Liner Notes: 1964

Song of the Year: “I Want to Hold Your Hand” by The Beatles

Number of U. S. soldiers in Vietnam at year’s end: 23,300

Number of men drafted into service: 112,386

*Billboard* Chart Sweep for 1964

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK3bsYzZNHk>

They came, they saw, they conquered. The Beatles, that is, and the U.S. pop music charts. Once they nudged Bobby Vinton and “There I’ve Said It Again” out of the No. 1 spot in late January 1964, the Beatles dominated the radio waves. One mega-hit after another, after another … the four mop-topped lads from Liverpool stood strong at the top of the 1964 weekly charts for more than half the year.

But while there was an energy and optimism associated with the upbeat Beatles sound, especially in the aftermath of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in late 1963, much more was afoot in 1964 than met the eye, or the ear. Civil rights, voting rights, an all-important presidential election and, seemingly coming out of nowhere, a war in Southeast Asia.

Tapping their toes to the tunes of The Beatles, The Supremes, The Beach Boys, Roy Orbison and Mary Wells, America overlooked the warning signs of dissent, discontent and violence gathering on the horizon. Heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay converted to Islam and became Muhammad Ali, shedding what he called his “slave name”; three civil rights activists were murdered during “freedom summer” — the grassroots campaign to register Black voters ; the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X clashed on how to achieve civil rights and equality for African Americans; a new conservative movement took shape under Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater; anti-war protests and draft card burnings made headlines.

And then there came the alleged “attack” by the North Vietnamese on American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964. Immediately, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent a resolution to the House and Senate titled “To Promote the Maintenance of International Peace and Security in Southeast Asia” which became known as the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The House of Representatives passed the resolution 416–0, the Senate, 88–2, with only Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska and Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon opposing.

“I believe that history will record this resolution as a historic mistake… [one] that in my judgment is going to kill needlessly untold numbers of American boys — and for nothing,” predicted Senator Morse. “All Vietnam is not worth the life of an American boy,”concluded Senator Gruening.

The American public would later learn that there was no attack on our ships that August. In fact, according to an eyewitness, Navy pilot James Stockdale, who “had the best seat in the house to watch that event”: “Our destroyers were just shooting at phantom targets — there were no PT boats there. ... There was nothing there but black water and American fire power.”

But we didn’t know that then, and now we were a nation at war. We had to prevent a worldwide communist takeover, and Vietnam was where we had decided to draw the line in the sand.

Curiously, several thousand U. S. advisors were already in Vietnam, helping the South Vietnamese Army fight against the communists of the North. The majority of them were career military, and they weren’t listening to The Beatles or The Rolling Stones. The soothing voices of Tony Bennett and Pat Boone were more to their liking. Bobby Vinton returned to the top of the charts in late 1964 with “Mr. Lonely,” the words of his lament touching the hearts of the first troops in Vietnam and the hundreds of thousands that would follow.

*“Letters, never a letter  
I get no letters in the mail  
I've been forgotten, yes, forgotten  
Oh, how I wonder, how is it I failed*

*Now I'm a soldier, a lonely soldier  
Away from home through no wish of my own  
That's why I'm lonely, I'm Mr. Lonely  
I wish that I could go back home.*

* [*Doug Bradley*](http://origin.kcts9.org/vietnam-war-timeline/about.html)