

THE SONGWRITER: ADAPTING TO THE 60's & 70's

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The intention of the songwriter changed dramatically from the 1960's to and through the 1970's. The internal and external struggles of America during these two decades played a key role in motivating the songwriter to not only resound his message, but to also find that formula for success--the hit song! It would seem imperative to chronologically review the attitudinal changes of Americans during these twenty years, and even more imperative to start with and note the significance of the Kennedy administration and assassination. Although the threat and influence of Communism pre-occupied the fears of many Americans--the effects of McCarthyism still lingering--the country felt relatively secure under its leader. Information gathered by the Gallup Poll during the early sixties revealed an almost naive outlook that Americans had concerning the future. The results of a poll released August 29, 1962 indicated that 55% of the people polled believed that life would get better as the sixties progressed; 69% believed that there would be no serious racial trouble in the succeeding two or three years.¹ There was virtually no discussion of the Viet Nam crisis, and the leadership of John Kennedy and the Democrats remained convincingly popular throughout the President's short lived administration.

However, when President Kennedy died on November 22, 1963, so died with him the concepts of Idealism and Nationalism that were known prior. The country was marked for change--radical change. Again, information gathered by opinion polls throughout the remainder of the decade reflected a dramatic change in the attitudes of Americans. The country was growing increasingly suspicious of its government and of the future. The results of a Gallup Poll released October 31, 1965 revealed that 48% of the people polled believed that corruption in Washington was increasing; by 1968, with the Viet Nam War becoming a main issue of concern, 51% of those interviewed expressed displeasure with the way President Johnson was handling his job, and 66% vowed that they would vote for a candidate who would support troop withdrawal.² Americans were simply not content and growing more restless by the day. On August 14, 1968, the results of yet another poll revealed that 61% of Americans polled believed that life in the United States was getting worse in terms of honesty (the highest negative rating among twelve nations polled).³ Inevitably this suspicion and pessimism spread to the college campuses, and by June of 1970 the most important problem concerning the nation's citizens was campus unrest.⁴

Born out of these changing times were folk singers--in many cases singer-songwriters--whose lyrics were clung to by an ever changing counter culture desperate for leadership and theme. Such noted artists as Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, and Joan Baez wrote and sang what would prove to be anthems that accompanied

the various marches, demonstrations and movements throughout the sixties. Bob Dylan, in particular, made his mark indelible. With such thought provoking songs as "Blowin' in the Wind" and the "The Times They are a Changin'" Dylan became acclaimed not only as a singer-songwriter, but as a poet and prophet. Indeed, his lyrics eerily forewarned the generations who were listening of inevitable change. However, though not to belittle the purism in Dylan's style, the artist was, in fact, writing for the times and making whatever compromises necessary to achieve success. Quite simply, it was fashionable and practical to write protest songs during the early and mid sixties. Dylan, himself, admitted that "his main responsibility was to himself, and that protest songs were a means to an end, that is, a way of launching his career."⁵ Again, there is no doubt that the then shy and elusive Dylan was as concerned about the domestic struggles of the individual and the country as were those who idolized him and his songs; yet, and with full intent, ". . . he did what was necessary to reach stardom."⁶ Eventually, and most notably with his 1965 hit "Like a Rolling Stone," Dylan 'electrified' his acoustic sound (a move scorned by some critics while, on the other hand, praised by those who credited him with the invention of folk rock). Perhaps Dylan--with his keen sense of prophecy--perceived the direction popular--or commercially successful--music was heading. The political overtones in his lyrics began to disappear and the writer became more self-indulgent (definitely

evident in "Like a Rolling Stone"--a precursor to the theme of the 1970's). "Dylan's shift away from protest material established him as a bona fide commercial artist."⁷

Songs by such writers as Dylan, John Lennon and Paul McCartney shall remain timeless; established as well as new artists are still consistently recording these tunes--primarily songs written during the sixties. How glorious was this decade for the songwriter! Although the main route to a hit song was the same as it is today--constant and consistent airplay on Top 40 radio stations--the exploration of lyrical and musical themes seemed limitless. Consequently, even the obscure artists and writers--who perhaps started with exposure on underground radio stations--worked their ways to and up the charts. In contrast, the formula construction of a hit song during the mid to late 70's was much more rigid and defined. The industry was not as open as it had been, and underground movements had not raised their heads in the way folk, or folk rock, or the psychedelic sound once did.⁸ After Dylan had opened the door, songwriters during the sixties were able to confront topical situations and actually give meaning to self expression through song. "Abraham, Martin, and John," written and sung by Dion, not only lamented the loss of these fallen leaders, but mournfully professed the senselessness of their assassinations and the uncertainty of the future. The mourning never stopped; as if with eerie timing the loss of Bobby Kennedy is mentioned in the last refrain. The song was a hit in

1968. The Canadian rock group The Guess Who scored a huge hit with their self-penned song "American Woman." Although the message in the lyrics rejected "the United States as a domineering world power"--with the lines "I don't need your war machine, I don't need your ghetto scene"--constant airplay pronounced the song as one of the summer themes of 1969.⁹ The Buffalo Springfield spoke out against police harassment of youth with the 1966 hit "For What It's Worth"--although the group didn't stay together long the song became a classic and launched the careers of Stephen Stills, Neil Young, and Jim Messina. In 1965, one of the most biting political ballads ever recorded became a national best seller. Written by nineteen year old P. F. Sloane and sung by ex-Christy Minstrel Barry McGuire, "The Eve of Destruction" shocked the nation with its blatant protest against hypocrisy. The folk rock anthem haunted the airwaves, and, perhaps, illustrated more than any other song, the freedom of speech that the songwriter had during the sixties. There seemed to be no stopping the songwriter from either dealing with his own true feelings and emotions, echoing the voice of the populace, or, simply, confronting whatever topic was timely in order to attain a hit song. Disturbing topics such as drugs, social, economic, and racial strife gave way to light--even sing-a-long--melodies. Ray Stevens' "Mr. Business Man," Joe South's "Walk A Mile in My Shoes," The Association's "Along Comes Mary," Steppenwolf's "The Pusher Man," and even Sonny and Cher's "Laugh at Me" explored

repression among the classes and generations and freedom for the individual with unforgettable melodies. Finally, as the decade of the sixties was ending, and the new decade of the seventies beginning, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's "Ohio"--commemorating the death of the four Kent State students--chilled and reminded the nation what it had been through and what was possibly ahead. Released in May of 1970, "Ohio"--with its lush harmonies characteristic of CSN&Y--rose to the top of the charts.

The universal experience of the individual became the theme of the 1970's. Often referred to as the "I, Me, Mine" decade, self-indulgence, individual freedom, and love were the main topics--and for all practical purposes, the only topics--from which the songwriter had to choose. Although the first few years of the decade still refrained the topics of the 60's, by 1973--with the Viet Nam War all but over--the nation was eager to forget and 'get down.' Many of those who had protested in the 60's were growing up, wearing three piece suits, and figuring out ways to afford a monthly lease on a Mercedes. Again, the Gallup Opinion Poll reflected a satisfaction--blind as it may have been--among the working class. In figures released April 3, 1973, 52% of the people polled were simply "very happy," and 77% were satisfied with their jobs.¹⁰ Up until the so-called "recession" during the Carter administration, the individual American was spending more time and money on himself--being spurred on by commercial advertising--than, perhaps, the days of the Roaring 20's.

Advertisements on radio and TV, in magazines and movie theatres, and on billboards across the nation all reverberated one of the stellar themes of the 70's--"if it feels good - do it!" The music industry took an exception to this spendthrift attitude, and the 70's witnessed the birth of many new record companies and record paid advances to recording artists--established and new. David Geffen, often referred to as the "boy wonder" of the early 70's, created Electra-Assylum records by signing three of the hottest singing-songwriting acts of the decade: Jackson Browne, Joni Mitchell, and the Eagles. Browne's debut "Doctor My Eyes"--the lament of the weary traveler who had seen too much pain--, Mitchell's critically acclaimed album Court and Spark--a self portrait of the artist's psyche--, and the Eagles' "Peaceful Easy Feeling"--the relaxed, but expressed urgency of making love lest the chance be gone tomorrow--well defined the attitude and responsibility of the singer-song-writer during the early to mid 70's. Elton John (together with Bernie Taupin), James Taylor, and Jim Croce further epitomized the singer-song-writer of the 1970's. Although many of their songs shall forever be considered classics, they were, nonetheless, expressions of self-indulgence reflecting the light and dark sides of the artists' own personal experiences. John's "Your Song," Taylor's "Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight," and Croce's "I Got A Name"--though written by the writing team of Fox and Gimble--all bared the soul and yearned for self-identity.

If the songwriter of the 70's was not the likes of the previously mentioned singer-songwriters, he had to compete not only with their material, but with the legend of their beings. Publishers and producers went to the well of their favorite writers more often than not to ensure the likelihood of a hit song. Newcomers were screened with obsessive subjectivity, and unless someone in the industry chain--the publisher, the producer, or the record company--recognized the immediate hit potential of a song, the artist or the song was passed--"regardless of the artistic talent."¹¹ Even the trade magazines--such as Rolling Stone--paid particular and consistent homage to the same superstars over and over throughout the 70's.¹² The music industry was calculated to bank on a 'sure thing.' Of course, many songwriters--whose names will remain obscure but whose songs will live on--were very successful during the 70's. However, it is not necessary to chronicle them and illustrate the fulfillment of the American Dream. It is the challenge and limitations placed upon the songwriter by this decade that is of more concern. With the arrival of Disco in 1976, popular music had culminated the most diverse blend of musical styles of any decade. However, with less emphasis on the lyric, an even more perplexing problem faced the serious songwriter.

This writer's experience could, perhaps, provide some first hand authenticity to the dilemma that faced many songwriters during the years 1976 through 1979. After carefully crafting

the lyric and melodic structure of a particular song, and then, ultimately, spending approximately three hundred dollars on the studio demo, it was less than amusing to find a publisher or producer screening my songs with a stopwatch; the purpose of which was to make sure that the song had the then mandatory 132 beats per minute necessary for a hit Disco song! Experiences such as this made me glad that I finished college. Concerning lyrical content, my most memorable experience of frustration would have to refer to an incident at ABC Music (before it was purchased by MCA). Aside from racing disco songs, love ballads were very popular during the late seventies. Having often chosen between the two, my catalogue of ballads had become stockpiled! The absolute head of ABC asked me to write an erotic, groping, four letter song. Peter McCann's "Do You Wanna Make Love (Or Do You Just Wanna Fool Around)" was given to me to use as an example. Again, thankful that I held a college degree, I compromised to the task. As it turned out, I lacked the tact that some of the more refined balladeers of eroticism had, and my resulting song was given an "X" rating. However, I did get invited to parties. Enough! Quite simply, the successful songwriters of the sixties and seventies were those who adapted to the times and made whatever compromises appropriate. It would appear that some of these compromises were made freely, while others were made with some reluctance. Nonetheless, it was the mood of each decade that dictated to the music industry--which, in turn, dictated to the songwriter--the requirements for a hit song.

NOTES

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¹William P. Hansen and Fred Israel "ed." The Gallup Poll Public Opinion 1935-1971 (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 1782.

²William P. Hansen and Fred Israel "ed." The Gallup Poll Public Opinion Vol. 3, 1959-1971 (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 2167.

³Hansen and Israel, p. 2153.

⁴Hansen and Israel, p. 2252.

⁵Serge R. Denisoff, Sing a Song of Social Significance (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1972), p. 112.

⁶Serge R. Denisoff, Great Day Coming! Folk Music and the American Left (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972) p. 181.

⁷Serge R. Denisoff, Sing a Song of Social Significance, p. 18.

⁸Jean and Jim Young, Succeeding in the Big World of Music (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1977), p. 169.

⁹Denisoff, Sing a Song of Social Significance, p. 185.

¹⁰Hansen and Israel, The Gallup Poll Public Opinion, 1972-1977, (Willmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1978), p. 11.

¹¹Jean and Jim Young, p. 169.

¹²Jean and Jim Young, pp. 169-170.

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