

## 'THE VIETNAM WAR' DOCUMENTARY

Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, 1963



ROWLAND SCHERMAN/GETTY IMAGES

# SOUNDTRACK TO AN ERA

Music mirrored deep, conflicting emotions of Vietnam War

By Matt Alderton

**O**N THE BATTLEFIELD, THE Vietnam War was just as shrill as the wars that came before it. But because of rock 'n' roll, it also had a sound all its own — at times joyful, sad, angry, hopeful, woeful, inspiring, fearful and forgiving. Sometimes — in The Beatles' 1970 song *Let It Be*, for example — even peaceful.

"Music is the fastest art form there is.

Two notes, and you feel something," said Ken Burns, who co-created *The Vietnam War* documentary film series, broadcast on PBS, with partner Lynn Novick. Music plays a lead role.

"The music of the time is a character in the film," said co-director Novick. "It helps you understand the experience of people living through the Vietnam War better than almost anything else."

In truth, music isn't one character in the film, it's three: *The Vietnam War: The*

*Soundtrack* includes popular music from the period, an original score by Academy Award-winning composers Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross and interpretations of traditional Vietnamese melodies arranged and recorded by Grammy Award-winning cellist Yo-Yo Ma and The Silk Road Ensemble. Each adds something special to the 10-part documentary series, the sounds of which make Vietnam reverberate in

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Ray Charles, 1964



The Beatles, 1967

America's eardrums just as loudly today as it did 50 years ago.

## LICENSED TO ROCK

Retired four-star Air Force Gen. Merrill McPeak talks about music's key role in the cultural revolution that coincided with the war, in the opening of the series' eighth episode.

"The late '60s were a kind of confluence of several rivulets," remarked McPeak, a fighter pilot who flew 269 combat missions in Vietnam. "There was the anti-war movement itself, the whole movement towards racial equality, the environment, the role of women. And the anthems for that counterculture were provided by the most brilliant rock 'n' roll music that you can imagine."

Meanwhile, The Beatles' 1968 song *While My Guitar Gently Weeps* plays hauntingly in the background, the phrase "I look at the world, and I notice it's turning" bleeding from George Harrison's vocals.

That's the kind of musical synergy Burns and Novick sought. They achieved it with the help of 120 licensed tracks from the Vietnam era.

"While there's popular music in other films we've made, this was on a very

different scale," said Sarah Botstein, who co-produced *The Vietnam War* with Burns and Novick. Acquiring the rights to use music for the film — songs such as Bob Dylan's *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* and the Rolling Stones' *Gimme Shelter* — took five years.

Among the record companies that joined the project was Universal Music Enterprises, which licensed music from The Beatles, Marvin Gaye, The Temptations and many others for the film and its soundtrack album.

"This specific project was brought to us by Jeff Jones of (The Beatles' corporate entity) Apple Corps, who had no special involvement, but had seen some of the documentary and sensed the importance. He wanted The Beatles to be included in the production and on the album — which, if nothing else, shows you the significance of this series, since The Beatles have never previously licensed their music for soundtracks," said Universal Music Enterprises president and CEO Bruce Resnikoff. "Knowing how important music would be to the telling of the Vietnam story, we knew we had to be their music partner."

Because he grew up during the Vietnam

era, Tom Rowland, the executive vice president of film and TV music at Universal Music Group, was especially enthusiastic.

"I had a cousin who was a Marine who lived with us between tours of duty when I was 12. He didn't talk a lot about the war, but he turned me on to the music of the era," he said. "He would talk about the life of a soldier. I was a big war buff, and I'd always pictured guys marching off to war with their guns. What was shocking and surprising to me as a kid was finding out that these guys didn't just have guns; they had guitars, and they'd sit around and play music during their downtime. Music was incredibly important to them. Hearing it was like getting postcards from home."

Music was as influential with protesters as it was with service members, and producers consulted both groups in



Janis Joplin, 1969

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Jimi Hendrix, 1967

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

the course of assembling the soundtrack.

"We interviewed 100 people, 80 of whom are in the final film. Before we started selecting tunes, we asked every single one of them to tell us what their 10 favorite songs from that time were," said Botstein, who added that songs' placement in the film corresponds with their release — songs in an episode about 1969 were actually on the radio in 1969.

Such fidelity to the music helps explain why legendary artists wanted to participate in *The Vietnam War*, Rowland said. "It's one thing to go watch *Baby Driver* and hear a classic song as part of the background. It's another thing to see the music in the original context of how it was heard," he said.

"The way they approached this film made being part of it an easy decision," said John McDermott of Experience Hendrix, which manages the estate of Jimi Hendrix. Several Hendrix songs were licensed for the film after the artist's sister, Janie Hendrix, spent a day previewing it with Botstein. "We saw right away that it wasn't about trading on famous names; it was about understanding what actually went on during that era. And Hendrix certainly was a part of that."

Because of the musician's iconic performance of *The Star-Spangled Banner* on the electric guitar at Woodstock in 1969 — a commentary on America that was simultaneously scathing and celebratory — some might even call him a symbol of it.

"Young people always looked at Jimi as one of the leaders of that era," McDermott said. "We've heard from countless people over the years who said he made an incredibly difficult experience more endurable. For that reason alone, this project really resonated with us."

## SETTING THE MOOD

The film's original score, composed by Reznor and Ross, is a surprising complement to the likes of Hendrix and Dylan. A discordant potpourri of severe guitars, menacing synthesizers and intriguing percussion, it's restless, raw, anxious and austere — just like the war was.

"Our film changed profoundly when we began working with Trent and Atticus," said Novick, who approached the pair after hearing their score for *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Along with Burns and Botstein, she shared with them some of the film's raw footage; sound effects from the era, like helicopter rotors; and a list of feelings

they wanted the music to convey — fear, love, panic, confusion, guilt, alienation, despair, adrenaline. Composed over two years, the score consists of 17 "themes" with titles like *The Forever Rain*, *Counting Ticks* and *Haunted*. "We wanted original music that would amplify, enhance and explain the emotional moods of the film; the music they created does that in ways we can't possibly understand," Novick said.

Cellist Ma and The Silk Road Ensemble achieve a similar effect with their contribution: a collection of traditional Vietnamese folk songs rearranged and reinterpreted during a daylong recording session that also yielded several improvisations used in the film.

"Sitting in the studio and watching Yo-Yo Ma and this group of musicians create art on the spot was one of the great joys of this project," Novick said. "They gave us some truly remarkable music."

With 18 hours of footage, there's no shortage of things to see in *The Vietnam War*. Clearly, however, the viewers who understand the war best will be those who listen as intently as they watch.

"We're very fortunate," Burns concluded. "It's one hell of a soundtrack."

THE VIETNAM WAR  
The Soundtrack

## CD 1

1. *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*, Bob Dylan
2. *Hello Vietnam*, Johnnie Wright
3. *It's My Life*, The Animals
4. *Eve Of Destruction*, Barry McGuire
5. *Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)*, The Byrds
6. *Masters Of War*, The Staple Singers
7. *Mustang Sally*, Wilson Pickett
8. *Smokestack Lightnin'*, Howlin' Wolf
9. *Backlash Blues*, Nina Simone
10. *The Sound of Silence*, Simon & Garfunkel
11. *One Too Many Mornings*, Bob Dylan

12. *Ain't Too Proud To Beg*, The Temptations

13. *Are You Experienced?*, The Jimi Hendrix Experience

14. *I'm A Man*, The Spencer Davis Group

15. *Green Onions*, Booker T and The MG's

16. *Strange Brew*, Cream

17. *Waist Deep in the Big Muddy (live)*, Pete Seeger

18. *A Whiter Shade Of Pale*, Procol Harum

19. *The Lord Is in This Place*, Fairport Convention

20. *For What It's Worth*, Buffalo Springfield

## CD 2

1. *Don't Think Twice, It's All Right*, Bob Dylan
2. *Piece Of My Heart*, Big Brother & The Holding Company, Janis Joplin
3. *Magic Carpet Ride*, Steppenwolf
4. *Tell the Truth*, Otis Redding

1. *Less Likely*
2. *Four Enclosed Walls*
3. *The Forever Rain*
4. *Remnants*
5. *Other Ways to Get to the Same Place*
6. *Torn Polaroid*
7. *Before Dawn*
8. *What Comes Back*
9. *Justified Response*

10. *Counting Ticks*
11. *A World Away*
12. *The Right Things*
13. *Passing the Point*
14. *Strangers in Lockstep*
15. *Before and After Faith*
16. *The Same Dream*
17. *Haunted*

THE VIETNAM WAR  
Original score by  
Trent Reznor and  
Atticus Ross

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