kraaijvanger, "Bob Dylan as a Political Dissenter," (Bachelor's thesis, Radboud University 2017), 10

⁵ "Creedence Clearwater Revival," Billboard, accessed July 17, 2019
<https://www.billboard.com/music/creedence-clearwater-revival>

movements of the 1960s and their modern counterparts; the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter, and the antiwar protests against Vietnam and the War on Terror.

Music and Social Movements

The History of Music and Politics

Many scholars, when studying social movements, relegate cultural phenomena like music as secondary factors, regarding them as byproducts rather than integral elements of the movements. While music exists largely today in a superficial sense, bubble gum pop was not what music was predestined to be. In early European times, music was strictly religious, written for royal courts and the church. The scales which now make up the basics of music were structured around religious conventions. For instance, an augmented fourth/diminished fifth interval was banned because it was thought to be the ‘devil’s tritone’, or in Latin, *diabolus in musica*.⁶

Because music was part of the dominant political structure, it had a clear political role in supporting prevailing interests and values. It was not until the late nineteenth century that music was even accessible to anybody outside of religious elites. Once music did begin to become secular, it belonged to aristocrats. Secular music was contrived by patrons, with musicians confined to compose by contracts. Because most patrons demanded new pieces frequently, musicians began composing pieces using formulas to be able to finish within the given time constraints. While this time feels very far away from where the music industry is today, the system has nearly come full circle.

⁶ Judith Kogan, “The Unsettling Sound of Tritones, The Devil’s Interval,” *NPR Music*, accessed on July 17, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/31/560843189/the-unsettling-sound-of-tritones-the-devils-interval>

Today, while there is many more artists on the market than back in the Classical Era, almost every song that finds its way on the Billboard 100 is funnelled through the same ten or so producers—Max Martin, Baauer, Mike Will Made It, to name a few. These producers work for big record labels, such as Sony and Universal. These labels are looking to make a profit, not to make a statement. In order to meet the market's demands, artists sign contracts which obligate them to release a certain number of tracks per year. So, the cycle continues. Popular music has yet again fallen into the same formulaic structures—it is where we get 'bubble gum pop'. Easily consumable, tied up in pretty little packages. Before, there had to be composers who were brave enough to defy their patrons and take a risk on themselves. Today, there is no financial guarantee—and in fact poses more of a risk than a benefit—from being an independent artists and turning down record deals. Sometimes a Mozart does rise up and write what they truly want, but Mozart was also mostly posthumously famous.

When music is contrived by elites behind the scenes, the masses become relatively unaware of everything that's out there, especially in counterculture. This was especially true in the 60s, when there was no such thing as a streaming service, and we certainly did not have unlimited access to all of the world's music at our fingertips. Woodstock helped bring counterculture into the mainstream, in part because it showed people types of music that they had not previously aware of. The antiwar messages that saturated the folk and rock featured in music resonated heavily with the majority of Americans.

Music has always informed public life, beginning in the late 19th century, and musical performance came to represent a type of political participation. According to John Street, Seth Hague, and Heather Savigny, who have conducted research on music, musicians and non-governmental public action, political participation not only includes taking part in action aimed

at influencing public policy, such as by voting or demonstrating, but also include “speech acts” in which people engage in debate and deliberation about public matters.⁷

For Street, Hague, and Savigny, whether or not one is willing to accept music and other forms as valid forms of political expressions depends largely on one’s definition of the ‘public sphere’. For the case presented here, the most helpful definition of the public sphere comes from the philosophy of Jurgen Habermas, who argues that the public sphere is not constrained strictly to public discourse:

...a condition of the public sphere is the ways in which art and culture are separated from dominant religious and political structures as they become products made available through the market. For Habermas, a condition of the public sphere is the ways in which art and culture are separated from dominant religious and political structures as they become products made available through the market. Art and culture assume meanings that are not confined to their place in some pre-designated order.⁸

Habermas was no stranger to music’s historically elitist role in society. He points out that up until the late 18th century, music existed solely for religious or courtly ceremonies. Musicians mostly composed for commission and lacked much creative freedom. It, then, *only* existed in a political sense. Once music became accessible to the general public, its political connection continued. There is much value in what the market (comprised of the general public) deems to be valuable and what meaning they apply to cultural byproducts such as music.⁹

Movements That Rely on Music

Thus, studying music as an integral element of political and social movements does in fact make sense. Music has become a central organizing point for movements such as the anti-war movement in the 1960s that led to Woodstock, as well as more modern radical movements

⁷ John Street, Seth Hague, and Heather Savigny, “Playing to the Crowd: The Role of Music and Musicians in Political Participation,” in *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, (May 2008), 3-4.

⁸ Street, Hague, and Savigny, “Playing to the Crowd,” 4.

⁹ Street et al., 5.

such as White Power. However, due to the corporatization of the music industry, it has become increasingly difficult for artists to make meaningful political pieces. Capitalism has, effectually, begun to strangle protest music as we once knew it. Movements such as white Power are largely outliers, and music's ability to still influence them tells us when music is most effective in mobilizing social movements.

Before delving into how music has worked with movements, we must first clarify what a social movement actually is. Scholar Atsuko Sato describes social movements as originally being thought of as “irrational, sometimes hysterical, and invariably threatening political phenomena.”¹⁰ Today, though, the definition is much broader and much less radical. Now, Sato offers this definition:

Social movements can be viewed as collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in the condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living.¹¹

This definition is especially fitting for our case here. People living in the 60s felt as though the country could crumble at any moment and felt extremely dissatisfied and disillusioned with the government—especially after the Tet Offensive.

Scholars Ugo Corte and Bob Edwards have studied just how essential music has been in the dissemination and growth of the White Power movement. They argue that music has been essential in recruiting new members, particularly amongst the youth, as well as establishing a more collective identity for the movement and harnessing financial resources.¹²

¹⁰ Atsuko Sato, “What Makes a Social Movement?: Understanding the Rise and Success of Social Movements,” in *Doing Comparative Politics: An Introduction to Approaches and Issues*, (Lynne Reiner Publishers: Boulder, CO) 2006. 235.

¹¹ Sato, “What Makes a Social Movement?”, 236.

¹² Ugo Corte and Bob Edwards, “White Power Music and the Mobilization of Racist Social Movements,” in *Music and Arts in Action*, (June 2008), 7-8.

They also find that there are three broad elements that make music more effective. First, the music is oppositional and represents people who believe that they are persecuted. Many who subscribe to the White Power movement do so because of some perceived repression. They feel as though they are taking action, against a large conspiracy that is working against them and the music makes them feel empowered in doing so.¹³

The second element that makes music more effective is authenticity. Not only does this factor help describe why the music becomes integral to a movement, it also helps explain why other music *does not* succeed in mobilization. Often it is said in White Power Internet pages that White Power musicians are literally passing up millions of dollars by not selling out, by not diluting their image and message. According to their fans, White Power musicians would certainly reach mainstream success, except that they are true believers in the cause and unwilling to compromise.¹⁴

The Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter

Music has been a central aspect of African American political culture since as early as the 1800s. IN early nineteenth century New Orleans, slaves were allotted free time on Sundays to do as they pleased, and they quickly found themselves claiming a park on the edge of the city as their meeting place. This park became known as Congo Square, and is known to many as the birthplace of jazz. We only know about these gatherings because of a few drawings and writings from early African American scholars who attended them.¹⁵ While we may not know everything about the happenings at Congo Square, we do know that music became integral to them.

¹³ Corte and Edwards, "White Power Music", 10.

¹⁴ Core and Edwards, 11.

¹⁵ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*

Most slaves were torn away from their families, left alone in a foreign land—music was one of the only things that could not be stripped from them once they were enslaved. They were not allowed to play instruments or participate in musical activities outside of Congo Square, but some did come up with field hollers and work songs. Slave owners had grown weary of music among the slaves, as drums had been used to signal attacks on the white population previously during rebellions.¹⁶ On Sundays at Congo Square, though, they were able to play and dance freely. The city of New Orleans officials designated the space official in 1817 in an “exemplary degree of tolerance”.¹⁷

These early displays epitomized music as a political act. Slaves were acting politically by attending the gatherings in Congo Square every Sunday and performing, whether it was through dance or through drums. Black performance is especially inherently political, because being African American is political by itself. American culture has continuously fetishized and ostracized black music, as we can see in modern times with genres such as rock in the mid-1900s and hip hop today.

The early music that stemmed from slavery times was still prominent during the Civil Rights Era. “We Shall Overcome”, for instance, played an important role in many different events in the 60s. Dr. Martin Luther King sang it frequently during marches, and there was a powerful moment at the highly volatile Democratic Nominating Conference in 1968 where the crowd broke out in song in the midst of all the chaos.

As scholar William G. Roy illustrates in his book titled *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*, what those in the movements are doing to/with the music matters just as much. During the 1960s, songs that were emblematic of the

¹⁶ Gioia *The History Jazz*. 7.

¹⁷ Gioia, 7.

Civil Rights Movement seldom gained mainstream attention, and ensuring their commercial success was not on the members of the movement's minds of the musicians at all. However, as Roy points out, what mattered was the fact that both people of color and whites were joining together and singing—it was unifying, and a powerful display of the hope for equality.

Antiwar Protests and the War on Terror

Music's involvement in movements involving war has seen a much more interesting progression. Music went from spreading messages of peace to becoming patriotic soldier songs. Unlike other movements such as civil rights, the messages behind movements that confront war have become more fractured.

In the 1960s, the one of the biggest points of contempt between the people and the government was with the draft. Many felt that elites were able to dodge the draft—referenced in CCR's "Fortunate Son", confronting elites who were getting their sons out of the draft while others were much less fortunate.

Today is much different. The war in the Middle East has, up until this point, been totally voluntary (although there is much debate on the preying of poverty-stricken kids with recruitment officers in underprivileged areas, but that is a different paper). So, when Bruce Springsteen and Dave Grohl perform "Fortunate Son" at a Veteran's Day event, it is understandable why there is so much conservative uproar.

Jimi Hendrix was not vilified for being unpatriotic when he played his iconic rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner. It was not seen as an attack on America, but a powerful and poignant commentary on the state of the country.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this year, Michael Lang announced that an official Woodstock 50th Anniversary show was in the works. Shortly after, an epic lineup was announced, featuring some of today's most politically outspoken artists.

Fast forward to June, two months before the rendezvous, the planning has unfolded publicly, in a very chaotic, downward spiral. Investors have pulled out. Artists have canceled. Venues have denied access to their locations. While there is no way to know what will actually happen the second week of August, it is increasingly appearing that Woodstock 50th will not happen, despite Lang's most feverish efforts.

And, as it turns out, 'three days of peace and love' is likely not something that will be recreated any time in the near future. The 1960s left the following generations with a severe political burnout, and capitalism has the music industry in a death grip.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965, and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King in 1968 helped create a window of opportunity to music and social movement to come together. In 1970, just one year after the original Woodstock that famed some of the United States' most iconic protest songs, the window was slammed shut, almost symbolically with the deaths of Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix.

Capitalism effectually waters down protest music to the point where it loses all political integrity. Gone are the days of 'folk' artists, whose identity *was* protest music. Now, artists may release a handful of tracks that confront social issues, but they do not make a social issue their central persona.

All hope is not lost, though. One of the main takeaways from this research is how we can use music as a sort of social meter reading. Labels pick up music that is marketable. Woodstock showed politicians that the public overwhelmingly wanted to withdrawal from Vietnam. It also

showed record labels that people were interested in music with a message, and that it was not controversial to invest in those artists.

Woodstock was the glue that held the country together in a time where people thought the country was on the fritz. It was only possible because it was genuinely what the people wanted. That is why Woodstock remains so ethereal and mystifying, and also why recreation is likely impossible.

“Politics can be strengthened by music, but music has a potency that defies politics.”

--Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995)

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