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Julia E. Palacios Franco*

Sounds of a Generation¹

Sandwiched between the utopian 1967 and the amazing 1969, 1968 is one of the most significant and rebellious years of the second half of the twentieth century.

In the middle of the ongoing Vietnam War, a focus for people around the globe, and increased anger at and questioning of foreign U.S. policies, in 1967 “flower power” was blooming and the hippie children were living in freedom and searching for peace and love everywhere. San Francisco’s Summer of Love and the Monterey Pop Festival in August of that year exploded with extraordinary music, arts, and psychedelic fantasies floating in the air [“San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair),” Scott McKenzie].

The Beatle’s June 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* was an ode to psychedelia and a musical masterpiece. Nothing like it had been heard before [“Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” The Beatles].

On June 24, on the *Our World* program, people around the globe were able to watch The Beatles sing “All You Need Is Love” on the first satellite television broadcast ever.²

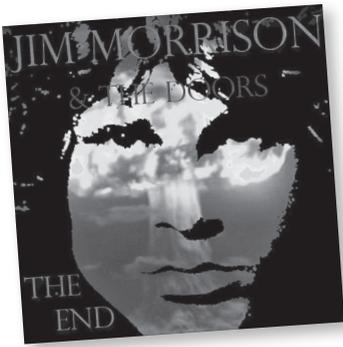
And while the common message was love and the dream of a world at peace, running through it were also deep reflection and the seeds of insurrection and restlessness.

Canadian poet Leonard Cohen moved hearts and souls with his first album. Songs like “Suzanne” became symbolic anthems of a deep personal search for meaning [“Suzanne,” Leonard Cohen].

In Southern California, Buffalo Springfield, a Canadian-American band with virtuous sounds, sang about the riots, civil rights, and protest [“For What It’s Worth,” Buffalo Springfield], while The Doors with their trance-induced songs and existentialist attitude were yelling, “We want the world, and we



* Academic and researcher at the Ibero-American University Communications Department; juliapalacios@gmail.com.



want it now!" ["The End," The Doors].

The 1968 rebellions were about to explode. Prague, Paris, Montevideo, Mexico: riots, demonstrations, violent government repression; the questioning of authority and the system in general was

inevitable. In the United States, the assassinations of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy added to social concerns. In August 1968, the riots at the Chicago National Democratic Convention openly questioned the system and its institutions, while the black power salute with the gloved fists of John Carlos and Tommie Smith at Mexico's Olympic Games were the most effective gesture to show the world the increased restlessness and non-conformity of one of the African American movements that permeated the decade.

There is a tendency, a myth, an idealization of 1968 as the year of the revolution, counterculture, protest, the turning point that marked some of the most important changes in the second half of the twentieth century. Mostly, this is due to the protagonist role of youth, restless and thoughtful youngsters who openly raised their inquisitive, raging voices.

Yet, those were not "all" the young people and "all" the voices. 1968, like now, fluctuated between conservatism and rebellion, a completely different, dual approach to society, culture, and music. 1968 cannot and should not be read as a single homogeneous year.

In Mexico City, the second half of 1968 was a mixture of festivity and joy with the upcoming Olympic Games and the protests and outrage of the student movement: fear and celebration, praise for modernity and anger at authorities. A similar spirit was felt in many other parts of the world. Divergence of general meaningful interests and specific musical tastes permeated the student move-

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ments and the radio waves. In Mexico, we wavered between being modern, being worldly, international, and keeping our traditions and conservative values.

The student movement was mostly left-leaning, more related to folk and protest songs. Inspiration came from Pete Seeger, Joan Baez ["We Shall Overcome," Joan Baez], Bob Dylan ["The Times They Are A-Changin'," Bob Dylan], and Peter, Paul, and Mary ["Blowin' in the Wind," Peter, Paul and Mary]. Our revolutionary *corridos* or Latin American "protest" songs were typically sung in brief support events and flash student rallies by singers like Óscar Chávez ["Carabina 30/30," Óscar Chávez] ["Hasta siempre" (about Comandante Che Guevara), Óscar Chávez], and Margarita Bauche, celebrated as the "Mexican Joan Baez."

Conservative youngsters were dancing to sterile mainstream songs like "El juego de Simón," a cover version by Roberto Jordán of the original "Simon Says" by the 1910 Fruitgum Company ["El juego de Simón," Roberto Jordán], or "Yummy Yummy!" by the Ohio Express ["Yummy, Yummy!" Ohio Express], or the traditional Russian song with adapted lyrics in English, "Those Were the Days," recorded at the brand new Apple Records, produced by Paul McCartney ["Those Were the Days," Mary Hopkin], and still dancing cheek to cheek with the gracious romanticism of Paul Muriat's orchestra ["Love Is Blue," Paul Muriat].

In August 1968, a major musical event took place in the heart of Mexico City. Thousands of youngsters gathered at the downtown Alameda Park, and Spanish singer Raphael gave a free concert at the peak of one of his multiple moments of popularity. He was proclaimed the Number One Artist of the Year 1968 by *Notitas musicales* (Little Musical Notes) magazine, the leading teen music publication of the era ["Mi gran noche," Raphael].

Genres coexisted on several mainly music radio stations specialized either in romantic Mexican tunes like boleros, ranchero or tropical music,³ or pop songs sung in Spanish.⁴ Plus, several radio stations played only



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music in English, mostly the hits of the moment.⁵ Besides the popular songs with simple lyrics and nonsense rhymes, but a contagious beat for dancing, there was an eruption of poetry, complex words with deep, hidden meanings. All this was wrapped in innovative music inspired by oriental sounds and recording studio exploration, plus the so-called psychedelic sound influenced by the increased consumption of natural and synthetic substances used in name of the so sought-after “mind expansion.”



Many song lyrics dealt with the drug culture, such as “White Room” by the British band Cream, one of the most powerful trios in rock history [“White Room,” Cream].

There was also the Eastern influence like in the “Hurdy Gurdy Man,” by Scots singer-songwriter Donovan. The troubadour-like Hurdy Gurdy song was inspired during the Beatles’ famous 1968 trip to the Rishikesh Ashram in India to practice transcendental meditation. Donovan was part of the group. This was a main event that consolidated the bridge between East and West, musically and spiritually.

Critical social issues were talked about openly. The film *The Graduate*, featuring Dustin Hoffman, portrayed a young graduate having a love affair with an older woman. “Mrs. Robinson,” sung by the marvelous duet Simon and Garfunkel, described a long-gone United States and became one of the 1968 “anthems.”

Another critical film of the time, *Valley of the Dolls*, portrayed female consumption of “dolls” or prescription pills that caused addiction and even death. This was openly talked about in the film, as was the rehabilitation crisis that addicts go through. The death of beloved star Marilyn Monroe in 1962 due to an overdose of prescription medication was still an ache in people’s hearts and

minds. The film’s theme song was very popular in 1968 [“Valley of the Dolls,” Dionne Warwick].

By 1968, the civil rights movement and so-called “black power” were at their peak. Music, in which African-American singers and composers have played a key role in music history,⁶ also expressed the pride of being black. Hugely popular singers like Aretha Franklin and James Brown sang about this pride, becoming the voices of their race and generation [“Say It Loud. I’m Black and I’m Proud,” James Brown].

Peace and Love movements and attitudes were also directed at racial and gender integration, planting the seeds of what would later be gender equal opportunities. At that time rock and pop music in general were both predominantly masculine art forms, but the female presence started taking on a new role beyond the candid teenage singer or the romantic sweet female voice.⁷ Two important female front-women had prominent roles in the psychedelic era: Grace Slick, the voice of San Francisco’s iconic band Jefferson Airplane, and Janis Joplin, the voice of another Bay Area band, Big Brother and the Holding Company. Joplin’s interpretative power had been “discovered” in 1967 at the Monterey Pop Festival during the Summer of Love, and their 1968 *Cheap Thrills* album, with its cover design by underground artist Robert Crumb, set them up as one of the most impressive, influential bands of the psychedelic scene [“Piece of My Heart (You Know You’ve Got It If It Makes You Feel Good...)” Big Brother and the Holding Company].

Of the various bands that blossomed in the Bay Area, Sly and the Family Stone were a very interesting example of their times. A seven-member band with a powerful sound, it was the first popular racially integrated rock group. Plus, having males and females in their line-up was also something unusual for a rock band [“Dance to the Music,” Sly and the Family Stone].



Rock music was transcendent in many ways. Its intrinsic force of communication became the perfect way to express the restlessness of the times. John Lennon’s composition “Revolution,” with its three different versions, talked about demonstrations,



supposedly the ones in Paris in May 1968 and the questioning of the tactics and forms of protest [“Revolution,” The Beatles].

The Rolling Stones also sang in 1968 about the international protests young Londoners had joined and the demonstrations that turned

into riots. “Street Fighting Man” also dealt with the difficult conditions facing young people without jobs or opportunities in English cities. And, with an autobiographical wink at the English baby boomer generation, born during World War II, “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” portrays a young man who survives his problems through escapism and fun [“Jumpin’ Jack Flash,” The Rolling Stones].

As homage to the young people fighting and dying in the Vietnam War, Eric Burdon and The Animals sang “Sky Pilot.” It was really a strong critique of military chaplains who blessed and guided young soldiers as part of the system that maintained the ongoing war [“Sky Pilot,” Eric Burdon and The Animals].

And the main anthem of 1968, the song that became number-one that year, was the mysterious, trance-inducing “Hey Jude,” with its complex, understandable meaning. Though it was said that Paul McCartney wrote it for Julian Lennon, John’s son, who was going through difficult times personally, it became not only the most popular song of the year, but a real anthem of the times. Its uplifting words, beautiful melody, and impeccable chorus were appropriated by people all over the world, and would survive as an essential soundtrack of that generation [“Hey Jude,” The Beatles].

Then came 1969 with the Woodstock Nation, the unbelievable gathering of a good half million people, mostly young, which seemed impossible in the aftermath of

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the 1968 riots and demonstrations and killings of very recent memory.

In a way, 1969 was the end of the possibility, of the Peace & Love Utopia, the raised voices and fists, the power of gathering, the strength of protest; the longing for change, for a better world in many ways. The expansion of consciousness, the exploration of the mind, were trapped in addictions, excesses, and more and more dealers.

By December 1969, the Altamont Speedway Free Festival in California became a nightmare in itself. The joy of music turned into violence; the sense of sharing, of common ground, and celebration became fearful and sad.⁸

The 1969 film *Easy Rider*, written and directed by Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda, with the two of them in the main roles as bikers traveling throughout the southern United States, summed up the end of the decade as a playful, carefree, anguished and restless escape. *Easy Rider* presented flashes of its time and, with its impeccable selection of songs and the roar of the choppers riding down the wide empty roads became an outstanding audio document that portrayed the anxiety, intensity, and exhaustion that closed the decade [“Born to be Wild,” Steppenwolf]. ■■■

Notes

1 At the following link, the reader can listen to each of the songs cited in brackets throughout the article: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLt1NBdpYwec9rtS18T11Bo4_bDfLSlOKG.

2 With an estimated audience of 350 million viewers worldwide. <https://www.thebeatles.com/feature/our-world-global-satellite-broadcast>.

3 Tropical music was the name given to all sorts of genres, mostly dance music with Caribbean roots, like chachachá, merengue, mambo, and various combinations that had successful interpreters like Sonora Santanera. This was before the term salsa was generally adopted as a genre.

4 Mexican romantic pop song composers had their work recorded and were gaining audience. This was the case of singer Carlos Lico, with compositions by Armando Manzanero. Spanish singers like Raphael and Rocío Dúrcal were very popular, as were Mexican pop singers doing cover versions of U.S. ballad hits or easily translated Italian pop songs.

5 The U.S. Hit Parade was the main guide.

6 The history of U.S. pop music has been marked since its origins by Afro-American performers and composers. Musical genres as important as jazz, blues, gospel, and rock and roll are U.S. creations with a decided influence and presence of Afro-American roots.

7 Female jazz singers did have an important role in music, but they were an exception.

8 The documentary *Gimme Shelter* (1970), directed by brothers Albert and David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin, captured what happened at this festival.