

Woodstock Festival Music Choices

1950s

“Hound Dog” (written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, 1952, sung by Elvis Presley, 1956)

“Hound Dog” was a blues song of modest popularity before Elvis sang it; when he sang it, it won many accolades and became a top hit of the 1950s. First of all, it (like many of Elvis’s songs) carried the youthful vibrancy and sexual appeal of Elvis, sentiments that began to blossom after the seriousness of the war. The earliest baby-boomers would have reached adolescent age by this time in the mid-1950s, and its continued popularity throughout the decade showed the youthful majority of Americans in the postwar era. The emphasis on the carefree, loud nature of this song appealed to these younger audiences, who were to become the life of the “Rights Revolutions” in the next two decades — by normalizing slang such as “you ain’t” and criticism such as “that was just a lie” these youthful people of America became more rebellious, more eager to fight. Specifically, the word “hound dog” was meant to refer to a man, as if this song were sung from the perspective from an abused wife. Written in an era of improving awareness for women’s rights, with the new inventions of birth control pills and the publication of the widely-read *Feminine Mystique* eight years later, this showed young Americans that it was socially acceptable to fight back for your rights against abusive, lying “hound dog” husbands.

“Johnny B. Goode” (Chuck Berry, 1958)

“Johnny B. Goode” was an influential early rock song of the 1950s. Its contribution to rock and roll music even caused it to be included in NASA’s “Voyager Golden Record” because it was so influential to music as a whole. Like “Hound Dog,” its upbeat tune and catchy rhythm enticed the youth. What is most powerful about this piece is that it was supposed to be mostly autobiographical about black singer Chuck Berry. He writes of his humble beginnings, living in “a log cabin made of earth and wood,” probably when the countrysides became increasingly less populous and prosperous as people moved to the city to work in the manufacturing industries for WWII. But, despite these humble roots, the song goes to say that “maybe someday your name will be in lights,” emphasizing the American Dream and the potential prosperity of anyone. This highlights the economic boom in the 1950s in the beginning of the postwar era, in which the manufacturing war industry created a general economic upswing. Being such a successful and an optimistic African American singer, his message to the younger generation was especially positive: this song brightened the prospects of many Americans, both economically and morally. Arguably, its upbeat-ness helped motivate the Civil Rights Movement because of the connotations of blacks with equality and prosperity in his song.

1960s

“Stand By Me” (Ben E. King, 1960)

While “Stand By Me” is mostly seen as a lively, romantic song, it can be interpreted in a way to match the patterns of the century. To “stand by” someone means to support them, especially “whenever [he or she] is in trouble.” While a relationship goal appears to be the focus of this song, the words “Stand By Me” are very vague. They seem inviting, as if to ask others to join its cause, which

occurred in the many Rights Revolutions: a few bus boycotts and sit-ins and Civil Rights marchers grew to many thousands as people stood by each other and faced the federal government's oppression of rights in these different categories. The song even claims that "if the sky ... should tumble and fall / Or the mountain should crumble to the sea" support from another person is all that is necessary to survive. This is more meaningful because Ben E. King is African American— although he was not known to be a Civil Rights movement advocate, by being a African American artist who could top the charts (it was a #1 rated song in the US and the UK during the decade) during the Civil Rights Movement and asking for people to "Stand By [him]" it can be interpreted as a call for action against racial inequality. This is emphasized by its being in the "soul music" genre, which "combines elements of African-American gospel music, rhythm and blues and jazz" ("Soul Music - Wikipedia") and ties of the song to its African American roots.

"Bad Moon Rising" (Green River, 1968)

"Bad Moon Rising" by Green River can be interpreted in multiple ways. More literally, it shows the environmental concern of the 1960s and the "hurricanes" and "rivers overflowing." While many of the environmental protection policies (such as the creation of the EPA, the Clean Water/Air Acts, NEPA, etc.) occurred in the 1970s during Nixon's presidency, environmental concern grew steadily throughout the 1960s as industrially-caused accidents (such as deadly smog in NYC and deadly SO2 emissions near a steel plant) caused rising concern over environmental issues. This was similar to *Silent Spring*, a book raising awareness about environmental concerns caused by humans; this song could be warning that all of this "nasty weather" could occur in the near future if humans continue creating unregulated industrial waste at the rate they then did. However, the Green River Band actually stated that the terrible weather mentioned in the song also referred to the fact that "the times seemed to be in turmoil. Martin Luther King and [US senator] Robert F Kennedy had been assassinated. [They] knew it was a tumultuous time." The band probably felt that these (of the President and Civil Rights leaders, no less) caused too much chaos. This coincides with the growing level of distrust in the central government, the growing idea that radical Leftism (the Rights Revolution) has gone too far and that it should be stopped with conservatism. This leads to the rise of the conservative "silent majority" wanting peace by the end of radical liberalism.

1970s

"Imagine" (John Lennon, 1971)

"Imagine" by John Lennon is universally recognized as a pacifist call-to-action. He tells Americans to imagine the possibilities of a world that exists in peace. He tells people to "imagine no countries" and "no religion," these being the aspects by which people of different nations are separated. Specifically, in this time at the beginning of Nixon's presidency when Vietnamization is beginning to happen, this song is especially relevant as it voices the wants of the anti-war majority of American citizens. Lennon asks that the "world would be as one" — an idealistic request for a world depending almost completely on loyalties to one side or another. But however idealistic his request, it was a popular stance in the increasingly anti-war America: when people learned of the massacres of Vietnamese (e.g., at My Lai) and the bombings of Cambodia and Laos, and when the Pentagon papers were earlier the same year of the release of this song. Lennon muses that if there was "nothing to kill or

die for,” that we could reasonably “imagine all people living life in peace.” This simple, moralistic goal portrays Lennon as a stereotypical peace-loving “hippie” out of the many anti-war and pro-peace and pro-equality people (“hippies”) in the 1960s and ‘70s.

“I Will Survive” (Gloria Gaynor, 1978)

“I Will Survive” is a very passionate song about showing individual strength. It emphasizes the themes of individuality (as opposed to giving in to strong government and social influences) and women’s equality. It most literally is about how a woman changes from “thinking I could never live without [her partner] by my side” to a woman that “grew strong, and I learned how to get along.” This clearly demonstrates the increased power of a woman to control things within her own home, having more independence and less need of a husband: this corresponds with the rise of smaller families, higher divorce rates, and more single parents. While anti-feminists believe that this was destroying families, it also gave women freedom from oppressive partners. Thus this song is similar to the song “Hound Dog” from the 1950s; however, the woman’s perspective in this song in 1978, two decades later, is much more well-defined and confident, just as women in society were. They believed that they could “just walk out the door” if they needed to escape oppression. Because the phrase “I Will Survive” is so vague, it can also mean the ability to survive against an oppressive political regime. Hardy Americans braced themselves from the political manipulation scandals such as from the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate scandal, and did not get too caught up from it — they ended up “surviving” the big-government liberalism of the 1960s and the untrustworthy Nixon after his scandal and continuing enthusiastically into Ford’s and Reagan’s presidency.

Works Consulted

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