

Peace Songs of the 1960s

by **Ronald D. Cohen**

Peace songs have never had a popular following in the United States, except during particular times and for specific reasons. Despite this, they managed to make slow but steady progress during the early sixties, before peaking later in the decade.

While there was initially no visible hot war—Korea was in the past and Southeast Asia barely on the radar—the “military-industrial” (and political) complex, as [President Dwight Eisenhower](#) had warned, remained quite active and in control. Peace songs, old and new, continued to surface, often appearing in the older [Sing Out!](#) and the newer [Broadside](#) magazine. Indeed, the cover of *Sing Out!*'s first issue in 1950 featured [Pete Seeger](#) and Lee Hays's “[The Hammer Song](#),” which would long serve as a popular peace song, particularly after Peter, Paul, and Mary's recording in 1962.

Folk music was usually given credit for being more political than rock ‘n’ roll. “[Where Have All the Flowers Gone](#)” became a hit single for The Kingston Trio in early 1962 and quickly appeared on their best-selling *College Concert* album. The song's genesis began in the mid-1950s, however, before Vietnam was a battlefield for American soldiers. In 1955, Pete Seeger had drawn some verses from Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don*, altered others, then added “When will they ever learn?” The following year, he recorded it for Folkways Records and it appeared on his 1960 album [The Rainbow Quest](#). Soon afterward, [Joe Hickerson](#), a fledgling performer and folklorist, added two new verses. It was picked up by Peter, Paul, and Mary in Greenwich Village, who changed the tune, which prefaced the Kingston Trio's recording and its eventual popularity and translation into more than a dozen languages.¹

[Sis Cunningham](#) and Gordon Friesen launched *Broadside* magazine in 1962, which soon featured numerous peace songs. The third issue included Bob Dylan's “[I Will Not Go Down Under the Ground](#),” referring to bomb shelters, and was recorded by Happy Traum, backed by Dylan, for the album [Broadside Ballads Vol. 1](#) (1963). Potential devastation from atomic weapons, rather than the looming Vietnam War, mostly occupied the minds of songwriters at this point. Dylan's creative and powerful songs caught the imaginations of a growing number of performers and fans, although their political messages were often oblique. His 1963 “Go Away You Bomb,” however, while unknown at the time, was more direct.² Dylan's “[Blowin' in the Wind](#)” appeared on the cover of *Broadside* #6, in May 1962, with its rather abstract, convoluted peace message. His 1963 Columbia album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* included not only “Blowin' in the Wind” but also more pointed peace songs, such as “Masters of War” and “A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall.”

Dylan would soon stray from writing about peace, but would quickly be replaced by the prolific [Phil Ochs](#), who had arrived in New York from Ohio and quickly joined the *Broadside* collective. The October 1962 issue opened with Ochs's critical "Vietnam," an early indication that things were definitely heating up in Southeast Asia, despite President John F. Kennedy's disclaimers. In addition to publishing topical songs, with the assistance of Folkways Records' Moses Asch, *Broadside* issued the first of its [Broadside Ballads](#) albums in 1963, which included Matt McGinn's "[Go Limp](#)" (a.k.a. "The Young CND"), about the British antinuclear movement, Mark Spoelstra's "[The Civil Defense Sign](#)," and Dylan's "[Let Me Die In My Footsteps](#)." During the Newport Folk Festival in July 1964 Ochs performed his hard hitting "Draft Dodger Rag" as well as "Talking Vietnam Blues."³⁴

While President Lyndon Johnson promised not to get the country into the slowly escalating war in Vietnam, soon after his inauguration in January 1965 it began to quickly escalate, and peace songs naturally followed. Ochs's devastating "I Ain't Marchin' Anymore" appeared in *Broadside* in January 1965, and then became the title of his second Elektra album, issued in April, which also included "Draft Dodger Rag" and "The Men Behind the Guns." With such controversial lyrics, Ochs naturally received little airplay, though developed a popular following among college students. On April 17, during the first antiwar demonstration in the nation's capital, 25,000 protestors heard Ochs sing his scathing "Love Me I'm A Liberal," while Joan Baez and Judy Collins performed "[We Shall Overcome](#)" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'." "After a couple of years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, it started to smell very wrong," David Crosby, a member of the Byrds, would recall. "We began asking ourselves, 'Why are we there?'" *Sing Out!*'s editor [Irwin Silber](#), singer [Barbara Dane](#), and [Pete Seeger](#), along with the cream of the folk establishment organized a two-part "Sing-In For Peace" concert at Carnegie Hall on September 24, 1965, which featured sixty black and white artists. The Fugs, a wild rock ensemble, performed their scathing "[Kill for Peace](#)." Unfortunately, a local newspaper strike prevented much media coverage, but the concert marked a turning point in the peace song movement. As Silber remarked in *Sing Out!*, "the essence of the creative union between folksong and social value had been recaptured."⁵⁶

A week before the "Sing-In For Peace," on September 17, *Time* launched its coverage of antiwar songs in the article, "Rock 'n' Roll: Message Time,"⁷ which quoted from the nineteen-year-old P. F. Sloan's⁸ best-selling song "Eve of Destruction." Barry McGuire, the former lead singer for the New Christy Minstrels, recorded the song, and in late August, his record began to appear in the pop charts. Within a few weeks, it had reached Number 1, and then began to fade. Protest had seemingly become fashionable. "The media frenzy over the song tore me up and seemed to tear the country apart," Sloan would recall.⁹ Josh Dunson, a member of the *Broadside* group, interpreted the broader impact:

'Eve of Destruction' is the first protest song dealing in specifics to reach the non-college-educated sector of the population. It is awkward and full of holes, but the earnestness with which it was bought by hundreds of thousands and blocked by dozens of stations might indicate a large segment of the young population other than college students is dissatisfied with our war policy abroad and double standard at home.¹⁰

Through 1966, President Johnson continued to escalate the war in Vietnam, which included increasing both the number of soldiers (to 400,000) and the frequency of bombings. Peace songs now proliferated, with Buffy Sainte Marie's "[Universal Soldier](#)" being recorded by Donovan, The Highwaymen, and Glen Campbell, who seemed oddly unaware of its left-wing message. The Byrds' version of Pete Seeger's "[Turn, Turn, Turn](#)" reached the charts in late October 1965, and while not known as an explicitly antiwar song, its meaning was clear to many. On the West Coast, Country Joe McDonald published the magazine *Rag Baby*, which included his own composition "The I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag," which he soon recorded with his group Country Joe and the Fish. Pete Seeger then recorded it for Columbia Records, but the label refused to commercially release it. The song would go on to be a hit at the Woodstock festival a few years later. Seeger continued with his own peace songs, including "If You Love Your Uncle Sam (Bring Them Home)" in 1966, and "[Waist Deep in the Big Muddy](#)," which was censored when he performed it on the Smothers Brothers CBS TV show in 1967.

Peace songs were now appearing in books, such as the Student Peace Union's *Songs for Peace* in 1966, and [Barbara Dane](#) and [Irwin Silber](#)'s *The Vietnam Songbook* in 1969. *Broadside* continued to publish peace songs in most issues through the rest of the decade, along with [Broadside Ballads](#) albums, with vol. 5 featuring Matt Jones and Elaine Laron's "[Hell No, I Ain't Gonna Go](#)." Numerous Folkways albums included peace songs. Silber and Dane started [Paredon Records](#) in 1969 and would soon issue such titles as [FTA! Songs of GI Resistance](#) (1970), [Vietnam: Songs of Liberation](#) (1971), and [Vietnam Will Win!](#) (1971). By the decade's end, the war seemed nowhere near ending, and neither did the output of peace songs, which continued to register the country's ongoing frustrations.

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¹ Pete Seeger, *Where Have all the Flowers Gone: A Singalong Memoir* (New York: A Sing Out! Publication, 2009), 166. Originally published in *Sing Out!*, Vol. 11, No. 5 (Dec.-Jan. 1961-62): 3.

² Scott Barretta, ed., "Go Away You Bomb," *The Conscience of the Folk Revival: The Writings of Israel "Izzy" Young* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 231.

³ Jeff Place and Ronald D. Cohen, *The Best of Broadside, 1962-1988* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2000; SFW CD 40130).

⁴ On the history of Folkways and *Broadside* consult: Richard Carlin, *Worlds of Sound: The Story of Smithsonian Folkways* (New York: Collins/Smithsonian Books, 2008), chap. 9.

⁵ David Crosby and David Bender, *Stand and Be Counted: Making Music, Making History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 28.

⁶ Irwin Silber, "Fan The Flames," *Sing Out!*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (January 1966): 71-72.

⁷ “Rock ‘n’ Roll: Message Time,” *Time* (September 17, 1965): 102.

⁸ Born Philip Gary Schlein.

⁹ P.F. Sloan, “P. F. Sloan : In His Own Words - The Stories Behind The Songs,” February 19, 1999. Accessed June 2013. <http://www2.gol.com/users/davidr/sloan/aboutsongs.html>.

¹⁰ Josh Dunson, “Folk Rock: Thunder Without Rain,” *Sing Out!*, Vol. 15, No. 6, (January 1966): 16-17.