

The Transformative Power of Music: A Comparison of Music's Influence in the 1960s and Today

Is it possible for music to change the world? In times of intense polarization and social upheaval, music has proven to be a powerful tool for fostering change, promoting unity, and providing solace. This is evident when we examine the music of the 60s; the years of political tension, counterculture takeover, and racial hostility. The 1960s saw iconic music festivals such as Woodstock and the Harlem Cultural Festival, artists utilized their music as a means to bridge divides, inspire activism, and create a sense of togetherness. Comparatively, in today's world, while the social landscape may have transformed, music continues to hold the potential for social impact, albeit with different nuances and challenges.

The year 1969 in America was marked by political polarization, a surge in counterculture, and ongoing racial conflicts. It was a time when social cohesion, relationships, and a sense of solidarity among community members were in dire need. However, amidst the chaos, music emerged as a powerful tool for unity and social change. Woodstock and Harlem Cultural Festival were groundbreaking events that challenged the status quo and promoted inclusivity, tolerance, and peace. I will explore the connections between music in the 1960s and music today, highlighting the role of music in fostering social cohesion and political purpose.

It was in this atmosphere, the plagued cohesion of America, that two essential music festivals defined the summer of 1969. Happening just miles and lifetimes apart in the same start

of New York. Woodstock, held in a farm upstate, was a “true sociological phenomenon that tested every norm that defined its concertgoers and naysayers” (Tomasky 2019). Bringing in over 400,000 individuals from all ages, races, genders, and beliefs. It provided a communion between musician and audience never seen, serving as a catalyst for human encounters that were not hostile or one-sided. Rare for the time, as the world around this haven was war-torn, feared, and racist. Woodstock became an “aspirational vision of what countercultural youth thought they could achieve” (Farber 2019).

One unforgettable moment from Woodstock was Joan Baez’s performance, folk singer widely recognized as the moral center of the anti-war and social justice movements (Browne). Baez, known for ability to move crowds with the words of others, engaged with the audience through call-and-response. Invoking a sense of nostalgia and unity as she sung “Oh Happy Day” by Edwin Hankins Singers’, rekindling their spirits and blessing them with the transformative power of music. She closed her set with a timeless anthem of hope and resilience, “We Shall Overcome”, a song she had previously sung alongside Martin Luther King Jr. during his historic March on Washington in 1963. Through her words and simply her presence, she was able to reassure and comfort those in attendance, providing a brief respite from the worries and anxieties of the tumultuous times.

While in the heart of the Black community in New York City, Harlem, hundreds of thousands of Black individuals and families came together to celebrate and inspire one another

through music and words. The years that plagued the 60s, with all the violence and loss that came with the Civil Rights Movement and the assassinations of its leaders, and the generation of youth that were done listening to the Establishment and its skewed beliefs. Giving birth to music and a new sound that brought relief, freedom, and above all, inclusion, in a time that was segregated beyond belief. The Harlem Festival was a direct response to the tensions of the time serving as a celebration of black excellence. As filmmaker Ahmir Thompson notes, “it was an opportunity to have Black excellence shown in all its glory and not have to look through the prism of some sort of white establishment’s idea of what Blackness should be”.

Activists of the time saw themselves as warriors, propelled by the spirit of music to challenge the establishment and fight for justice (Thompson). Nina Simone, with her captivating talent and regal presence, embodied the passion and determination of the era. Her performance at the festival served as a battle cry, awakening a sense of purpose within the crowd. It was during her set that Simone recited the powerful poem, “Are You Ready” by David Nelson, member of the Last Poets, capturing the essence of black nationalism and the urgency for change (Thompson).

Are you ready black people?

Are you ready black people?

Are you really ready?

Are you ready to do what is necessary? Are you ready black man? Black woman are you ready?

Are you ready to kill if necessary?

Is your mind ready?

Is your body ready?

Is your body ready to do what it has to do to create life?

Are you ready to smash white things?

To burn buildings?

Are you ready to build black things?

In the midst of the 60s, when being black itself was considered anti-establishment, the audience members who shared in that collective experience fueled her rage and beliefs. This powerful moment exemplified the impact of music artistry in the construction and preservation of a culture.

Journalist David Corn sees these events as "...more than just concerts; they were symbols of a new kind of society, one that was inclusive, tolerant, and focused on peace and justice."

But what about in 2023? Do we still see this surge in the counterculture and youth utilizing the power of music? Danny Goldberg in 'In Search of the Lost Chord: 1967 and the Hippie Idea', "there were tensions galore between the radical idea of political strategy- with discipline, organization, commitment to results out there at a distance – and the countercultural idea of living life to the fullest, right here, for oneself, or for the part of the universe embodied

in oneself, or for the community of the enlightened who were capable of loving one another- and the rest of the world be damned (which it was already)". Nowadays individuals are aligning more with the masses than their own interest or wellbeing, no longer a counterculture but a hodgepodge of polarization and accusations.

The 1960s were characterized by the civil rights movement and anti-war protests were widespread and growing, music became the unifying force the different identities needed to achieve societal transformation.

Today, the social landscape has changed. We see a diverse array of issues and movements, from environmental activism to LGBTQ+ rights, the challenges we face today are multifaceted and intersectional. As a result, contemporary music reflects a broader range of social concerns, with artists using their music to address these diverse issues.

There is less 'call to action' as there was in the 60s. A war torn both within the US borders and out, the younger generation had no skin in the game yet had the most to lose. They needed the release of music, and today now there seems to be 'just music'.

The sound of music from the 1960s was that of raw emotion and something never done, and now we see a commercialized and fabricated culture of music. No longer a new sound but rather a remix of an overplayed rerun or beat or message, like a needle of a record player stuck on an infinite loop.

It would be unfair of me to not touch on the few artists that use their platform to address pressing issues today, such as Kendrick Lamar, Beyonce, and Childish Gambino. Similar to those in the 60s, these artists employ their craft to challenge existing power structures and promote social change. Lamar's album "To Pimp a Butterfly" examines systemic racism and the Black experience in America, while Beyonce's visual album "Lemonade" delves into themes of empowerment, feminism, and racial identity.

Our advancements in technology and the democratization of music production have also significantly impacted how music is created, consumed, and distributed. The rise in digital platforms and social media has provided artists the ability to engage globally and directly with their fans. This has in turn allowed for a more decentralized music scene, enabling grassroots movements and niche genres; while diluting the potential of music to catalyze meaningful change.

The commercialization of the music industry has sometimes overshadowed its potential for social impact, with artists focusing more on individual agendas and profit.

"Music is an indirect force for change, because it provides an anchor against human tragedy" notes Jesse Michaels, protest musician of the 60s (Heilbrunner). Where did we go wrong? When did music lose its realness? Or is it the artist and not the art?

Music will remain reigning as an integral part of the social fabric and can still inspire, unite, and mobilize communities. It is through thoughtful engagement with music, critical

thinking, and collective action that we can harness its transformative power to shape a more just and equitable society. Music has the potential to bridge divides, ignite conversations, and foster empathy, reminding us of the enduring power it holds as a catalyst for change.

We once were able to "...understand the limits of human efforts to bring change, as well as the possibilities", and I hope more than anything we can find it again.

Citations:

Farber, David. 2009. *The Sixties: From Memory to History*. University of North Carolina Press

Goldberg, Danny. *In Search of the Lost Chord: 1967 and the Hippie Idea*. Akashic Books, 2017.

Heilbrunner, Oded. "Music and Protest: The Case of the 1960s and Its Long Shadow." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2016, pp. 688–700.

JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44504003>.

Hill, Michael. 2019. *Woodstock Generation Looks Back, from Varied Vantage Points*.

<https://www.weny.com/story/40901888/woodstock-generation-looks-back-from-varied-vantage-points>.

Tomasky, Michael. 2019. *The Day the Music died: Remembering Woodstock 50 Years Later*. The Daily Beast. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/remembering-woodstock-50-years-later>.