

WE GOTTA GET OUT
OF THIS
PLACE

THE
SOUNDTRACK
OF THE
VIETNAM
WAR

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AND CRAIG WERNER



Although the cultural memory of Vietnam-era music centers on songs that questioned or protested the war, the first wave of Vietnam-related songs to be played on the radio expressed an unquestioning belief that the Cold War stakes justified the sacrifices of the soldiers and their families. One of the best known of the many Vietnam-themed songs that began to appear on country radio in 1965 and 1966, Johnnie Wright's number one country hit "Hello Vietnam," follows in the footsteps of songs from the era of World War II and Korea like "Remember Pearl Harbor," "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition," "Cleanin' My Rifle (and Dreamin' of You)," and "(Heartsick Soldier on) Heartbreak Ridge," the latter a huge country and western hit by both Gene Autry and Ernest Tubb. Today, "Hello Vietnam" is probably best remembered as the music playing over the title sequence of Stanley Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket*. "Hello Vietnam" doesn't share Kubrick's fiercely antiwar sentiments, but it doesn't celebrate the war either. Adapting the familiar persona of a soldier saying goodbye to his sweetheart, Wright sings that he doesn't "suppose this war will ever end." But he doesn't doubt that the sacrifice is worth it. If we don't stand up to Communism in Vietnam, he sings, our "freedom will start slipping through our hands."

"Hello Vietnam" typifies the genre of so-called prowar songs, many of them sentimental ballads centered on the separation of soldiers from their families. They outnumbered protest songs on the radio by a wide margin until at least 1967. The first songs to mention Vietnam simply added a specific locale to the soldier-away-from-home lyrics of the Shirelles' "Soldier Boy" and Bobby Vinton's "Mr. Lonely," the lament of a soldier "away from home through no wish of my own." In "Dear Uncle Sam," for example, Loretta Lynn pleaded that she needs her man much more than the Pentagon does. The emotional textures varied from song to song, but none of them questioned the closing lines of the Powell Sisters' 1963 release, "Our Daddy's in Vietnam": "Without their Daddy, tall and strong, we'd lose our freedom's land."

As the antiwar movement became more vocal and more visible, however, songs such as Ernest Tubb & the Texas Troubadours' "It's for God, and Country, and You Mom (That's Why I'm Fighting in Viet Nam)" and Jerry Reed's "Fightin' for the U.S.A." gave evidence that the war needed to be defended in ways that simply hadn't been necessary during World War II. Dave Dudley's "What We're Fighting For," which, like "Hello Vietnam," was written by the ace country songsmith Tom T. Hall, sounded an even more confrontational note. Best known for hard-driving honky-tonkers like "Six Days on the Road" and "Truck Drivin' Son-of-a-Gun," Dudley's letter-writing narrator vows to his mother that "another flag would never fly above our nation's door." Dudley's follow-up single, "Vietnam Blues," written by Kris Kristofferson, was even more angry and bitter. That anger was echoed in Stonewall Jackson's "The Minute Men (Are Turning in Their Graves)," which struck near-apocalyptic tones, warning that the demonstrators were at best naive and quite possibly traitorous, an attitude that became the centerpiece of Merle Haggard's late sixties hits "Okie from Muskogee" and "The Fighting Side of Me."

World War II-style patriotism smacked up against the iconoclastic irreverence that would become a central part of Vietnam musical culture in the skirmishes surrounding Sgt. Barry Sadler's "The Ballad of the Green Berets," by far the best known of the patriotic hits of the Vietnam era. Cowritten by Sadler and Robin Moore, whose semiautobiographical novel *The Green Berets* is much more morally ambiguous and complex than either the song or the movie it gave rise to, "The Ballad of the

Green Berets" was *the* most popular song of 1966, surpassing "We Can Work It Out," "Paint It Black," the Association's "Cherish," and a host of Motown classics, including the Four Tops' "Reach Out, I'll Be There" and the Supremes' "You Can't Hurry Love."

Selling two million copies in five weeks, the heavily orchestrated anthem, set to a military cadence, tapped deeply into the country's patriotic commitment to the image of the soldier willing to "die for those oppressed." Sadler presents Vietnam as a clear-cut continuation of the struggle for freedom portrayed in hundreds of World War II movies. Catapulted to instant stardom, Sadler became the poster child for the Vietnam conflict, and his song became the most imitated—and parodied—of the Vietnam War. It's still a best-seller at the Special Forces Museum at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Sadler's story made excellent copy for a press that had not yet begun to seriously question the war. In May 1965 Sadler was a young Green Beret soldier leading a small patrol in the tall grass of the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. His knee came into contact with a *punji* stick, a camouflaged, booby-trapped stake made out of bamboo and contaminated with toxic plants, frogs, or even feces. His wound created a serious infection that required emergency surgery. As Sadler was recovering in a military hospital, he heard Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy dedicating the new JFK Center for Special Warfare at Fort Bragg. Moved and motivated by Kennedy's speech, Sadler remembered a song he'd been thinking about writing ever since he was in jump school at Fort Benning. "I began to think about writing a song involving the airborne," he later recalled. "I had no idea what it would be, but I wanted it to include the line, 'silver wings upon their chests.'"¹²

After the demo found its way to RCA, the company provided Sadler with a fifteen-piece orchestra and a male chorus. On just one hour's sleep, he finished recording a twelve-song album by 11 p.m. on December 18, 1965. Released as a single on January 11, 1966, the record took off like wildfire.

Curiously, the military resisted the idea of making a Hollywood movie based on Moore's book. A proposal for a film to be directed by David Wolper, an established Hollywood figure who would go on to produce *Roots* and *The Thorn Birds*, encountered stiff opposition. "Pentagon legs were going crazy," Moore wrote in a letter to the retired general Bill

Yarborough, recounting the movie's origin, "because the song, the book, and a Green Berets comic strip were producing recruits faster than they could be drafted. All of them wanted to be Green Berets."¹³ Convinced that the Green Beret fad was undercutting its broader needs, a faction at the Department of Defense pressured Moore to dissociate himself from the movie, at which point Wolper canceled the contract. For all the song's popularity, it appeared that the movie was dead.

Enter John "Duke" Wayne. In late 1966 Wayne, who, like everyone else in the country, was familiar with Sadler's record, read Moore's book and decided to make the movie himself. When the Pentagon reiterated its opposition, Wayne went straight to the commander in chief, President Lyndon B. Johnson. Beginning his letter to Johnson, "When I was a little boy my father always told me if you want anything done, see the top man," Wayne framed his argument in terms of national interests. "I know it is not a popular war," he continued. "I think it is extremely important that not only the people of the United States but those all over the world know why it is important for us to be there. The most important way to accomplish this is through the motion picture medium."¹⁴ Following up with a call to the White House, Wayne informed LBJ that he was "going to make the picture with you or without you." Shortly thereafter he had obtained not only Johnson's approval but also the full cooperation of the military.

Numerous veterans have testified to the effectiveness of Wayne's movie and Sadler's song. Bill Branson, who served in Vietnam in 1967 and early 1968 and who became active with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) when he returned home, describes the impact of Sadler's song on his decision to enlist. "Well, you had the newsreels and you had the popular songs, you know, 'Green Berets.' I was anti-communist. I thought they were evil. I loved it when our politicians gave it to them. I believed the Domino Theory. I believed we were going to free those people and we should. That was our role in the world. This was our generation's war—I didn't want to miss it."¹⁵

Voicing the disgust Branson came to feel with his youthful politics, John Ketwig, who was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967–68, declared that the film version of *The Green Berets* was absurd: "Lots of helicopters and sandbags, a few Oriental kids and a booby trap. But where was the filth, the stink, the open garbage piles swarming with

flies, the beggars? Where was the fear? No one in the movie was afraid. The Vietnamese were so polite and grateful, and the GIs were a bunch of good ol' boys on a turkey shoot."¹⁶

Like many early recruits, Jim Kurtz responded strongly to "The Ballad of the Green Berets." An army officer with the 101st Airborne, Kurtz describes the evolution of his feelings about Sadler's anthem.

SOLO: Jim Kurtz

Growing up when I did, it was a reality that if you were a male you were going to serve in the military. Like a lot of guys in my generation, I grew up on visions of John Wayne movie heroics and World War II victories. I remember believing that there was no chance we were going to lose in Vietnam.

As an ROTC student, I had an obligation to fulfill, so after my University of Wisconsin Law School graduation, I was sent south to Fort Benning, Georgia, as an army first lieutenant. That September I had more than one thousand men under my command at Benning. I wasn't ready for that. And by June 1966 I was a wet-behind-the-ears platoon leader with the 101st Airborne at Di An, South Vietnam.

One of the ways I coped was to hum the lyrics to a popular song written and sung by another former resident of Fort Benning, Sgt. Barry Sadler. For me, "The Ballad of the Green Berets" is more about relevance than popularity. It's more than just a song. It's a shared story, an anthem to valor and sacrifice, patriotism and victory. At that time in Vietnam in 1966, "The Ballad of the Green Berets" was the Vietnam anthem. But the more I heard the song, the more I compared it to what I was seeing in Vietnam. They didn't square up. It was becoming less heroic. Now, rather than ringing true, the song rings hollow.

I thought I wanted to be a hero and that Vietnam was the place to be heroic and that's what the song said. It was kinda like "On Wisconsin." We were going to march through the country and win the game, save the day. But I don't feel so good about all that now because of what I saw and what I know. And "The Ballad of the Green Berets" is a bunch of nonsense, especially the end of the song where the father dies and asks his wife to put the silver wings on his son's chest. It's nonsense.

While “The Ballad of the Green Berets” has become a touchstone for arguments about the justification for the war and the media’s role in how things played out, its musical afterlife revolves around the countless parodies that began sprouting up shortly after its release. We’ve collected a dozen of them, including the nonvet Bob Seger’s (yes, *that* Bob Seger) “Ballad of the Yellow Beret,” written as a rejection of the antiwar movement. Within a few years, Seger had changed his political stance; his song “Two Plus Two” is one of the most powerful, if largely forgotten, meditations on the human costs of the war.

Even a dedicated career soldier like Gen. Edward Lansdale, at one time the head of the Senior Liaison Office in Saigon, had trouble swallowing Sadler’s patriotism whole. Casting a realistic eye on the image of fearless soldiers eager to “jump and die,” Lansdale’s retort mingles sarcasm and realism:

*Frightened soldiers from the sky
Screaming, “Hell I don’t wanna die,
You can have my job and pay,
I’m a chicken any old way!”*

A marine remake titled “The Counter Attack” openly ridicules the Green Berets, telling them to “keep your hate and your silver wings / We’ll send them with all your things.” Presenting the marines as rescuers—“One hundred men we saved today”—the song concludes with an ironic jab at Sadler’s commercial success:

*I know this song won’t be a hit,
But we Marines could give a shit.
So when it comes to pride and fame,
We’ll kick their ass, take their name.*

Even Marty Heuer’s The High Priced Help got into the act, viewing the Special Forces from the perspective of army helicopter pilots:

*Silver wings upon my chest
I fly my chopper above the best
I can make more dough that way
But I can’t wear no Green Beret.*

The High Priced Help conclude with yet another sardonic remix of Sadler’s final verse:

*And when my little boy is old
His silver wings all lined with gold
He then will wear a Green Beret
In the big parade on St. Patrick’s Day.*

“I suppose you could say that Army Aviation resented the elite Special Forces who were getting all the glory in Vietnam at the time,” added Heuer, continuing to say that “[the group] chose this opportunity to bring them down a notch or two. I personally know of an officer who prohibited the singing of this song in his club in Saigon.”

The most surreal adaptation of “The Ballad of the Green Berets” was the one described by the helicopter pilot Robert Mason in his memoir, *Chickenhawk*. Part of a team assigned to create a song for a military contest, Mason found himself sitting in a room with a “human skull mounted on the wall, string tied to the jaw so it clacked along” with the songs being played on the tape deck. When a Joan Baez song came on the tape, Mason “glanced at the skull, clacking with Baez’s words” and came up with a grim parody of Sadler’s words: “Silver wings upon their chests / Flying above America’s best / We will stop the Vietcong / And you can bet it won’t take long.”¹⁷

While the parodies of “The Ballad of the Green Berets” dismiss the song’s platitudes, they weren’t intended to protest the war itself. Until at least 1967, when *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* and the (mostly off-radio) emergence of San Francisco’s psychedelic sound began to alter the soundscape, the vast majority of “protest” songs circulated primarily within the commercially marginal enclaves of the folk music scene. Antiwar songs by Phil Ochs (“Talking Vietnam,” “I Ain’t A-Marchin’ Anymore”), Tom Paxton (“Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation,” “Talking Vietnam Potluck Blues”), and Buffy Sainte-Marie (“Universal Soldier”) spoke powerfully to listeners on college campuses and in the bohemian enclaves of big cities, but even major folk stars like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan received relatively little radio play.

One of the small number of protest songs that enjoyed significant commercial success, Barry McGuire’s “Eve of Destruction,” which topped the *Billboard* chart in September 1965, included a passing reference

to Vietnam—“The eastern world it is exploding, violence flaring, bullets loading”—but it was the exception to the rule of an ostensibly politics-free media. Despite the song’s popularity, numerous radio stations in the United States, including KYSN in Craig Werner’s military-dependent hometown of Colorado Springs, banned the record, claiming it was “an aid to the enemy in Vietnam.”